

# The SoundWaves Network Programme in Bristol

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This report explains our journey as Early Years Music practitioners working and learning together in two Early Years settings.

### The beginning starts with observing...

We started our Bristol Soundwaves journey on the 30th September 2019 with a window onto the workings of St Paul's Nursery and Children's Centre in the morning and BS3's Chessel Centre in the afternoon. We spent our first day in both settings watching the staff work with the children; we witnessed their usual circle time routine and watched the children at play.

### Setting Staff Professional Development Evening

After a day of observing and talking to practitioners and managers, we gathered all the staff from both settings together to meet, network and be introduced to the programme in the evening. This event was hosted (with food - always important!) by Bristol Plays Music.



The evening commenced with us delivering a non-verbal West African djembe session to encourage gentle participation from the start.



We then talked about the ways we were looking for the settings to start working musically with the children. During a standard day in an early years setting, there will consistently be moments where a child maybe exploring their own musical self. This might be through song, vocal doodling or movement and pulse. There are numerous ways in which musicality can manifest itself in these scenarios. Young (2018) states that, it is the experience from all sides, early years practitioner, musician and parents that can take unique perspectives on what it is they are observing to inform how to progress a child's musicality further, therefore enriching their learning.



We introduced the idea of the staff becoming the children's non-verbal musical play partners as well as noticing the children's spontaneous music in their everyday play. Once these new ideas were presented and the staff heard Jane talk about the natural musicality of children, the practitioners left the evening feeling much more relaxed about their role in the project.

It was wonderful to see how inspired the staff were from settings when they realised that they were doing much of what we were talking about already. Subconsciously they were already expert musical play partners. We also introduced staff to some simple rhymes and songs appropriate for the babies and young children they work with. They left the evening feeling very much that they 'can do' this!



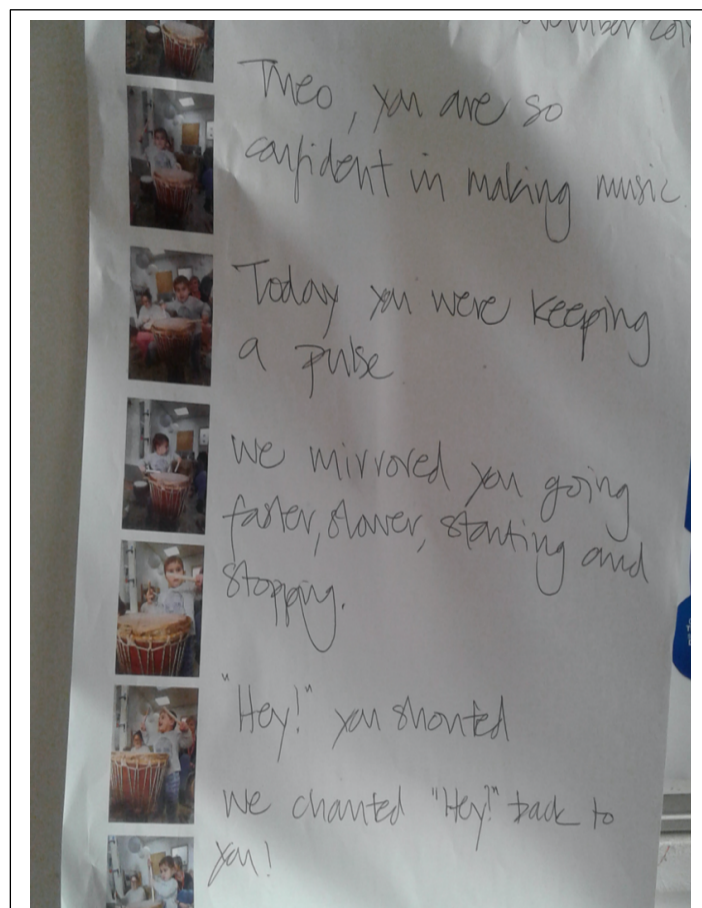
### **St Pauls Nursery School and Children's Centre**

We were asked to work with the two year olds in a very long room leading to a large outside area. However, it felt too busy and large a space for our sessions to run productively so we were offered a larger side room which was ideal for musical provocations. The setting reorganised this room into a 'music room' and it is still in place well after the end of the project.

Each session that we spent in the centre started with us setting up a provocation in the music room which had been dedicated to our musical play. Each week we would set up using our pitched bells and scarves, or our gathering drums, our chime bars, and we would begin to play and see what happened. Gradually children would come to visit us and see what was going on. There are some children that we knew we would see every week; they would appear as soon as the instruments came out and then we would see new children each week who we had not seen before. We gradually introduced our approach, through playing with the children and modelling ways of scaffolding the children's learning and recognising their musical offerings.



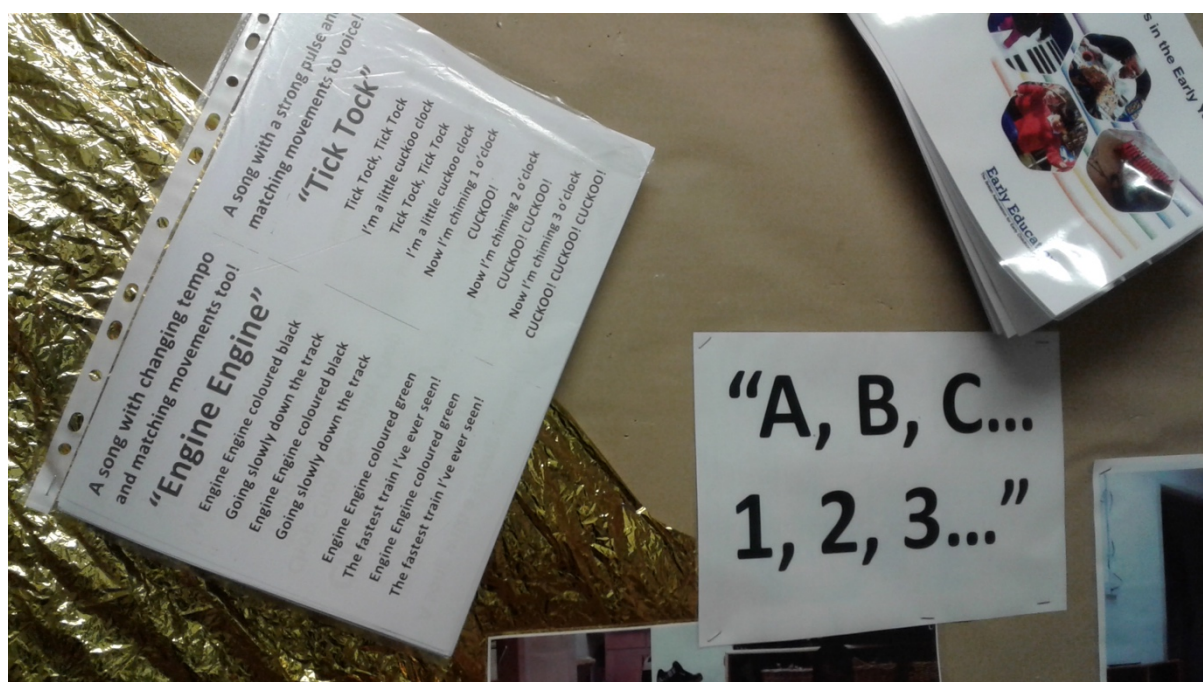
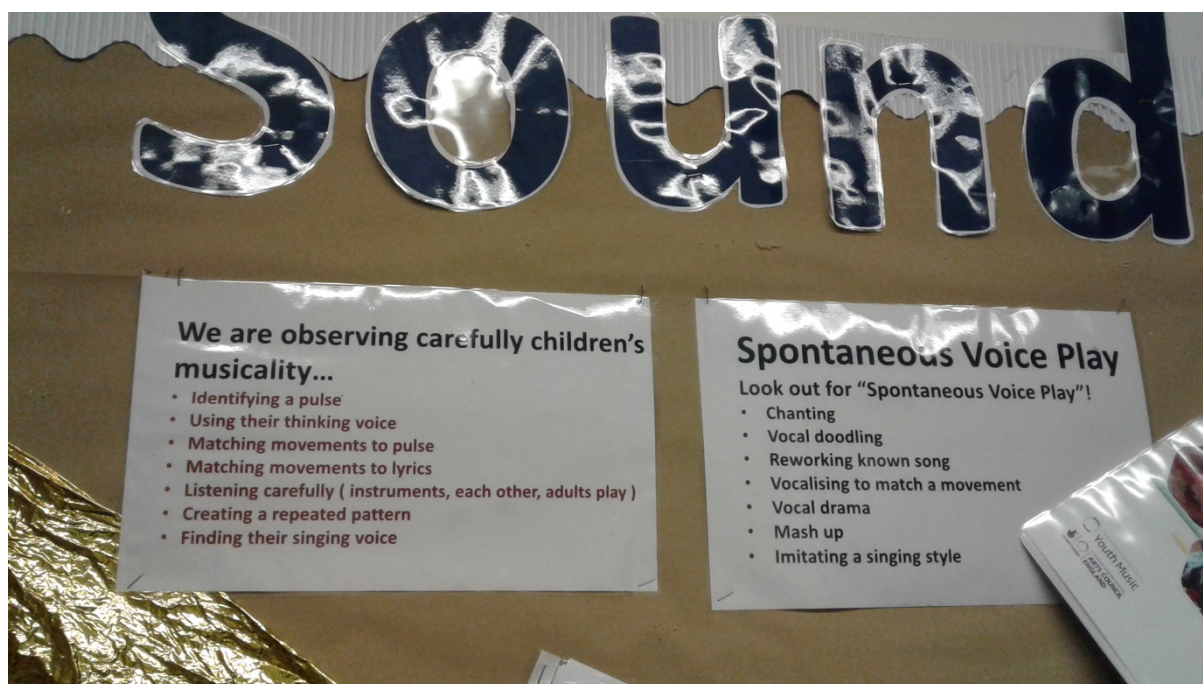
The staff took everything on and started to write their observations.





There were two immediate challenges that faced us as we began sessions at St Paul's. The first was identifying the musical learning in the songs the staff were already using. They had a good repertoire of songs, but were unclear as to what, immediately, were the benefits of each. We sat down and explained to them the differences between pulse and rhythm, discussed pitch etc and taught them new simple repertoire. The first of these was 'Hickety tickety bumble bee' which can be used to introduce pitch and also matching movements to pulse (we observed children rocking from side to side accentuating the pulse of the song). We went through each song and discussed with staff the intended musical learning outcomes for all. They wrote this up and displayed them on boards around the setting for other staff and parents to read/learn. This immediately gave validity to the work we were delivering. Each week updated learning outcomes were added, and parents could also see and understand the work being delivered on the parent communication display boards.





The next challenge was to support staff in non-verbal musical play-partnering. With reassurance and perseverance, staff became more and more practiced at doing this. It always surprises us how much space non-verbal play partnering offers us as researchers. It enables us as practitioners to identify those 'key moments' without conversation to nursery staff and is rich in terms of musical outcomes.



St Pauls is a tremendously busy Children's Centre, and as a result, for the first few weeks, we only worked with a small percentage of staff. There was a shift halfway through the programme where new faces would turn up to the sessions. This was a direct result of the centre manager's enthusiasm and encouragement, and even gave way to new staff leading their circle time. Quite quickly, we had a team there, fully immersed in not only the musicality of the children, but also understanding and recording observations of musical play in action.

From the onset, the key staff working with us on these sessions were completely on board with the Soundwaves network. Added to this their Head was fully onboard. As a Children's Centre they invested more than £800 on quality musical instruments and resources.

We were so impressed by the knowledge and energy of the staff at St Paul's and by their approach to the children. In spite of us knowing that there were more than 100 children in the centre we would not have known this as the spaces are arranged with such an uncluttered and open feel. The dedicated staff are so present with the children; we always felt so relaxed and unhurried working with them; there was rarely a sense of chaos which is quite a feat with that number of children!

The staff at St Paul's embraced us being there from the outset. They were very keen to take on everything we were communicating. Some of the staff were more confident to start with but with encouragement all the staff came to watch us at work and were encouraged to lead the songs and observe the children.



Valuable reflection time with St Pauls staff. The picture above shows something that is often missed when working in this, and many other, educative settings, 'the reflection'. This happened after each session and were always in-depth discussions around observations we had all had. In St Pauls we had the privilege, most weeks, of reflecting with two lead practitioners, a practitioner from the baby room, and the manager, all of whom were present at each session.



## Feedback from St Paul's Nursery and Children's Centre

The feedback from the staff at St Paul's has been fantastic and we have seen that the approach we introduced has been sustained and shared with other staff.

In their evaluation via an informal zoom meeting due to pandemic restrictions, they pointed out how much music had been a way for the children to reconnect after lockdown.

- *During lockdown when we were still open, it really enabled them to come back into nursery. Obviously, we were shut for a short period and then we came back and we used, they used a lot of the songs, the rhythm and the pulse songs with the instruments to kind of settle themselves back in - it was quite noticeable.*
- *They use the gathering drums quite a lot. But they were doing it, we didn't initiate it, they would just gather around the drums and start imitating each other going fast, going slow. There was lots of looking at each other making that connection, almost like reconnecting but through musicality after being separated for such a long time.*

As well as introducing the Early Years practitioners to new musical material we explained the reasons why we choose to sing the songs we choose. Helping them look at a song or rhyme and work out what the musical learning is for the children. We talked about the words, 'pulse, rhythm, pitch, tempo and dynamics' making sure that the meanings were clear to them. There were many lightbulb moments for the staff as they realised that much of what we talked about already came naturally to them. They were used to mirroring the children and responding to them; they were relieved to realise that they didn't need to have passed grades in musical instruments to be a strong musical role model for the children. Through simple material, including lots of rhymes and simple songs using only 2 or 3 notes we give the children the opportunity to succeed with pitch matching. Through lots of repetition of songs and rhymes tapping and stepping the pulse we give the children the opportunity to feel the pulse in their bodies. Through doing lots of repetition of fast and slow rhymes with the help of Harry Hare and Mr Sloth we give the children the chance to feel the difference in tempo of a song. Through lots of repetition of rhymes with our talking voice and whispering voice we give the children the opportunity to play with their voices, to explore dynamics. All these opportunities are also there for the practitioners. By taking away the anxiety around being able to copy a complex melody or play an accompanying instrument the practitioners were able to relax and experiment with their voices. We encouraged them to be musical play partners with the children, to explore a non-verbal way of working and to notice the spontaneous music happening around them all the time.

This guidance helped them provide a good quality and accessible musical environment for the children. We used the "OWL" approach (Observe, Wait, Listen) which was introduced to us via the SALT Music project by the Magic Acorns Team. This way of working helped us understand what the children responded best to and informed our way forward. The staff noticed the songs that were most played with in

the intervening weeks and we made sure these were repeated during circle times and built upon.

### **St Pauls Nursery and Children's Centre Learning**

We had some wonderful online sharing from one of the practitioners – Robin Taylor - who, after putting together a songbook, made his own videos of the Soundwaves songs at home with his own children. He then shared these on the St Paul's Nursery website for the families to use at home. This online resource supported the Centre's families through the first lockdown and also fed into the archive of resources they hold for the children.

<http://stpaulschildrenscentre.co.uk/2020/03/27/robin-brings-our-first-song-book-to-life/>

### **Chessel Centre**

We were originally going to work with two rooms at the Chessel Centre, the 3/4 room and the baby room but due to staff changes and a change of management we changed plan and decided to concentrate on working in just one of the rooms. This meant that we had the whole session to dedicate to one group of children; as we had done at St Paul's in the morning. The staff in the baby room were all keen to be involved and were fully invested in what we were doing. It transpired that two members of their team played guitar and flute and were happy for the children to play and explore both.

It is clear that with this new model of working we needed the time for the practitioners and the children to understand the approach we were hoping to embed in the setting. It is tempting to give more children the opportunity to benefit from the music by delivering it to two rooms but the experience taught us just how much more sustainable it was for the children to spend more time with us so that the staff could take the work forward. Working just with Pearl Room meant that the practitioners were really empowered to take it forward without our input. They had seen week on week how we were building on previous successes and feeding back the reflections into our next delivery.

We could see from their post reflection presentation how much they had taken on. Here is an observation of one of their children:

*'Child 2, one of our focus children has been able to keep a steady beat on a drum for a little while. Since doing this project we feel like we have become more aware of the children's budding musical skills! Now we know what we are looking for we are seeing it all the time.'*

*'Many of the new songs are now our favourites. We already had the lycra but had never realised what we could do with it! The children want to repeat the rhymes and songs again and again. We reached 35 minutes with one simple song adapted in many ways. It is fine to repeat a song isn't it? Repetition is the mother of learning!'*



We left the Chessel Centre last March fully confident that the staff would take this new way of working forward. We had been sent so much evidence on our online sharepoint showing the children responding and the staff being their musical play partner's scaffolding their learning with increasing confidence. It was a joy to see some of the practitioners who played instruments bring them in and share them with the children.







A child at the Chessel Centre exploring the sounds and vibrations of the guitar. It was important for us not to be precious about the instruments we took into settings. In doing this, we were able to give the children a full and exploitative musical experience.

In the summer we received this email from the setting which was the evidence we needed that our job was done:

*'As it seems so long ago that our musical journey came to such an abrupt ending I thought I'd drop you a line to let you know how we are getting on here at the Chessel Centre in Pearl Room. I recently watched back through the presentation we prepared and it was such a shame we never got round to presenting it in person!*

*The children of course absolutely loved their sessions with you and grew in confidence from week to week. As did the practitioners! I think it gave us the boost we needed to be more confident in singing and exploring music with the children.*

*The children still sing songs you taught us, we have implemented some of them into our daily routine, and I feel we have fully embraced our musical abilities. "Engine Engine" and the "Look at teddy" song are asked for on a daily basis, and we have noticed that so many of the children are now able to tap out the pulse on their laps whilst we sing songs.*

*You may remember we had a small unit where our instruments were housed before. Due to Covid, we are not allowing parents into the rooms, and are therefore unable to use our cloakroom area as it's intended purpose (bags are now stored outside in the garden area) so naturally I have turned the cloakroom into a music room! It's decked out with a little sofa, lights and all of the musical instruments displayed around the room, as well as photos from our sessions with you guys. They*

*love looking at the pictures of you playing the guitar and drums with them. I shall get some pictures if I can and send them to you.*

*Of course our biggest battle I felt was trying to secure some sort of budget for resources and whilst that has obviously been put on hold due to current circumstances, I am still holding strong on finding us more resources, we have actually had a few bits and bobs donated to us by parents which was great!*

*All of us here would once again like to thank you so much for everything you did for us over your time with us and hope that one day when it is safe to you can come back and visit us!*

### **Chessel Centre's Learning**

Staff at the Chessel Centre documented their learning on a powerpoint now on Take Art's website. It reflected the musical journey the children and adults had been on; this was a great testament to how much they had grown and developed over the months.

<https://takeart.org/early-years/early-years-video-library>

The presentation with films and pictures of the process showed how they had started the project feeling, perhaps not so sure of their skills to realising how much musicianship was already in the team and using it to their advantage! They created a book for the setting to show the parents how much the children had enjoyed the music sessions and they invested in new instruments for the children to play. They also transformed their cloakroom into a music room; a dedicated space for the children to explore the instruments and to sing and play.

### **Our role as two early years music practitioners working together and studying on the CME:EC course**

In this, our second year of delivery for the Soundwaves network, we have fully engaged with the skills colleagues from each setting have, and therefore understand more clearly how to develop their pedagogical approaches, musically, in a way that compliments their day to day delivery. It was important for us, as musicians, not to blindly go into a setting with the assumption we were teaching staff new tricks. In both St Pauls's and Chessel, we were gifted staff who were not only musically aware, but also already providing rich musical environments for their children. We were also both doing the Certificate Music Educators: Early Childhood course and were mentored by Jane. The requirements of the course - observing and analysing musical play, session planning, understanding the musical development of 0 to 5s and reflecting on diversity and inclusion (amongst many other aspects!) beautifully complemented our work on the project. Working and studying together throughout the programme was a privilege. Our experience in this sector can be lone working with the major drawback of having no constructive feedback from a colleague. In this work we were able to positively support and feedback to each other. This enabled us to develop and grow our practice, and from a personal development point of view was invaluable.

We feel that an important part of our role in Bristol has been to demystify the 'musician' role for many of the Early Years practitioners we work with. It was very important for us to move away from the model where the 'expert musicians' are parachuted into a setting to deliver the music and then leave. Our role was to empower the staff to see themselves as music facilitators; to realise that as music is a language that we all have access to we can all communicate and play musically with the children.

After the time spent in the room with the children we would co-lead the circle time, introducing new songs and supporting the staff with delivering songs from previous weeks. The session would end with the reflection time which was possibly the most important part of the entire programme. This would enable us all to reflect on what had happened and process the information everyone had taken in. It gave us time to discuss different children and for the staff to ask questions about any new songs; for them to understand the musical learning.

We had a great time working with together in the settings; we often set up guitar and djembe gentle jams which the children would join in with; vocalising in call and response. These gentle jams also gave the staff in the settings an opportunity to use their instruments and to sing along, to encourage the children to join in and week on week the sessions became more relaxed and joyful as we were building on previous musical experiences.

## **Conclusion**

The two Bristol settings took on the project with gusto and despite COVID getting in the way at the end of the project we managed to communicate enough of the approach for the staff to fully take it on through and beyond lockdown. We saw that the songs and rhymes helped the children settle back after lockdown and also helped the children at home during lockdown. Not only have we developed our skills as reflective practitioners but we have seen the practitioners in the settings develop their skills as music leaders and musical play partners. I think we can be confident that in both cases the musical environment for the children has been greatly improved through the project; not only through improved instrument provision but also through the training the staff have received and already passed on to new staff. This is evidence that the work is really embedded in the culture of both settings. Finally, As artists on this project we have felt constantly supported and encouraged by Take Art. Jane, Gina and Nadine offered us as practitioners unlimited access to CPD events, training, and also links to other professionals in this sector. Their passion and selfless desire to link music hubs, music collectives and other organisations in the aid of better music provision in early years is unprecedented. Long may it last.

## **References**

Young, S (2018). *Critical new perspectives in early childhood music*. Routledge