



Soundwaves Case Study

How can we support musical play?
Bluecoat C of E Primary School, Torrington

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How can we support musical play?

Setting:	Bluecoat C of E Primary School, Torrington
Teacher's name:	Cath Gross, Becky Rollinson, Nursery Plus Teacher
Artist name:	Richard Hughes
Artform:	Music and Visual Arts
Term date:	Autumn Term 1 2017
Average no. of children	17
ages	3-4
Average no. of adults and type:	1 teacher, 2 TA's, 1 artist

Activity:

The activity involved sound and mark making. Through the course of the project, different activities were explored. We worked in an open – ended manner with the whole group free to join at any point. Later, we also started some days with a focused and more structured group with a small number of children that we thought would benefit from this. These children started the session and then others would join as the session became more open – ended.

We planned this approach to support some children who might otherwise find it hard to integrate into a group involved in a large open-ended activity. A little later, other children could join in what was, by then, the small group's activity.

From the artist: Richard Hughes

At the start of the project, I laid out a large expanse of paper in the middle of the classroom. On this paper were musical instruments and large colourful marker pens. I hoped that this would support dialogues between mark making and sound-making.

As the children arrived in the morning, they start to play the instruments and draw on the paper.

Immediately, E starts to explore narratives through the music that she plays.

"Twinkle Twinkle" and "Wheels On The Bus". She then tells me,

"This is the story, the story owls.

The owls going in the woods.

The owl music and the wood music –

the little one (beater) is the owl music and this one is the wood music."

E is exploring ways of telling her story sonically; - in this instance, assigning each of the beaters (which are different and produce different sounds) to different aspects of her narrative.

She comes back – the baby owls are dancing then jumping."

A interjects, "No the fox is coming and eating."

F is also exploring the Owl Babies; he plays a xylophone and has two owls that are sitting on it as he plays. He is re-telling the story as he plays and animates the owls as the story progresses.



F had previously been drawing on the paper with his owls and this narrative carried through from drawing to playing music.

Meanwhile El is posting plastic discs and bottle tops into the xylophone whilst she plays music. First she posts them between bars then she takes off the bars and pours them directly from the box, filling the xylophone, replaces the bars and continues to play. We notice the difference in sound that the xylophone now produces. El then empties the xylophone again to compare the sound.





Already, we start to see musical play develop in a number of directions. I hope that the open-ended nature of the activity can allow and support these explorations to develop.

The group stops for story time and I notice P. I am sitting at the back of the group and She repeatedly turns to look at me nervously. In the class, she seems to do things quietly on her own alone, not really making contact with the other children.

Later, she eventually joins us at the instruments and watches quietly. After a while, we play with the castanets together. We pretend that they are mouths and that they nibble each other's fingers and then noses. Gradually P allows herself to play more and laugh but I notice that each time she enjoys herself she furtively looks over her shoulder at the teacher as if to make sure this is alright – there is a great nervousness to it.

On the second day, P joins me when she arrives and we are playing the xylophone. She seems to have made a different contact with me today. When the children are called for story – time, she says, "I've got to go – do you want to come?" We sit together and listen to the story. During story – time, there is a fire alarm. P and I calmly walk out of the building, hand in hand.

Later, P tells me that she is going to draw a big circle. She draws a large spot and I mimic her and draw one. She then draws a circle around my spot and so I also do this. We continue with this game. Gradually, we set up a rhythm where one of us makes a mark; there is a short pause of consideration and the other responds. This Rhythm allows P to be secure in what is happening, it somehow reinforces what we are doing and when and so adds security to the activity.

The activity on the paper is very busy but Poppy seems to be very able to inhabit her own process within this.

P mentions a "really big circle" so I draw a really big circle. I then go on to draw a circle right around myself; P does the same around herself.

Then she finds a previously drawn face and slowly, with a brown pen, covers it. She gradually but completely covers all of its features. I ask who it might be. "Not Me."

She is covering the face with great vigor, determination and focus – I had not yet seen P so engrossed in her own activity.

"I'm doing the hands, can you see?"

It's fascinating to see her desire to communicate become so apparent so quickly.



On the third day, as well as the previous equipment, I have brought in a microphone, loop pedal and amplifier. We decided to do this because we had noticed that a proportion of children had some speech and language issues. I have noticed that when using this equipment, children who have some difficulties with speech.



S comes and uses the microphone. He starts to recite parts of the description of the Gruffalo. He gradually becomes more confident and inhabits his exploration more as he starts to loudly roar and growl. As his

nervousness diminishes, S makes larger and larger gestures along with the growing sounds – he is really enjoying himself. He then goes on to sing “Baa Baa Black Sheep”.

He does this for a considerable time and then goes on to carefully draw the Gruffalo –and then a monster (dinosaur) on the paper on a large scale. He draws an open mouth and says that it is singing.







It is lovely to see the dialogue between music making and mark-making develop as one informs the other. Working with both media alongside each other offers a context for the work in both activities. The children do not necessarily see them as two activities!

S is completely happy free forming which displays a high level of confidence. He free forms around word and song.

P has been watching from a short distance for some time as the children take turns to use the microphone. She finally approaches and says “hello” into the mic. She has been clearly working up the confidence to do more. P is inhibited if she thinks that someone might be watching what she is doing and will often then stop.

P sings! She wants to have a go but, as she is about to have her go J jumps in. P pushes J out of the way in order to do carry on. Bad timing! She had been building up to this. She manages to sing briefly anyway.

H repeats Twinkle Twinkle many times. H has difficulty pronouncing the words of the song. I try to sing with him at points, slowing down the song to allow him to hear different aspects of the words more clearly. Gradually H sings with much more clear pronunciation. H does this for a long time; he is really enjoying it and he seems to enjoy the fact that he can hear that he is singing words more clearly.

Later C and H are playing at the dolls house. They play for a long time with great enthusiasm and cooperation. Rachel remarked that it is unusual for H to do work in relationship to someone else successfully for an extended period. Is this a result of the previous positive learning experience? It felt like a big moment for him.

C and H are taping up the house and then cutting the tape so that the man can jump out. The jumping becomes a very strong part of the narrative – soon it is a jumping competition and the figure can jump from any of five exits.



C then retapes the house, “I’ll do a little more decorating in time for the jumping competition. -.... The last finishing bit – it’s sellotaping time – I want to jump.’

S is listening to the pipe with the music box on the end..... "It's like a star coming out – Twinkle Twinkle Little Star."

P continues to become involved in longer explorations.



We decide that we will work outside the next week and I collect materials for this: tubes, tins, buckets etc. We are keen to embed musical activity around the setting and remove any thought that music happens in a particular place or time.

There is a lot of boisterous music making! S makes a drum kit from various objects that make different sounds and plays it for a very long time. He seems to be very aware of the different sounds that he is making and is consciously contrasting the different sounds as he plays.

We play a game where he is conducting me and some other children. He tells us when to start and stop, get louder and quieter, faster and slower and which sounds to make and he really explores the different qualities of sound with us.

I have also made some large tubular bells from the metal poles of a marquee and have installed them in the garden. Many children explore these. They produce a compelling sound that is large and quite “beautiful”. The bells are quite large and for some children offer a very physical challenge and there is a lot of very loud playing.





P however, finds that the tubular bells offer an interesting sound when the tube is muffled at the end of the sound so that the ring is cut short. She repeatedly hits the pipe, lets it ring and then kills the sound by putting her hand around the pole so that the sound stops immediately. She explores the many possibilities by playing different bells and allowing the sound to continue for different lengths of time. She is very considered in her exploration.



There are also various tubes, down which children are singing to others. This offers a very visual example of the communication between the children. Thomas sings down one end of the pipe and is very focused on the other end and how it might sound.

We stick a musical box to one end of the tube and whilst one child operates it, others listen at the other end. I realize that this is a very visual way of demonstrating the movement of sound and the children seem to respond to this very strongly.



F says (whilst listening to the pipe, "It's like the Gruffalo."
I ask why?
"It's like the mouse."

P is playing with a cardboard cone and a lone tube. We fit them together and look down the tube from our respective ends. She says, "I can see you." I start to sing, "I can see you." repeatedly and P joins in; we continue to play this game taking it in turns to look and sing.

R and I are drumming together. I am behind him and my arms and tubes are either side of him. We really are playing together!! Because I was behind R, I could not see his expression and so I ask Becky what she saw.

Becky told me how amazed she was that he was smiling as we played.

*** This from Becky Rollinson, nursery plus teacher:**

R struggles to use language at nursery. He doesn't easily form relationships with others and often moves away from possible sources of interaction. The open-ended nature of the music project allowed R to access musical play under his own control.

He was interested in the bottle tops; throwing them at Rich, who responded by copying his sounds that he is making and actions. A conversation started, although it consisted of no words, only reciprocal actions and sounds. R sustained interaction in this new situation.

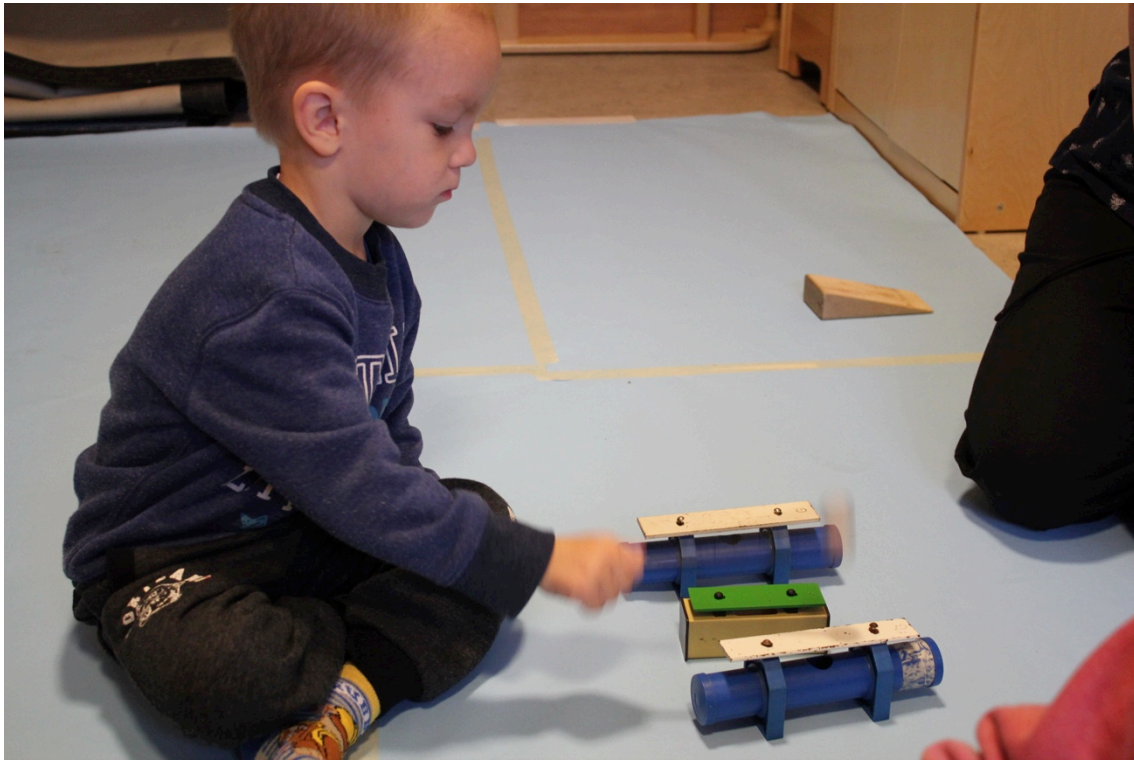
As the project continued R gained confidence in using vocalisations, he made marks on the large sheets of paper and began to explore instruments and sound makers. He was able to come and go, revisit and repeat activities. His body relaxed as he explored, his facial expressions indicated happiness and joy more frequently.

During the outside musical play R confidently explored the different sounds. He concentrated and was interested in the sounds he could make. He banged the metal tubes with a variety of different objects, varying his speed and power. His usually limited concentration was extended through this musical play. R continued his exploration and banged the tubes against the tuff spot, making random sounds. Rich moved to him and copied R's rhythm; a musical conversation began. A child who struggles to communicate was being understood and listened to. The conversation continued and R was content, happy and engaged.



We decided that we would set up in a side room and start the session with a small group of children with a more focused starting point. We wanted to target some children who perhaps found it hard to integrate socially and to join in with larger group activities. This start would segue into a more open-ended session where everybody could participate. We hoped that before the other children joined us, the groups could have "taken ownership" of the activity. Others would therefore be joining them.

We started the session with activities aimed at listening to the difference between sounds and then listening to each other as we played together. It was interesting seeing the children's involvement in this activity. It seemed to allow the group to deepen their involvement in a shared activity.

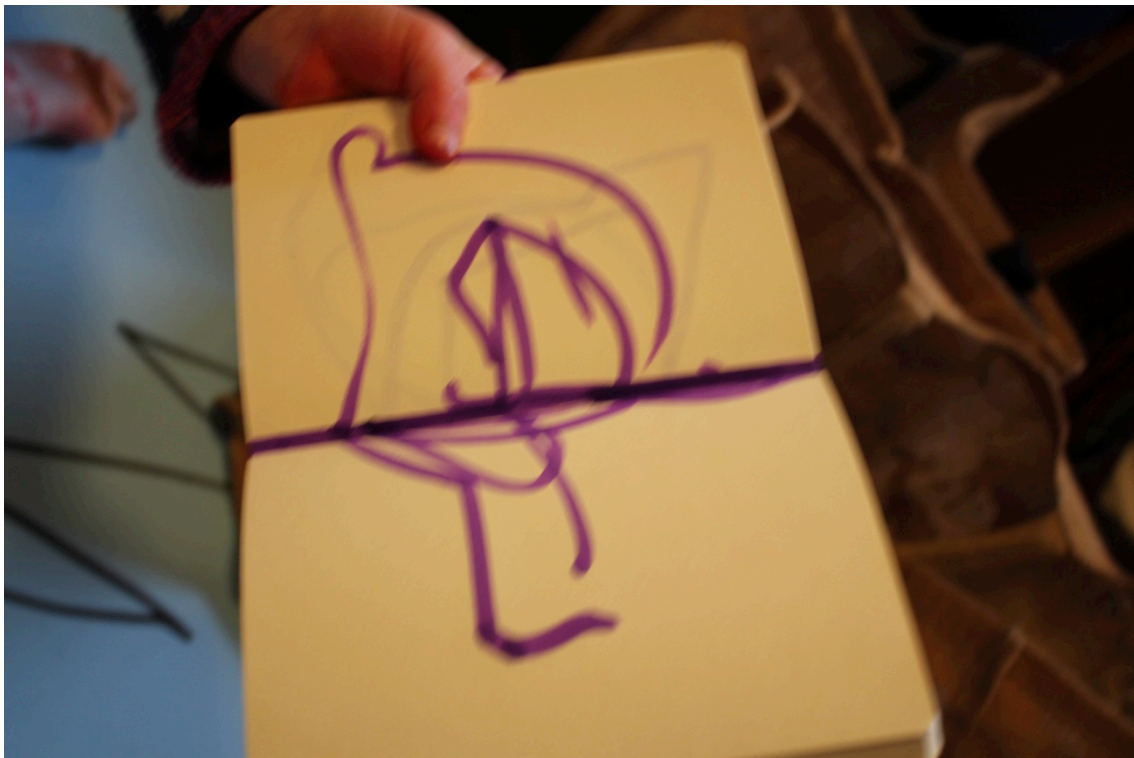


By the time that other children joined us, the group was so involved that they were able to work in a more even partnership. Some children seemed able to become more involved in the drawing and playing through starting off in the small group.





P had been drawing in my notebook. A, who is a very confident and high achieving character, asked P if he could draw with her. They sat and drew together for a considerable time, chatting to each other and sharing thoughts and ideas. They also played music together, playing a game of taking it in turns to play. It was fantastic to see A join in with P's activity! When they had finished drawing, they left the room together and continued to play with each other.





Through the day, P seemed to have more confidence and I watched her play with C. They played together with neither dominating the play.



We continued with this model of starting the day with the small group and a focused provocation.

As we continued, P's desire to communicate increased, as did the clarity of her speech. She would now chat to me as she played, telling me what she was doing or what she was about to do. Her sense of humour became obvious; she would play games and make jokes. She was also much more confident in class. Playing with other children, she was no longer isolated and would interject at story time. These are all things that were really not happening at the start of the project.





She also started to “read” me stories, going through a book whilst telling me the story. P also introduced story telling into the music and drawing that she explored, relating the Gingerbread Man whilst drawing. She drew the story of the Gingerbread man across the paper as she narrated it to me.





Later we started to make a line from black plastic discs. P was soon chatting to me about what she was doing and where the line was going to go. She was also telling me what to do in a stream of consciousness-like stream of words. I was so taken aback that I had to film us working so that I could show the teacher the extent of P's communication.

Throughout the sessions, Cath and I would talk about what we had been doing and how to extend the learning. We would talk about the progress of particular children and how to support that. We also looked at the layout of the room; how could it be altered to improve creative learning opportunities and could the day run any differently to support children's creative processes?

From the Class Teacher: Cath Gross

Question: How can practitioners support children's musical play?

Great Torrington Bluecoat School is a large rural primary in North Devon. The school nursery takes up to 26 children a session, aged 3-4 years.

Rich Hughes worked with us for 10 days at weekly intervals. Some of the children in the cohort have poor listening and attention skills, and several have levels of speaking that are below ARE.

As practitioners, we are experienced and confident in leading singing and fairly structured music sessions, but we wanted to find out how we might support children with more open-ended approaches.

We decided to track 3 children:

P. who was late to talk and needs support to make relationships and has low confidence. She also needs time to be able to trust adults and will stop what she is doing if she feels she is being observed.

S. who lacks confidence and often does not want to try unfamiliar activities for fear of not doing it “right”

A. who has English as an additional language and finds it hard to be part of a group activity, listening to others’ ideas.

At the first session Rich covered the large carpet area with paper, and provided felt pens. He had a couple of large xylophones and small percussion.

As children came in Rich introduced himself and immediately started to play the xylophone in a low-key way. Children were drawn to what was happening on the carpet, and initially were slightly bemused –was this something to watch or join in? Was it adult led or could they explore as they wished? Having drawing and music combined was also a novelty.

Some children preferred to watch for most of the session, perhaps coming briefly to play a couple of instruments. Other children showed more confidence and bashed on the instruments very loudly, wondering what the adult’s response would be.

It was very open-ended, with Rich observing children and responding to how they explored the area. There was an atmosphere set up in which anything was possible as long as children cared for the instruments and sound makers.

Rich listened to our story times every week and often incorporated parts of the story into the music making. For example, when we had a longer focus on the Gingerbread Man, Rich made up rhythms to go with “run, run as fast as you can” which children picked up on and joined in. They contributed animal sounds and recalled parts of the story as they played, thinking about whether the gingerbread man sounds are loud, soft, fast, slow etc. It became an improvisation that developed through the session. This also happened with the Little Red Hen, and a child’s interest in dinosaurs

One main feature of this work was having musical conversations e.g. mirroring and responding with individuals, which led later to children taking a lead and directing or conducting a small group. eg. saying stop/go, or slow/fast to change how the instruments were played.

As Rich modeled the process, we later observed children doing this when he was not there, and making up their own songs or improvising in a freer way.

In session 4, Rich brought in a microphone where sounds could be recorded, layered and played on a loop. E. was wary at first but excited about the way in which his voice was amplified, gradually making his voice louder until he was almost screaming into the mike. It was a thrill to hear back what their voices sounded like, and to build a vocal piece in layers.

P. was timid at first but then started “reading” parts of the Little Red Hen story and making the animal noises. Her trust in Rich had gradually been growing and she felt able to try something out of her comfort zone. She particularly liked “conversations” with the instruments and being able to dip in and out as she wanted.

We planned an outdoors session where we hung up metal tubes and had various pipes, buckets etc. - non-instrumental found objects to make sounds with. Children were interested in a wind up musical toy that they put close to their ears. Then they played it at one end of a big tube with someone else listening at the other end. This evolved into singing and calling to each other through the tubes, experimenting with vocal sounds.

Because P. sometimes found the large, busy room environment overwhelming; we decided to spend a couple of sessions in a smaller side room with just 4 children for part of the session. This work helped P. to

feel part of a smaller group and she began to notice and respond to the other children (rather than only with Rich) focusing in on the variety of sounds and volume that different instruments can make.

We focused on exploring the variety of sounds each instrument can make and the quality of the sounds, "drawing" sounds, making marks, and drawings in response to the sounds.

Children started to draw around one another and P. asked for her turn, something I had not seen before. She also spent time drawing alongside another girl, and using the animal sound makers together. Later in the week she was able to pair up with this girl to play, having made a connection during the music session. The sessions really moved P. on emotionally as she felt comfortable with the format and familiarity of the content. She literally found her voice over the weeks, and became more active in her participation and ability to lead what could happen.

E. was also part of this smaller group and I think that he found this more comfortable, enabling him to "let go" more. He seemed to understand that there was no right or wrong way to communicate through sounds and I felt he was less anxious and able to improvise and go with the flow. He was good at listening to others and sharing their ideas.

During an early session A. began to move and make up dances which had a quality of martial arts moves about them. He moved around the carpet and the whole nursery interpreting the musical sounds and responding to the percussion. He also participated in the musical conversations and small group work, and began to take notice of what other children were doing, responding to them rather than trying to lead all the time. He also liked "conducting", deciding how loud or how fast sounds were and doing the stop/go directing. Over the weeks I felt A. could tolerate taking direction better and was more prepared to take direction from others. His development of English was also helped by recalling, acting out and improvising musically, the core tales we had been working on.

How does this link to the way we plan for children and our environment?

In nursery learning through self-initiated play plays a large part.

Play can be described as being:

- Freely chosen
- It is done for its own sake and not for external rewards
- It is open ended, the process is all important and has no fixed outcome
- Is deeply involving
- Is pleasurable
- Involves exploration and engages the imagination

We can safely say that these music sessions covered all the features of play above.

In the nursery we observe and plan with consideration to the Characteristics of Effective Learning that are central to the Foundation Stage.

We aim to develop habits of mind and dispositions for learning, through "Playing and Exploring", "Active Learning" and "Creating and Thinking Critically."

During the sessions we could see that the way the sessions were organized was an ideal environment to enable many of EL to be developed.

In her book "How Children Learn: Characteristics of Effective Learning" (2011) Nancy Stewart lists examples of "Playing and Exploring"

- Engaging in open ended activity
- Showing particular interests
- Using senses to explore the world around them
- Showing a "can do" attitude
- Engaging in new experiences
- Being willing to "have a go"

In "Active Learning" she suggests that we plan:

- to enable children to have choice and set own goals
- for time to become deeply involved in activities
- to help children to focus their attention through shared attention during play
- to allow for children to dip in and out of activity
- to use other experiences e.g. familiar stories to help children make links in their learning

The music sessions did fit in with our approach to organization and freedom for children to explore and create ideas, although we had not been able previously to apply this to our music provision.

In her book "Starting from the Child", Julie Fisher says that if " young children learn naturally by being active and engaging in a range of exploratory experiences, then the primary responsibility of the school or early years setting is to plan opportunities that facilitate and support these instinctive strategies. Children need opportunities to engage with a range of materials and stimuli. They need time to explore, investigate and question. They need a range of play experiences and appropriate resources of good quality. They need the space to move around, to experiment, to create and play. They need, in other words, a learning environment that offers concrete experiences that are relevant, meaningful and worthy of active involvement." (2013)

Conclusions:

- Over the weeks we observed the increased confidence in having a go, and not worrying about whether what they did was "correct".
- There was increased confidence in staff to follow children's lead, and loosening the structure of session
- Children developed their ability to listen and respond to *each other*, not just the adult
- This approach has taught us that we need to spend a longer period of time to allow ideas to develop rather than spending 10 mins on an over directed session.
- If children have access to instruments and know how to use them you can avoid the "bashing" that novelty produces and leaving instruments out helps children to use them thoughtfully for their composing and accompanying songs
- Using a larger area physically is a good idea so that children have space to draw and dance as part of the experience
- It is important to deploy staff in the area to support-scaffolding learning, showing sustained interest, having musical conversations in an unpressured, open ended way
- The model allows for both a constant presence or dipping in and out-meeting different learning needs
- Do not compartmentalize areas of learning- music, movement, drawing, symbolic play, story-telling all merged during our sessions.

- Many children take a long time to feel confident enough to join in. This means doing the sessions regularly so they are familiar and/or lengthening the time of sessions so children can explore in more depth and have time to develop ideas.

Issues and is this sustainable?

The sound levels were quite hard for staff not involved in the session-this was alleviated by being outside or using the smaller room.

The need to have a person constantly there will be difficult with our staffing levels-however, we could plan to have whole day music times occasionally so that children can pursue their interests and ideas over a whole day.

The quality of the instruments is important and we need to invest in some very good quality resources.

From Becky Rollinson:

My experience

I am an experienced Early Years teacher who has taught music in a prescriptive manner previously, using schemes of work. However I also am a child-centered practitioner and I value practice, which follows child interests. The musical teaching I had completed previously never sat well with me and I never really enjoyed it. Currently I work as an outreach teacher supporting children with additional needs in preschools and nurseries.

Being part of the music project, I gained much confidence in using music as an intervention tool. The approach to teaching music felt right. So much so that I frequently now pack musical instruments in my bag to support children with communication, language and emotional and behavioral difficulties.

In one such case I worked in a setting in which musical play was not welcome unless it was during a focused, time limited, adult led group (very much like the way I had taught music using schemes). I bravely sought the teacher's permission to run some musical play sessions during my visit. The sessions were planned to support a child with very limited listening and attention and a refusal to join any group time sessions. I scaled down Rich's practice and adapted it to where I was working. The outcome was very positive. The child was very motivated to explore instruments. Her listening and attention, interaction and language developed quickly. She began to see the group area as a non-threatening place. She started to join in group times. The staff became more interested in musical play and I was proudly informed on my arrival one day "We are going to do music today Becky".