

Why Music in the EYFS?

What do practitioners believe children gain most from music sessions?

This paper will look at the perceptions of practitioners leading music sessions with children aged 0-5 years -

- what are their priorities in terms of aims and objectives and
- what do they believe the children are learning?

This data will be examined in relation to a recent published paper on the impact of music on learning and development (Hallam, S. 2015) and identify which areas are supported by research. This presentation will offer practitioners the opportunity to reflect upon the role of music in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Context

In recent years there has been huge developments in neuroscience giving rise to large numbers of studies and many claims about the value and effect of music. Much of this research is focussed on the transfer effects of music and the way it might be used to support children's learning and development; "learning through music".

This is relatively new science and whilst great strides have been made there is still much that is not yet fully understood and many of those working with young children may be unclear about the potential benefits of music activity. This uncertainty is often compounded by practitioners own lack of musical knowledge, skill and above all, confidence which perhaps makes using music as a vehicle for another objective attractive. For those who run music groups in community settings, notions which imply "music makes your child smarter" such as "the Mozart Effect" (Rauscher, 1998) may be utilised to attract parents and customers. Indeed Young (2007) has suggested the intended learning objectives in these groups is often of a non-music nature and fuelled by a perceived need to raise standards in a particular educational area or, perhaps in the case of independent providers of music sessions, to fit the aspirations of parents who pay to attend.

Research study

In 2014 as part of a Masters Degree Dissertation, I researched the aims and objectives of music session leaders and their thoughts on what the children they worked with gained by participating in their sessions. In order to address these research questions, a sample of around 100 individuals from a cross-section of the population of early childhood music group leaders/providers would be

contacted, predominantly via an electronically circulated questionnaire. The aim was to gather relevant data from a variety of early childhood music practitioners in the UK ranging from those working with large national franchises (such as Jo-Jingles, Kindermusik, Music with Mummy and Caterpillar Music) to independent and freelance providers.

I was concerned that recruitment through personal contacts & Early Years Music organisations and online communities was likely to reach those who have an interest in engaging with other practitioners and that this would not be representative of the UK population of early childhood music leaders and practitioners. Most of the sample was therefore sourced via an online parenting organisation, "Netmums" (<http://www.netmums.com/>) which, among its many functions for parents, lists by geographical area information about activities for children under 5 years old. Preschool music classes are listed in the "Music and Dance" section of the "Baby & Preschool classes" category within each region of the United Kingdom. This is the way that many parents access children's music classes in their area and so this seemed a logical place to start. The early childhood music sector is indeed large, far larger than I had ever realised! The first two of the 12 "Netmums" regions in the UK (North West and South West England) yielded over 300 individuals advertising music sessions, most of who provide multiple numbers of classes throughout their area. This is big business involving huge numbers of children and families and yet remains somehow invisible on a national scale.

Contact emails addresses for practitioners were collected by trawling through the Netmums' regions and copying details to an excel worksheet for each area. There were large numbers of "Music" classes listed and so these were whittled down to approximately 50 per region. Once these lists had been compiled, the web link was sent out with a covering e mail message inviting practitioners to take part in my research study and complete the questionnaire. Once this had been completed for all regions, the information was also posted on an online community, the Early Years Music Facebook page which at this point in time had in the region of 650 members (membership now exceeds 1000). By this time however, the vast majority of the 137 responses had already been received.

The majority of respondents (58%) described themselves as "self-employed/freelance/sole trader" with only 14% employed by Local Authority Children's or Music Services, Children's Centres, educational settings, libraries and the like. It is highly likely that many of the self-employed respondents also work on a regular basis in settings such as these. Indeed, further analysis of the available data suggests that at least 57 of all respondents (41%) work in some form of early years education.

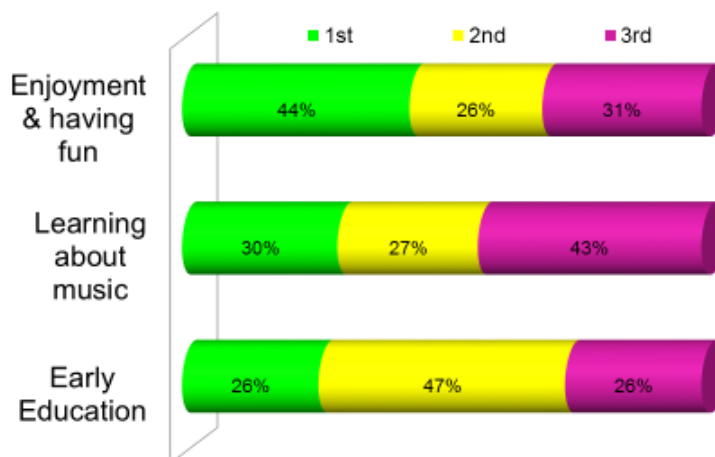
Music for...?

An earlier, smaller study (Greenhalgh 2013) had suggested that the main aim of many early childhood music sessions did not relate to learning musical skills but focussed on either general education and development, or enjoyment. To further investigate this notion, the practitioners participating in this larger study were asked to rate the aims of their music sessions in order of priority:

- a. *Early education through music and singing* – an enjoyable way for the children to learn about counting, colours, shapes, listening & language, sharing, turn taking etc. Music and singing provides an enjoyable way for the children to learn.
- b. *Learning about music* – exploring musical concepts and sounds and developing skills; singing, playing instruments, keeping a steady beat, etc. Non music learning also takes place in these enjoyable sessions.
- c. *Enjoyment and having fun* – a time for children & parents/carers to share some quality time together. Formal learning is not the priority.

main

Order of importance in music sessions



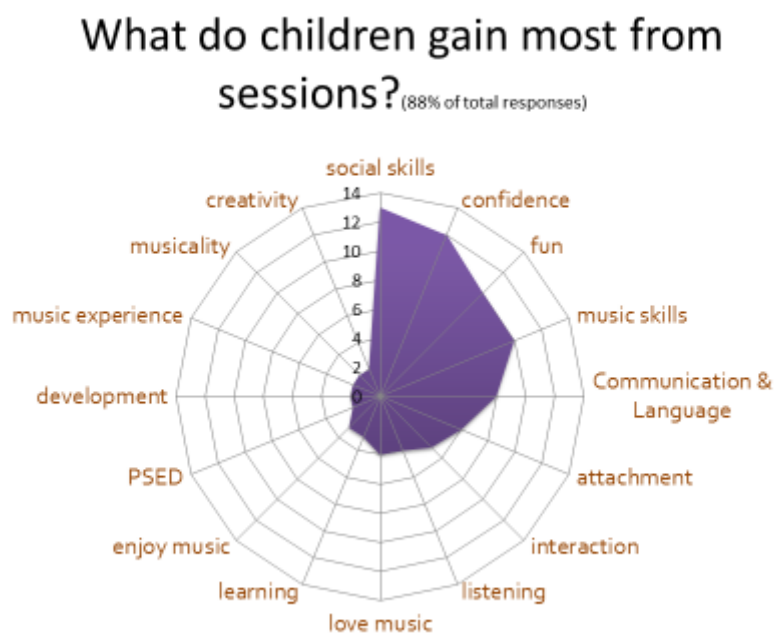
The most popular order of priority was 1. “Enjoyment and having fun” followed by 2. “Early Education” with 3. “Learning about Music” deemed least important. This evidence would seem to

support the findings of the previous study (Greenhalgh 2013) in suggesting that although groups are marketed as “Music Groups”, it is very likely that they do not aim to develop children’s musical skills or knowledge. “Learning about Music” was more frequently chosen as a main aim than “Early Education”.

What do practitioners believe children gain most from music sessions?

The practitioners were asked to identify the three things that they thought the children gained most from music sessions. Although this question generated 383 responses, many practitioners gave similar answers which were offered in very general terms. The responses were coded and sorted using key words to show commonly occurring themes.

As can be seen from the graphic, the majority of responses were concerned with personal, social and emotional development. More detailed analysis of all responses shows answers relating to “social skills” to be the most frequent response followed by “confidence”. “Fun” & “Enjoyment” were also popular themes.



Responses relating to “music” equalled “fun and enjoyment” in popularity. Approximately one third of these were given in non-specific terms such as “developing a love of music”, “exposure to music” and developing “musical awareness”. The development of musical skills represented 10% of all answers given.

Learning and Development

Communication and language was the most common theme (8%) that was more specific in nature in agreement with the belief that song, rhyme and rhythm support language acquisition, literacy and communication skills identified by Young (2007 p24). Listening skills and attention also featured regularly.

There were very few answers however, relating to the impact of music on core subject learning and intellectual development. Those that were given were very general in nature with responses such as “brain development”, “build on other skills like counting, colouring”, “educational development” and “a foundation for learning”.

It is interesting that very few responses relating to the development of physical co-ordination were identified (less than 5 responses) when musical activity and instrument playing in particular require a level of hand-eye coordination.

Evidence of “The Power of Music”

Professor Susan Hallam (2015) has collated the findings of the available research in “*a research synthesis of the impact of actively making music on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people*“. This publication aims to clarify the research that has been undertaken in this area, the implications of findings and where here is a need for future study. From the outset it is very clearly stated that the body of research comes from many different academic disciplines, using wide variety of designs and methods and whilst the findings contribute greatly to knowledge, it is generally not possible to know the direction of causality (Hallam 2015, p10).

Listening, Language and Literacy

There is “considerable and compelling evidence” says Hallam (2015, p10) that listening and aural processing skills are enhanced as a result of musical training and that areas of the brain which are used to process sound are structurally changed by musical involvement in childhood. A number of studies are cited which support the notion that early childhood musical training plays a major role in the development of infant’s and preschool sound discrimination ability with evidence that the younger children are and the longer they are exposed to musical activity, this automatic transfer of skills is more pronounced (Hallam, p36). Links with listening and phonetic learning do seem to have been established. Links with literacy are not so clear with mixed findings and this is an area for further exploration. Hallam (2015,p46) writes that “while the precise nature of the relationships between musical training and reading skills are currently unclear there is sufficient accruing

evidence to suggest that musical training which supports the development of pitch and rhythmic skills supports the development of fluent reading leading to enhanced comprehension”.

Spatial reasoning and Mathematics

It is a common perception that Music learning has links with the development of spatial and mathematical skills. Some studies have found indeed established links between musical learning and enhanced spatial awareness and mathematical skills but the causality is unclear. More research is needed in this area to provide reliable information.

Intellectual Development

One study by Rauscher (2009 cited in Hallam p60) concluded that different areas of musical learning appear to impact upon different intellectual abilities; rhythmic training linking with the development of temporal cognition and mathematical skills and language development being supported by learning relating to pitch and melody. Hallam also cites a number of studies where music learning has been found to raise IQ scores (2015, p59-60).

Other areas relating to transfer effects of music impact upon memory skills (Hallam, 2015, p48) but perhaps the most valuable transfer effect relates to executive function and self-regulation. Participation in group musical activity successfully requires the individual to be present and “in the moment”, involved in real time participation which requires higher level executive functioning involving processes such as controlling impulses, filtering distractions, remembering instructions while maintaining focussed attention. There is also some evidence to support the idea that children who participate in early childhood music classes are likely to have better self-regulation skills (Hallam, 2015 p65).

Social cohesion

It is perhaps unsurprising that there is a body of research on the impact of group music making activities in early childhood with social bonding and development given the inherently musical nature of early communication (Malloch and Trevarthan, 2010). There are some studies with school age children which associate an increase in social cohesion with increased participation in group music musical activities within the curriculum (Hallam, 2015 p82). In general group music making activity is believed to increase prosocial behaviour, belongingness, collaborative learning, group identity and team work.

Conclusion

Having considered the available findings relating to the transfer effects of music to other areas of development it is possible to identify some well-founded learning objectives that may be achieved through musical training in early childhood. The most convincing evidence relates to; the development of communication, listening and language skills; personal, social and emotional development, and executive functioning. What also becomes clear is that high quality musical training/activity is more valuable and effective in generating the effective transfer of skills to non-musical areas of development.

References:

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