



Soundwaves Case Study

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Badock's Wood Children's Centre, Bristol
Summer Term 2016

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The Big Picture

Play It! is an organisation based in Bristol that has worked for 15 years with under fives in Nursery Schools, Children's Centres and Primary Schools. The team, made up of experienced Early years music specialists had become increasingly aware that music can have a profound impact on young children's development.

This *Soundwaves Extra* action research project was an opportunity to work with children with language delay and poor social and emotional development and to be involved directly with vulnerable families. Two areas were identified in Bristol, Knowle West in the south and Southmead, a socially deprived area in North Bristol. Vicky Meadows was placed at Badock's Wood Children's Centre.

The Detail

Badock's Wood Children's Centre provides a mixture of childcare, education and family support in an area of Bristol, which contains some of the most deprived families in the country. Within our area there are about 1,400 children under the age of five. At the Centre we provide daycare for babies as young as three months up to children of pre-school age, with 90 full time places available, although most children attend on a part time basis so there are far more than individuals on the role.

Within the Centre we also run a range of groups, often attended by families without children enrolled in the Centre, reaching a wide range of children and carers. These groups range from universal ones such as drop-in and the APPLE group, to smaller targeted sessions such as Rockabye.

When the chance arose to work on a project looking at the impact of music on young children, we were delighted to be involved.

Although we used some songs in our daily routines, and there were small collections of instruments in all the rooms, we felt that there was more we could do with music, especially in thinking about children who had additional needs, or developmental delay. We wondered how we could involve key workers, families and other professionals (such as our child minder group).

Our Research Question

It was clear from initial discussions with the Take Art team that we needed to think of a research question where we could have some measurable outcomes. From the Centre's point of view, we have a responsibility to track children's progress, so we thought about how we could link the needs of the *Soundwaves Extra* Project with the needs of the children and the data we have to collect as a Centre.

In the end we decided on a straightforward question:

'Does enhanced early years music provision have an impact on children's well being and involvement levels

and, secondly,

does it have an impact on children's progress?'

We decided initially that we would be focussing on four children, who we described as our target children. These were children who had some level of additional need. We also considered the general impact on all the children who participated in the music sessions, as well as the impact on staff.



Some Theory

There is good evidence that a powerful way to assess the quality of learning going on, especially from the point of view of the learner, is to look at two dimensions - emotional well-being and the level of involvement.

Emotional well-being is all about the extent to which the child's basic needs are being met - how at ease, spontaneous, alive and confident they are feeling. Involvement levels are measured in terms of how concentrated, focused, interested and fascinated the children are.

Ferre Laevers argues that when children are at the highest levels of both these dimensions, then they will be operating at the very limits of their capabilities, so that we are:

'mobilising and enhancing the energy in people and drawing them into a positive spiral which engenders deep level learning'

At the Centre we had already begun measuring children's levels of well-being and involvement (in our day to day observations and learning diaries), following attendance at an inspiring conference delivered by Ferre Laevers. We've been using the five point scale he developed (called the Lueven Scale) to track these levels, and summarising them three times a year so we can see which children are struggling in these areas, and then plan what we can do to help.

Our working hypothesis for the *Soundwaves Extra* Project was that the use of enhanced music provision could be a good way to help improve levels of well being and involvement, and that this in turn could have an impact on general progress.

What Happened

The project covered ten weeks during which time Vicky came into the Centre ten Tuesday mornings. The initial structure of that time was decided with Kate, the SENCO and Louise, the member of staff who was identified as the one to provide continuity with the project and the main liaison with the rest of the staff.

Vicky's initial idea and the way she liked to work was through a combination of structured sessions with families, children and staff and also informally, responding to and engaging in the children's exploration of both the instruments that she provided as a provocation and providing a musical accompaniment to their play, both inside the classroom and in the garden. The structured sessions would provide an opportunity for Vicky to model new songs and musical activities using props and percussion for both the staff and the children for their circle times .



The staff would learn songs to accompany action and movement songs that were within the children's vocal range and had a clear learning purpose. These sessions would give the children an opportunity to sing together and for Vicky they were an opportunity to identify their involvement in a group. These sessions would also be an opportunity for staff to observe the key children and monitor their development



The informal and more spontaneous music would provide opportunities for the staff to recognise and to tune into the children's spontaneous musicality and for Vicky to model responding and reflecting this through making up songs to their play and joining in their music making.

The initial structure of the morning was a meeting with Louise, an important time to touch base and catch up with the week and then Vicky would focus on Willow Room, the 3 and 4 year olds delivering both structured music sessions at circle time and some informal time in the classroom and also in the garden.



Louise put up a large display about music in the main corridor and a letter was sent out to all families explaining what we were doing and what the *Soundwaves Extra* project involved, as well as an explanatory paragraph in the Centre's newsletter.

Because of the staggered start to the day with families arriving at different times it was not possible to involve parents in the project so Vicky made contact with the family support team and then joined the APPLE group, a drop in session for families with children mainly under two. This provided the opportunity to work with parents and the family support staff, sharing songs and instruments and in a relaxed way, incorporating the sessions with some theory: how language can develop through singing with your child, having fun through making up songs and the effect that singing with your child can have on the relationship.

As the weeks progressed Vicky also spent some time with the two year olds both informally in the garden and also with short sessions at the end of the morning. In addition to the work within the rooms, Vicky also attended one of our inset days and ran a training session for staff where she provided ideas and songs that we could all use with the

children in the Centre. She also took part in a Family Fun Saturday where she made percussion instruments with children and their parents.

The Hurdles and Challenges



Vicky's reflections

The Centre: Badock's Wood Children's Centre is a setting that I was not familiar with and quickly became aware that it was in the process of going through change: there were temporary staff in place and new staff settling in and a complicated timetable due to a flexible daily routine. I was aware that I needed to spend time not only getting to know the children but also to build a trusting relationship with the staff. It was important to me that they engaged in the project and didn't just see me as a visiting music specialist who was coming in and doing music once a week.

Lack of time: Spending time with the APPLE group was important in terms of being with families but I was aware that it meant that it shortened my time with the 3 and 4 year olds particularly the more informal time.

The staff in the two year old rooms were becoming aware of my presence in the Centre and were wanting some input from me. I was torn: I already felt that I was being spread too thinly and the informal time that I placed so much value on was shrinking. Yet I felt I needed to have an impact on all the staff. My observations of them told me that they needed both musical ideas but also some positive modelling in terms of engaging with the children and tuning in to their spontaneous musicality. There seemed to me a feeling that some staff focused on the children's finished product rather than the process; to prioritise documenting through photos a positive child activity or interaction rather than directly engaging with the child.

Before and After



Kate's reflections

So, what was the impact on our four target children? They were chosen because they were achieving at a level below their peers and they had low scores in well-being and involvement at the start of the project. Each child had a complex mix of needs, in fact three of them had some element of additional SEN funding in place. The *Soundwaves Extra* bid written by Play It! had been aimed at supporting children with an element of developmental delay, hence this choice of children.

It turned out that these were a particularly challenging group of children to focus on, especially within the time constraints of the project.



For some of the children, attendance was low, or they arrived late and missed some of the sessions. Also, two of the children found it hard to engage at first because Vicky was a new person coming into the nursery. Three of them had issues around joining in with group activities for any length of time, even with adult support. One boy disliked loud noises and would cover his ears in anxiety at the prospect of music being played, in case it turned out to be too loud. Outside factors (illness and family difficulties) also had a huge detrimental impact on two of the four children during the period that the project was running.

Of course any progress is made within a complex web of interactions and activities, making it difficult to suggest that any single intervention or programme has had a particular impact.

However, even given all of these factors, the overall impact was positive. Half of the children showed an improvement in well-being levels over the period of the *Soundwaves Extra* project. Overall involvement levels did not change, but involvement with musical activities did improve. In the core areas of the EYFS (personal, social and emotional; communication and language; physical development) three of the children showed improvements across the majority of areas.

It is often more useful and meaningful to talk about the specific impact on individual children. For example, the child who initially put his hands over his ears ended up listening and joining in with the music sessions. The child who found it very hard to sit and join in at all, was engaged and helpful, joining in and handing out instruments to his peers. By the end of the ten weeks, all four children were joining in and looking forward to Vicky's visits.

Possibly even more interesting was the impact of the project on staff. We had been provided with a questionnaire for staff to complete at the start and end of the project, looking at attitudes to music and confidence levels about using music with young children.

In the early questionnaires people said that they felt confident about using songs they were familiar with, but wanted more ideas for songs and small group times, as well as more time given to music. All staff felt that the use of songs as part of regular routines was already embedded, but they wondered about how to use music to help develop language and communication, how to embed it in free play and how to use it to support children with low emotional well-being or child protection issues. All staff said they would like to use music more in their own practice. Barriers to using more music were identified as lack of resources, time and staff training and knowledge.

The exit questionnaires were a mixture of discussion questions and scores, making it possible to draw out some ideas and conclusions but also to have some measure of the impact people felt it had made on their own practice (see *Appendix A* for an analysis of the scores). Overall, our involvement in the project was very positive for the adults and children involved.

Over half of the team felt that their confidence to use music with the children had been increased. The largest impacts were around the way staff planned and used music - they were generally more confident about using a child's musical participation as part of observations, more likely to include music in planning and more likely to attend music training events in the future. Areas where there

was less impact were an understanding of music in the children's homes and of children's individual musical tastes.

The written comments often referred to the wonderful skills Vicky shared ('Vicky was a star!') and there were many reflective, positive comments about the impact on children's language, emotional well being and staff team work.

Here are a selection of the things our staff team noticed:

- 'more children requesting songs, an increase in use of Makaton and turn taking language'
- 'it's been nice sharing practice with other colleagues and incorporating music into free play'



- 'children independently sing some of the songs with each other'
- 'I use a larger range of songs and more obvious links to emotional literacy'
- 'it was nice to see music become important again especially for some children with EAL/SEN and children that were not confident'



- 'I'm more aware of how to incorporate sound exploration into planning and free play'
- 'children building new vocabulary in songs like Pirate Jake'
- 'more use of instruments'
- 'more confidence in the quieter children'
- 'an increase in language [for EAL children] with familiar adults when singing or asking'



- 'children initiating song/sound exploration in groups when alone'
- 'children 'role playing Vicky'

It was noted that staff had 'developed greater communication and sharing practice with one another - they worked together to grow in confidence and think of ideas, with a larger range of songs'.

Some of the most popular songs amongst children and staff were those using lycra, which were taught to us on the inset day and are mentioned on several of the questionnaires. These are still being used on a regular basis at the Centre.

There were some clear areas for future work, especially around further engagement with parents and an understanding of music in the home for our children. Some staff commented that most of the parents who engaged with the project were those who were already very engaged with their children's learning. There were also some comments about the continued difficulty of fitting music sessions into room routines and the need for more musical instruments and other resources. Finally, although many people commented on the impact for children with SEN or EAL in particular, others felt that the most positive benefits were for children who were already achieving well and thriving emotionally.

Next Steps

So where do we go from here? In terms of the Centre and the children and families we work with, our next aim is to find ways to engage more with all families. We have just begun to use Tapestry to

share video and photos of what children do at the Centre, and we can see real possibilities here for sharing our songs and finding out more about the culture of music in children's own homes.



We aim to keep the focus on music as a way to play and learn with children and, having seen the growth in confidence and language amongst a number of children (especially those who are shy, quiet, are using a new language or have SEN) we want to keep using it in free play, in planning and in our daily routines.

We have seen a sustained increase in the use of song, the use of playful music making and the size and use of music areas in all our rooms. There has been a marked increase in staff's willingness to enter into the musical play themselves, rather than feeling the need to record it for a learning diary.

This is one of the most exciting aspects of the *Soundwaves Extra* project - the impact on all the staff who were involved directly, and their response to the inset day with Vicky as well. If at all possible, it would be good to build on these foundations and find a way to enable Vicky's longer-term involvement. But even if this proves difficult, as a team we will continue to find ways to weave music into the fabric of our day, rather than seeing it as a separate subject that we need to teach at certain times.

Reading and References

<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/child-care-early-childhood-education-and-care/according-experts/experiential-education-making-care>

[https://www.early-education.org.uk/.../ExperientialEducationIntro\(2016\)%20\(7\).docx_IMG_1586.jpg](https://www.early-education.org.uk/.../ExperientialEducationIntro(2016)%20(7).docx_IMG_1586.jpg)



Appendix A - Analysis of Staff Exit Questionnaires

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree/disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. You have a greater understanding of the children's musical tastes	?	?	?????		
2. You have a greater understanding of music played in the children's home environments			?????	?	?
3. Your confidence to use music in your setting has increased		??? ?	???		
4. You have increased the number of music based skills you now can use in the setting		??? ??	??		
5. You are better able to use a child's participation in music as part of your observations	??	??? ?	?		
6. You are more likely to include music in the planning of activities		??? ???	?		
7. You are more likely to attend a music based training event	?	??? ???			