

Sound Communities II Outcome Report



**YOUTH
MUSIC**



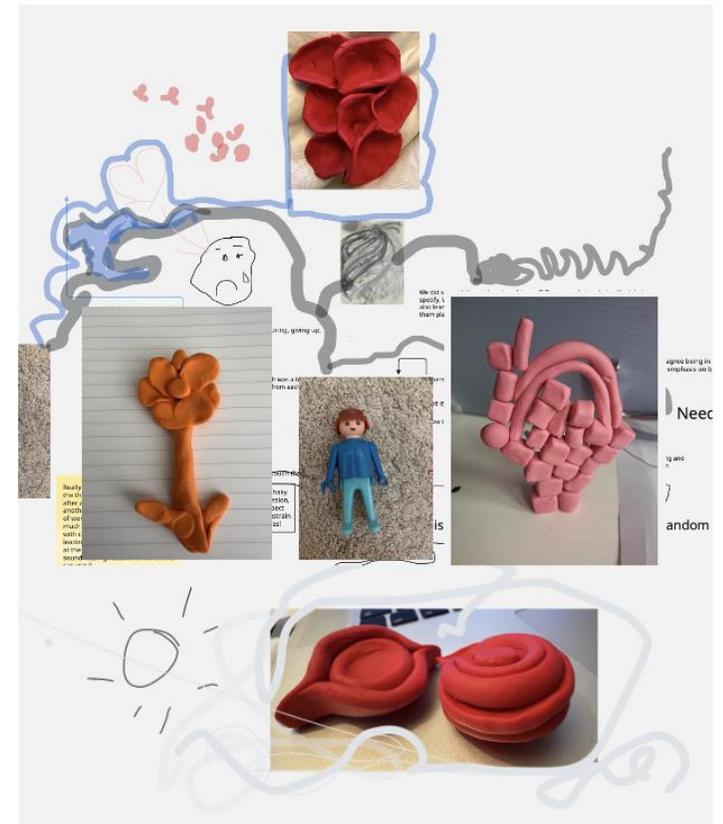
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ENGLAND**

Evaluation methodology

For this evaluation we have taken a qualitative approach (both in data and analysis) and used thematic analysis by the Creative Producer. Every setting, every practitioner, every child and every session are different and we wanted to try to capture some of the richness and context-dependency of this. A limitation of this approach is the extent we are able to talk about generalisability or transferability in the findings. However, we do feel able to draw broader conclusion about the project's effectiveness. It is also difficult to attribute changes seen to the project when there is so much else happening in the settings and the lives of those involved.

We collected a range of data over time, which we think gives a rich picture and offers some triangulation. The data sources were:

- Weekly reflective journals (some on paper, some audio recordings of conversations) – completed after every in-setting session by Creative Futures practitioners (CFPs) and Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) together, focusing on the child's experience and their practice
- Feedback forms from EYPs at each CPD session
- Creative Producer notes taken of conversation and quotes at CPD sessions
- Creative Producer reflections on setting visits
- Notes from termly CFP team meetings
- End of year reflections from EYPs on children's experiences and their own learning
- End of year reflections from CFPs on children's experiences, development of their EYP partners and their own learning
- Reflections from Emerging Leaders on every session they shadowed



Zoom whiteboard minutes from an online CFP reflection meeting

At the start of programme we used some 'pre' and 'post' tools with EYPs. We found the usefulness of quantitative scales limited and have not used them in year 3. We have found that a given person's response can vary enormously depending on what is happening for them that day. We have seen how someone can, for example, rate their knowledge in September as 8 out of 10 but by July rate it as a 5 out of 10 – even when we have worked closely with them and watched how much they've learnt! The phenomenon of 'you don't know what you don't know' means that taking part in these projects can sometimes expand participants' horizons so that they realise how much more there is to learn.

For the children and adults involved, change can look very small to an 'outsider'. We felt a qualitative approach would also be best suited to access this sort of nuanced and personalised knowledge. We think the value of the child's voice has been central to the project and informed the way we frame the evaluation but the evaluation could be strengthened by further data generation directly with children, that captures or is better able to communicate or represent their experiences.

While there are always power dynamics to be dealt with in any project, we felt approaches such as the journals and more open-ended forms of reflection were better suited to allowing the EYPs and CFPs to talk about the project in the ways that were meaningful to them and which made more space for their knowledge.



Child's sound bellow castle created for hybrid play

Analysis and interpretation: outcome 1

Strengthen children's innate musicality

In-setting sessions have included a wide variety of often multimodal musical activities. These include: group singing of songs and rhymes; vocalising and improvised singing; mark-making to music; musical jamming including leadership and ensemble opportunities such as starting and stopping, call and response; playing with sound makers and found objects; going on listening walks; intensive one-to-one interactions with instruments such as handpans, glockenspiels and kalimbas; adding sound to other focus activities set up in the nursery such as small world or play dough; movement to music including with lycra and scarves; exploring stories by reciting, rapping, adding backing tracks, retelling, adding instruments and soundscapes; listening to recorded music and responding through movement or the creation of spontaneous narratives; playing and making graphic scores.

Through these activities, children have developed techniques for playing instruments such as ocarinas, ukuleles, boom whackers, whistle and water flutes. They have developed their motor skills and gained experience in manipulating the instruments to play rhythms or control dynamics for example. They have also had time to explore the instruments, become familiar with their affordances and find ways to make sounds that are meaningful for them. Children have developed their listening skills through songs and games and also through varied opportunities to engage with and process what they have hearing, for example showing recognition of changes in music through movements or mark-making. Working in groups they have developed skills for playing together, coordinating starting and stopping together and changes in tempo and dynamics.



Group mark-making to music

The children have increasingly had their music-making valued by the adults working with them and so have developed their confidence which has supported their creativity. Children have created melodies and tone-rows individually and in groups. They have led activities, given musical directions, and given ideas both verbally and non-verbally.

Many children have engaged in the creation of micro-songs and sung conversations: *“Several of the children have been astoundingly fluent at this and have made songs based on their interests including submarines, dinosaurs, and several of the stories we have been looking at”* (CFP). These songs were often accompanied by movement and drama, vocal sounds, body percussion and instruments. A bear hunt song transformed into a song about a dragon in a cave, the wheels on the bus became the geckos in the jungle. Child S sang that it was starting to rain which then developed into a group musical drama about running away from the rain, singing rain songs and making splashing sounds. As well as creating spontaneously, children have also worked on their compositions over time. Children J and Z collaboratively developed their song “Don’t Be a Scary Cat” over a number of weeks – it went on to become a core part of the nursery repertoire.

“I think the project helped awaken the children’s musical curiosity and connect with music in ways they most probably hadn’t done previously. It also provided ideas and opportunities for a breadth of musical experiences.” (EYP)

“A particular highlight towards the end of the project was a music-making time which grew from a seed of me interacting musically with one child at the outside music wall. It grew and activated music-making across the outside area with lots of children becoming involved, playing pots and pans and boxes. They would come near to where I was playing the ukulele and singing and then ‘travel’ away making music where they went, then back again. Apart from the significant musical interactions that were happening, one of the reasons it was significant was that two children who were generally the most disruptive in the setting were fully engaged and absorbed in this activity, becoming more open in their interactions with me and others.” (CFP)

“G featured strongly as a song creator throughout the year. She often sings fully formed, original songs. The songs pulled in and collated her worlds, singing about her experiences (singing about Jamaican food for example) using so-mi-la tone sets and major hexachords following the nursery repertoire she knows so well. She also often sang known songs at a fixed pitch – I noticed she would accurately sing nursery songs in tune in C major without any previous pitch reference.” (CFP)

Analysis and interpretation: outcome 2

Support children's development in areas of the EYFS

We have found that the project has particularly supported children's development in the areas of personal, social and emotional development and in communication and language development, the two often being strongly intertwined.

Practitioners felt that this has been particularly impactful for those children who were not so confident and those with SEND. Music provides a medium and an environment where children, including (and often particularly) those who are other-than-verbal, can communicate, make a contribution to a group, connect with other children, and be seen as competent by adults.

Many EYPs made reference to increases in their children's confidence, for example:

It has..."helped support many children's confidence, wellbeing and development. This includes many of the SEND children and those children who, prior to this, were very shy and did not like joining in much."

"Everyone has music in them and I saw children who were not so confident build confidence through the sessions."



Children's play with castanets

Many EYPs also felt that music-making opportunities were inclusive of all children, which helped build relationships and communities within the nursery:

“Children like T felt heard. He often struggled to connect to others in the nursery, but when movement and music and scarves were introduced he would join in and shout numbers (sometimes counting, but more often than not just at random). His shouted numbers were accepted and echoed back, making him feel included and proud.” (CFP)

“It has had a positive impact on both wellbeing and development of the children in my class. The sessions have created a more than usual warm, joyful atmosphere where every child feels included and valued, which has supported their emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging. Also developing social skills, turn taking and listening to others, sharing instruments and working together as a group.” (EYP)

“Overall having the music group this year has reminded me how powerful music is for the early years development and how much joy it brings to some children. I am looking forward to keep using what I have learnt, I can see how much the regular sessions have brought to our nursery, far beyond simply learning songs. The sessions have given some children a safe, joyful space to express themselves and connect with each other.” (EYP)

A further group of practitioner reflections clustered around music as an alternative means of communication (though again, the role of children's wellbeing and feeling included in facilitating communicative behaviours is evident).

"It has been amazing to see the children who were not even repeating language or understanding receptive language in October develop and thrive so greatly. Several children who took a long time to settle have really engaged with the use of music and it has become one of the threads of their play. One particular boy made a strong friendship through mark-making to music (to Irish music on St Patrick's day) as another boy was copying his actions and chasing him with the pen. Apparently they asked for the rest of the week if they could do the activity again "with the mad dancing pens". (EYP)

"One of the most surprising parts of the project has been seeing just how much music can reach every child, regardless of their background, language ability or confidence level. Children who were usually very reserved have opened up and found their voice through music." (EYP)

"J has speech and language delay and struggles to self-regulate. Despite his speech delay and struggles with emotional regulation, he used songs to express himself. Musically and comedically he is very, very good. You can tell he has whole songs in his head - in particular songs from the Lion King. We've been having one on one sessions together for a number of weeks. This was the longest time he spent focused on anything in the nursery. He particular liked drums and kalimbas. Today he was hammering things into a board and I asked what it was he was making - a boat! We sang a song together changing the words to discuss the animal shapes he had on a boat. He joyfully sang, without a care in the world, subbing in new lyrics. He doesn't always form words clearly with his mouth/voice. He has a real sense of humour making this very funny and playing with ideas. His ability to remember and extend songs over months showed how music supports long-term memory and self-esteem. According to the EYPs the music time he spent with me was the longest he ever focused in the nursery."



EYPs in the project have broadened their understanding of what music is and what it is to be musical. Many start the project with preconceptions that to be musical you have to be able to read music or play an instrument. Similarly, for some, their conceptions around music-making in the EYFS are that it should involve nursery rhymes or some instruments and only happen in an adult-led circle time. Over the project EYPs have come to see that children's music happens all day in all areas of the nursery, often blended other types of play and accordingly, their practice has developed to support this.

"The way we see music in every area since we have started the project... we try to think about music in different ways."

"We have become more alert and responsive to the sounds around us. We now take any and every possibility to tune in with children in the sounds/noise/music they may make."

"Music now is not subjected/restrained to one corner/table or area of our setting. We can now include music into everything we are doing on a daily basis. We are being musical even without musical instruments."

"I have learnt that music can involve different things not just instruments and song. Every child is musical it just takes them time to get there."

"As a practitioner, I've learnt a lot about how music can be used not just for entertainment but as a tool to support learning, wellbeing and inclusion. The group has inspired me to use music more naturally into our daily routines. Some parents have often told us how much their children sing the songs at home, which show that the sessions extended beyond the nursery walls."

This has also meant being able to take more risks. CFPs noted:

"EYP F became more confident using recorded music and props as a foundation for rich, noisy, joyful music-making. The project gave her knowledge, and support to push through with different types of musical play even when some staff found it "too loud". There was a brilliant moment when F was leading a circle time and child M sat next to her and started to get agitated and tapping his knees, as he would.. F noticed it and redirected the activity to the song. You could see these lovely moments of OWL more at play at the year went on."

"When I arrived, the nursery went from primarily sedentary activities such as sitting around tables, puzzles, worksheets, to a space alive with movement, sound, and connection. The time I was in that room allowed there to be moments where children could explore their bodies, voices, and feelings, often resulting in laughter, storytelling, and imaginative worlds (and sometimes running, disregulation and over stimulation)."

EYPs have developed their own particular interests and strengths and it is in these areas that they seem most able to continue the practice they have developed with future cohorts.

EYPs' individual and specific plans include: running a music group for children with SEND (a very common theme), running CPD for next year's team of support staff, including more music in free play, using more songs in different languages, building an outdoors music area, including music in weekly planning, and working with Musical Development Matters in planning.

“Going to use MDM going forward next year for planning! That’s for sure! It’s massive! They’re making up their own songs!”

“Music is embedded into our curriculum and planning. We have music in our environment...the staff are more confident in singing with the children.”

Due to the withdrawal of one setting, we were able to return to a participating setting from 2022-23 and were pleased to see how much practice had remained. The CFP noted: *“It was interesting talking to one of the team who had returned to work at the setting after being away from work during the time of the original project. She was saying about the difference she’d noticed compared with when she previously worked there, for example in the way the team were using music...in a way they hadn’t done before and how much it’s made a difference for the children.”*

Although they don't have budget to contract Creative Futures for a full programme, one setting will be staying in touch with their CFP for visits on a freelance basis. A further setting has developed a partnership with a local dementia care home where they visit weekly to sing songs together.



The project has also provided learning and development for our CFPs, who have learnt from their EYP partners as well as from each other.

As a music practitioner, I have gained much greater insight into the daily workings of a nursery setting and the opportunities and limitations within this. I have learned a lot from working alongside experienced early years practitioners and their knowledge of the children has helped significantly in engaging musically with the children.

“Her ideas for developing music and stories has been inspirational in my practice; her slow pedagogy reflections gave me ‘permission’ to step back and observe”

“She inspires in the way she’s always curious – asking just the right questions”

“She helped open my eyes to the true meaning of the ‘unique child’ through her personal understanding of neurodivergence”

EMLs have also learnt from taking part in the project. Many highlighted the importance of inclusive approaches to SEND and anti-racist practice in the CPD sessions, not only for children but for their own safety.

They have been able to observe the wider professional collaborative role of a musician in a nursery and developed their confidence in delivery, particularly in play-based interactions. Journals show observations which reflect on the child’s experience, show how they begin to link music to the Characteristic of Effective Learning and Teaching, and deep thinking behind why the CFPs they shadow made the choices they did.



Discussion: challenges

Challenges across the early years sector such as high staff turnover and absence have made aspects of the project challenging. This impacted time available to engage in reflective conversations with our music practitioners, organise cascading sessions, setup activities or even to interact with children. This, combined with a high-pressure school readiness agenda, is resulting in low staff morale. Together with EYPs' own personal caring responsibilities, this has also impacted on attendance at CPD sessions. We offered to fund the cost of cover for EYPs to attend CPD sessions but this was still not able to guarantee full attendance and was not taken up by all.

Many settings had minimal resources, not only lacking musical equipment but also pens, paper and books. What resources there were, were often buried in cupboards and not available for use. We have felt a sense of 'resource scarcity', resulting in children's fierce (and sometimes challenging) sense of ownership over resources that were introduced. There has also been a sense of 'attention scarcity', that for music practitioners to arrive as adults focusing solely on interacting with children was so rare that they were overwhelmed with children who wanted to engage with them. Many CFPs noted settings have large numbers of children with additional undiagnosed needs but who have no additional support.

CFPs noted: *"There was no headspace to think about anything much more than getting school ready"* and *"it felt like so much pressure in the room. I think because the staff were really stressed and pushed"* and *"Times have changed since Covid...it was very evident in the second version of the project that practitioners were more stretched in the settings.... which created a 'barrier' to them fully understanding and engaging in the project unless they were particularly 'tuned in.'* EYPs reflected *"You won't change them (the system)... it's always been done that way" and "I've given up, there's no point".*

We have found working with one practitioner over the year to be highly beneficial in terms of having time to build relationships, trust, and dismantle preconceptions and expectations. However the risk is that the practitioner becomes 'the music person' in their setting and supporting music-making becomes their sole responsibility. If they then move on, they may take the practice with them.

We have implemented a range of strategies which we feel have been helpful for sharing practice and embedding culture: posters and displays to spark conversations with other staff and families; sharing practice with other staff by osmosis and informal conversations; whole team CPDs and staff meetings; music at graduations, picnics and other events to raise the profile and again make links with families. In an ideal world however we would work across the year will all EYFS classes (or indeed for longer and with the whole school!).

In an example from one CFP: *"The challenge in this project was the tension between Nursery and Reception.... I attended a music session to see if there might be...at least a conversation there. It mainly focused on showing single beats. This was very much at odds with what I know the children can do. It felt restrictive."* We are pleased to be working closely with the new team at Brent Music Service next year on Sound Communities III which we hope will support nursery provision and also their in-school offer for reception classes and more widely.

Discussion: mechanisms

It has been a particularly highlight to see so many children experience 'firsts'. In common with previous years and other projects, the project seems to have been particularly meaningful for children with SEND or those children labelled as quiet. Example journal entries include:

"A said today he was especially expressive today - he was smiling moving to music often in very silly head shaking and stomping ways when moving to recorded music. Usually he is very reserved in nursery according to A." (CFP)

"O, who struggles to engage verbally, stayed with musical games longer than her usual playing, repeating stop/go games, echoing actions, and giggling when she controlled the pace or sound game." (CFP)

"N was singing on the "stage". After a while I joined him and we had an absolutely fabulous back and forth musical conversation with vocalisations. Apparently he is considered very serious and rarely smiles, but he was laughing having eye contact and his responses were very creative."

We have been interested to think about the mechanism for this, and how music seems to facilitate this. In child-led, improvisatory, multimodal music-making children have tools or mediums such as gesture, movement etc that they can use to participate even if they are other-than-verbal. The music-making can take account of their interests and ideas which may increase their motivation. Means of participation, together with motivation, can then foster a feeling of inclusion and confidence. These in turn feed back in to children's participation in a sort of virtuous circle.

Recorded music has been an important resource, which can be used for story creation, movement, marking making, and playing along with. Open-ended resources, such as tissue paper, mirrors, and chalk have also been fruitful, particularly when plentiful numbers of the same resource are available. Open-ended resources can support children's creativity; a giant scrunchy became a circle of caterpillars, and scarves became cocoons for example.

However, we have been keen to understand and to highlight the importance of the change in the environment, rather than to see these changes simply as the rectification of a deficit that resides within the child. We've also noticed how a reported change in a child can often be a result of the adult's changing lens. By broadening their conceptions of music and children's music-making, adults can move from, for example, conceptualising a piece of musical play as 'noise' to reconceptualising it as music, or from seeing a child as only non-verbal or S&L delayed, to seeing them also as a communicative multi-modal musician. EYPs were often surprised by children's capabilities when activities were made more child-led. For example, an EYP related that child C had previously 'clammed up' when singing a song at grandparents' day but that at the end of year sharing, he sang exuberantly in front of everyone because he was singing his own improvised material.

Child N was described as one who does not generally create relationships with adults quickly. In one of her first meetings with N, CFP Julia noticed him enjoying playing with a pinecone and twisting it round on a table. It spun towards her and so she gently batted it back. This gradually developed into an interaction of making the pinecone move in different ways, then tapping it to Julia who would copy carefully and tap it back. The 'silent pine cone dance' is an example of something that a) might look like nothing but paid close attention to the child and what they were doing b) might not look like music because it is silent but is full of rhythm, pace, phrasing and interaction. The EYP reflected that it was the longest sustained interaction she had seen N take part in.



Discussion: implications

A further ingredient that we think is important in this kind of work is to try to remain flexible and adaptive and take a personalised approach.

CFPs described their roles in different ways. One said *“Increasingly I saw myself as a disrupter”* while others took a more pragmatic approach. Working with class topics for example can be challenging as it can be restrictive and in conflict with the idea of following children’s interests. However one CFP noted how well it worked for her EYP partner: *“by term 4 she was able to look at a topic plan and find lots of ways to incorporate music which is a great step towards sustainability... having somewhere to start from can be a good spark.”* These differences reflect both the personal styles of the CFP as well as the EYPs they were working with.

Further pragmatic approaches included:

- *“EYPA in particular adopted my techniques into her phonics scheme and the whole team scoured the nursery to find interesting sounds to be matching sounds in the hidden sound game! She has used the “can you make a noise like this” song to make sound stories for her “people who help us” topic and had a go at everything I have introduced – mark making to music, rapping stories, mystery sound games and adapting known songs, as well as movement and lycra etc. She kept a careful diary of what we added to her topics across the year so I hope that they will be added at the same time next year. In my last session I saw one of the shyest staff members leading a musical game in the outside space which made me super proud.”* (CFP)
- *“I focused in on repertoire in an attempt to mimic the EYFS requirements through a music lens in a way that was recognizable to teachers - they could share and take turns through music; they were able to show their own unique style and confidence in the way they presented; they could listen to and follow instructions where there was mutual respect; they were listening; phonics and syllables through music big tick.”* (CFP)

Certain settings also developed certain preferences and musical cultures. Setting A had a teacher who was really enthusiastic about rap and so reported lots of engagement and lots of examples of children rapping in time and replicating rhythms accurately. At setting C, *“ABBA became such a hit with that class, they just ended up having such a singing culture”* (CFP). At setting J, a strong thread of multimodal work around music and stories developed. Work with the book ‘Say Zoop’ turned into a mini project and children used voices, instruments and pots and pans to play, conduct each other, and begin emergent musical literacy work, playing from shapes, symbols and graphic scores and composing using their own signs and symbols. This setting also developed an animation project around the book ‘The Runaway Pea’, creating and recording their own polished improvisations to make a soundtrack, including car racing music, morning music and bird music.

Discussion: implications

We have found in this project, and know from our learning from other projects and those of colleagues, that time is essential. This ranges from the micro, such as time in interactions with children to OWL (observe, wait, listen), to the macro, such as time for EYPs and CFPs to sit together and reflect, and over the even longer term to learn about each other's ways of working and build relationships and trust.

This is particularly important as work with music comes with so many preconceptions and entrenched habits, as discussed in the previous section.

One CFP wrote in a journal entry from April 2025: *"it finally feels like children have understood I'm there to play and not to lead circle time"*. Others reflected:

“I enjoyed being in settings for a longer period of time than previous iterations. Watching the change in the children and particularly staff takes a bit of time to embed. In all of my settings in Brent I have been surprised by enthusiasm from support staff later in the year.... I find this particularly when staff are working with the SEN children as they have clearly observed that music is an essential tool they can use for regulation, intrinsic motivation and interest. I think the emphasis on legacy for the staff has also been a huge benefit and I have tried to focus on that this year in particular.”

“I felt that the real achievement was in the relationships I built with the early years practitioners and the children. I really felt that at the end of the project, we had created a strong bond and that the depth of the work was really felt by everyone involved. I feel confident that musical play and the approaches of validating and encouraging musical ideas will continue in this setting.”