

Using Music to Support Young People at Risk of Exclusion **WOODLANDS SCHOOL**



National Foundation for
Youth Music



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



SOCO MUSIC PROJECT



BACKGROUND

SoCo Music Project has been a pioneer organisation in the use of music to support young people at risk of exclusion for a number of years. They have a strong history of working with pupil referral and inclusion units, special schools and support programs across Hampshire and are one of 26 organisations in the UK to be selected by national charity Youth Music to lead on musical inclusion for young people.

In 2014 SoCo embarked on one of its most interesting youth projects yet, a 4-year partnership with specialised groups at Woodlands Community College in Southampton as part of Youth Music's wider 'Exchanging Notes' project. SoCo were one of just 10 organisations to be selected to take part in this project, which aims to explore the benefits of alternative approaches to music education for young people at risk of exclusion or outside of mainstream education. The project will see practitioners work with the same 2 groups of students, for half a day a week over a 4-year period. Students in these groups have either been placed in a specialised unit away from mainstream schooling because they are struggling to engage with this system (Inclusion Unit) or have been identified as a potential risk and so put on a specialised timetable for part of the school day (LINK group). SoCo's aims with these groups have been that over this prolonged period, young people would see a marked improvement in musical skills, a growth in confidence and increased resilience to the significant struggles that many of them face.

Our approach to achieving these outcomes and an explanation of the benefits that have already been identified 1 year in are further explored below.

TEACHING APPROACH

SoCo aims to provide young people with a learning experience that is informal and different from what they may have experienced at school. The thinking behind this is that many young people find it difficult to engage with a traditional teaching approach, particularly those who are at risk of exclusion. By using different methods, SoCo hope to increase engagement and create more opportunities for learning. The key elements to their approach is summarised below:

VARIED OFFER

Students at Woodlands received as wide and varied a programme of activities as possible in order ensure exposure to all forms of music making and in turn increase their likelihood of finding something that they can engage with and succeed at. Sessions included instrument tuition, technical music making with music software, song writing, music-production and producing radio shows. This approach ensures that music is far more accessible and has often resulted in students discovering unexpected talent.

PARTICIPANT LEAD

Linked to the provision of a varied offer is a commitment to ensuring content is completely guided by the learner. This is crucial to ensuring maximum engagement, which can then have a significant impact on learning levels. When students are allowed to focus on the things they most enjoy or are best at, they will naturally be more enthusiastic, which will then increase motivation, which results in increased attainment, which can then further increase motivation and confidence. It also holds particular importance for learners with additional needs, who may progress at a different pace to their peers.

RELEVANT

Many young people have a natural interest in popular music but often do not like music lessons because the content is not related to what they enjoy. Through making the content relevant to the learner's taste, they not only become more interested and motivated, but will often also experience a greater sense of achievement because they can connect what they are learning to a musician they admire e.g. learning the chords of a favourite song. Also important is the fact that a song that is relevant to the learner will often stimulate emotional engagement. For vulnerable young people this can be a very important stepping stone in helping them express their own emotions.

MUTUAL RESPECT

From day one practitioners place great trust in the participant by allowing them to guide the content of the session and experiment with professional instruments and equipment. This immediate demonstration of trust for the participant creates a strong sense of respect for the practitioner, which facilitates an ideal learning environment for music-making. Participants will often be more receptive to the practitioner and more willing to open up musically and emotionally. This level of trust can have a particularly large impact on this audience as their age and disengagement with education often means that they have been deemed 'untrustworthy' by many adults in the past.



OUTCOMES

Each student who attends a workshop with SoCo experiences different outcomes. There are, however, a number of key benefits that have been observed across the board with students at Woodlands and which SoCo have also evidenced when working with other similar audiences.

SKILL ACQUISITION

From the student perspective, learning to play an instrument or create music on an iPad has been by far the most significant and popular outcome. In the older Inclusion group at Woodlands, all but one student chose to receive either singing or instrument tuition, and out of the students that received tuition every single one ranked it as their favourite part of the music lessons. When students discussed instrument learning in evaluation, they expressed a level of enthusiasm un-paralleled elsewhere and for particular students this was reflected in rapid skill progression. Whilst the students found it hard to express why they enjoyed this element so much, practitioners working with the students link it with the enormous and unexpected sense of achievement it brings.

"They've got this idea when they first join us that there's a certain standard that music has to be, a traditional instrumental standard, which isn't achievable for them. Whereas, actually with the right guidance and equipment, they can get there. Making tracks which sounds like things they've heard elsewhere brings huge satisfaction and pride."

As indicated in the above observation, young people who have been removed from mainstream education often have very low confidence in their own abilities, as they have been unable to fit into the standard teaching system. The realisation that they are capable of learning a new skill that can also be demonstrated to their friends and family therefore holds enormous significance.

The benefit of instrument tuition when working with disengaged or disadvantaged young people is further evidenced through a number of external research projects. Of particular note is The Arts and Prosocial Impact Study, which analysed 35 arts intervention projects in deprived area of Los Angeles including the extremely successful Harmony Project and found that professional tuition was a crucial element when using the arts to produce social change amongst disadvantaged young people.

OUTCOMES

INCREASED ENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATION

Across the board, we have seen students' attitudes towards school improve as a result of attending the music workshops. At the end of their first year participating in the project, students were asked to what degree attending music sessions had made them enjoy school more. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with students giving an average score of 4.6 out of 5 (5 being the highest). One to one discussions with students revealed that this increased enjoyment was very much focused around their music lessons, however the effects of this stretched well beyond the lessons. A number of students receiving instrument tuition began to undertake additional practice during their break periods and to also request extra time for practice during the school day, demonstrating significant progress in their commitment and engagement to school. Two students in the Inclusion group also showed such marked improvement that they were reintroduced into mainstream music lessons, with one student taking up music GCSE - a significant step that would not have been achieved if it had not been for the additional music sessions.

Finally students were also asked in a questionnaire to rate the degree to which they felt music sessions had helped them with other subjects. There was a more mixed response here, with some students seeing very little link, yet a third of students identified a strong link, giving a maximum score of 5. This higher scoring was particularly prevalent within the LINK group who still spent part of the day in mainstream schooling.

GENERAL WELLBEING

When the above outcomes are accumulated together, there will inevitably also be improvements in student's general wellbeing. Students scored questions around enjoyment higher than any other area, with enjoyment of sessions receiving an average score of 4.7 out of 5, and improved enjoyment of school as a result of sessions receiving an average score of 4.6 out of 5. One to one discussions with students also saw use of the word 'fun' used time and time again. It factors that if students are happier at school then their overall wellbeing will also improve. As previously noted there was also a marked improvement in confidence and self-esteem, particularly amongst those in the Inclusion group, which can have an enormous impact on overall wellbeing. Finally students were also asked if the music sessions had helped them express themselves. The response here was more mixed, but still received a positive response overall, with all but one student scoring 3 or higher (out of 5) and a third of students giving the maximum score of 5. This was a key area of focus for practitioners, who had identified self-expression as important in developing students' resilience, and whilst some students may not have identified much improvement in this area, practitioners observed increased self-expression from all participants.

OUTCOMES

CONFIDENCE

Closely linked to the acquisition of new skills and improved motivation is a growth in confidence. The confidence levels of many of the participants were extremely low at the beginning of the project. Many students expressed a reluctance to take part, not because they did not enjoy music, but because they expected to fail. The discovery by participants that they were indeed capable of learning a skill they believed to be out of their reach consequently had a significant impact on their self-esteem. This process was reflected on by one student when asked why he enjoyed song-writing

"I thought it would be hard, but it wasn't as hard as I thought. It made me feel good."

All participants showed a notable growth in confidence across the year whether it be through the ability to perform an instrument in front of their peers, share a song they'd written or simply express an opinion on music. Students were also directly asked to rate the degree to which they felt music session had helped them feel more confident. For the LINK group, answers to this question were extremely varied ranging from 2 to 5 (5 being strongly agree). However, participants from the Inclusion group were unanimous in their positive response to this question with all participants either answering with a 4 or a 5. This is perhaps a reflection of there being particularly low initial confidence levels amongst students who have been completely removed mainstream education compared to those who had only been partially removed. This is a case that has also been strongly evidenced in a research project investigating the benefits of arts education for secondary school children, which noted the positive impact of music on self-esteem and how this could have particular impact on disengaged students who often had very low self-esteem. (see Harland et al, Arts Education in Secondary school: effects and effectiveness)

It is hoped that confidence levels will continue to increase as students move on to collaboration and performance in front of an audience. The majority of participants did not yet feel ready for this challenge at the end of the first year, however previous work by SoCo as well as external research (see Kennedy, R. (1998)) has shown that it is the performance element of music that can have the biggest impact on confidence and self-esteem.

The above outcomes were evidenced after one year of working with the students. It is anticipated that over the next 3 years, not only will we see further progress in these areas, but that new outcomes will be also be identified in areas such as communication, peer support, self-motivation and wider academic achievement. It is also recommended that readers look at the Further Reading list included at the end of this case study, which details a number of research papers which have been written on the benefits of music for this audience.



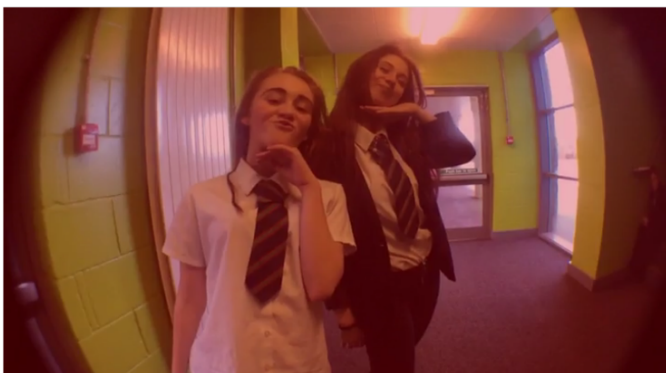
CASE STUDIES

SHANE

At the beginning of exchanging notes Shane expressed an interest in singing but said that he rarely had the opportunity to sing at home or school. He told us that he enjoyed singing but found it difficult to fit it in around his life especially because he was nervous to show people. During our time with Shane we have recorded him singing and rapping on three original songs written by him and other pupils. We have also made a music video in which Shane contributed many of the creative ideas. He is very proud of his work and has enthusiastically told us he has shown it to his family and friends. Sometimes he now goes to the music room in his free lunch time to sing. We would like Shane to continue progressing with his musical endeavours and we will work towards him singing live on stage with a microphone.

LYDIA

When we first met Lydia she showed she had a passion for music and enjoyed sharing the music she listens to with the rest of the group. She did not indicate to us any specific areas she might want to get involved in with regards to her own music making and creativity. We explored many different areas of music making. We used technology to make electronic music, wrote lyrics, recorded our singing and tried out some live instrumentation. It became evident that Lydia had a keen interest and a natural flare for playing the drums. There has been a clear progression and improvement with Lydia's playing from week to week. Lydia enjoys the drums so much that her drumming time has often become an incentive for her to focus in other parts of the sessions and in other areas of school. If, for some reason, she is unable to do drumming during one of our sessions she usually campaigns with the teachers to negotiate more time elsewhere to make up for it. She has become a lot more confident with her playing and is excited to show teachers and other members of the group what she has learned. She also enjoys showing us inspirational drummers she has found on YouTube and drum beats she wants to learn. Seeing Lydia's passion grow over the year has been really special and we look forward to working with her develop her musicianship and drumming skills in the future.



CASE STUDIES

MOLLY

Molly expressed an interest in playing the piano the moment she arrived but complained she did not have the space or support to practice. With the support of Mr Bellman the music teacher Molly has been able to receive some one on one piano lessons during our sessions and has progressed a great deal. Much like Lydia, Molly's incentive to play the piano has encouraged her to work hard in other areas of school. Seeing Molly's determination pay off when she is able to show the group a new piano piece is fantastic and it is clear she finds performing a rewarding experience.

JAMIE

Jamie was quiet when we first met him but now he is full of ideas and not afraid to share them. Watching his confidence grow with music has been wonderful because we can now see just how creative Jamie is. Jamie has always given everything a go from the start but seemed to become disengaged quite quickly when undertaking tasks. When he, however, specifically expressed an interest in the guitar he became very focused and engaged when learning it. Jamie had never played the guitar before but now he has one at home and knows how to play some chords. Now he comes to sessions with ideas of songs he would like to learn. To see Jamie playing guitar with some other pupils in a band would be a great progression and is something we would like to work towards in the future.

MEGAN

Megan was one of the quietest pupils in the group. She also arrived halfway through the year into a group that had some big personalities in it which was intimidating. For her to share music she likes with the group was very difficult and for her to talk in front of the group was rare. We have seen Megan's confidence improve over the last few months. She began by contributing her 'musical highlight of the week' at the start of every session, which was great. When devising our radio show Megan had the idea of creating a gossip feature on the x factor contestants however she didn't want to record her voice talking into the microphone for it. A few weeks into the project she recorded her voice whilst working alongside one of the teachers. They chatted about the X factor and celebrity gossip for the radio show. This was a huge step and an amazing achievement. We hope Megan's confidence will grow further during our sessions.