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## Music, Language and Learning: Investigating the Impact of a Music Workshop Project in Four English Early Years Settings

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### Abstract

The Soundplay project ran in four early years settings in Sheffield, UK, in 2014-15, using a series of music workshops to attempt to increase the music and language attainment of children aged two to four years. The associated research investigated the impact of the programme, using a combination of observation, music and language tracker tools, and interviews and written reports from the early years practitioners, parents and workshop leaders. The research demonstrated higher than average development in language skills amongst children who had been identified as being at risk of developmental delay, and also highlighted ways in which music helped to build confidence, social interaction and enjoyment. The confidence and engagement of the practitioners was supported through professional development, and end of project surveys showed how the practitioners had understood the potential of music for their children and had identified some strategies for including it in their future teaching. The

project is evaluated here as a model for collaborative and embedded research, which contributes to the growing body of evidence for the effectiveness of music in early years settings.

### **Introduction**

In a recent review of research on music in early years settings, Douglas Lonie highlighted ‘a lack of clarity over the exact differences or benefits music making can hope to affect in children and their carers’ (Lonie, 2010: 5). From a UK context, where bidding for public funds to run music intervention projects is an established model, Lonie noted a ‘difference in outcomes reported in published literature from those reported by funded projects [suggesting] that further empirical research could be better integrated into delivery contexts (perhaps as action research)’ (p. 3). Put more bluntly, this discrepancy exposes the pressure on the leaders of publically funded projects to achieve strong, positive outcomes in reporting on their musical interventions, while in more academically focused studies, the difficulties in isolating the effects of music on a child’s development might be more readily acknowledged. Several recent reviews of early years music research have shown how understanding of these effects is slowly increasing (Bond, 2012), even while the theoretical and empirical approaches employed remain ‘wide-ranging, disparate and often fragmented’ (Young, 2015: 2). While some practitioners, parents, and researchers are therefore well-equipped to argue passionately for the benefits of music for young children, others—including educational and cultural policy makers—remain apparently less convinced.

Within this context of aiming to align research and practice in early years more closely, I accepted an invitation from Music in the Round, Sheffield and their funders for this project, Youth Music, to work alongside them as they delivered the ‘Soundplay’ project in four Sheffield early years settings, between May 2014 and April 2015. Music in the Round has a strong track record of running musical projects and schools and family concerts in Sheffield and around the country, usually led by their resident amateur, Polly Ives. For Soundplay, they were working in partnership with the Every Sheffield Child Articulate and Literate (ESCAL) project (Sheffield City Council, n.d.), with the specific aims of working with children at risk of developmental delay, and using music to improve the children’s speech and language skills. Past projects delivered by Music in the Round had noted positive effects of music workshops on communication and language, particularly in children with special educational needs (Pitts, 2014), and the wider research literature confirmed that this was an area worthy of further investigation (e.g. Anvari et al., 2002; Rauscher & Hinton, 2011).

The Soundplay schedule of three terms of workshops crossing two academic years afforded a sustained opportunity to look at several key topics represented in the early years music education literature: namely the interaction between music and language development, the

understanding of young children's musical creativity, and the reported lack of practitioner confidence in teaching and using music. The implicit assumption of the project, that there are potential benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in learning music, finds some support in the research literature, though the focus has tended to be on older children. Kraus et al. (2014) monitored the progress of 26 children aged 6-9 years in the 'gang reduction zones' of Los Angeles who were participating in a community music programme, the Harmony Project, which included music appreciation, theory and instrumental tuition. They reported 'stronger neural encoding of speech after two years of music training' (p. 5), but strikingly there were differences within the cohort, dependent on their level of engagement with the programme: 'Even in a group of highly motivated students, small variations in music engagement (attendance and class participation) predicted the strength of speech encoding after music training' (p. 5). This finding offers a clear indication that the provision of a music intervention is not in itself sufficient: it is vital to build enthusiasm and engagement as well as skills, through teaching style and adult attitudes towards music in education and community settings.

Another longitudinal study, this time with younger children, observed similarly that there were benefits for language learning to be gained from a musical intervention: 'In terms of the children at-risk population, the significant differences for receptive language support [showed] that music classes could specifically influence receptive language by helping students' self-esteem and increasing the understanding of language' (Herrera et al., 2014: 379). The same research team also noted the effects of this two year project – a Head Start Program in Puerto Rico – upon the teachers' confidence to teach music, observing that 'their teaching quality improved over time and consequently, their students' scores increased as they improved their music teaching skills' (Lorenzo et al., 2013: 529). The focused aims of these studies mean that there is little explicit focus on the nature of the musical interventions, or on the enjoyment, creativity and musical skills gained by both children and teachers: music is being used as a tool to improve attainment scores in other areas, and its intrinsic qualities and benefits are largely overlooked. Other experts in early years musical development have argued for a more contextual understanding of the cognitive benefits of musical instruction, noting that the while the evidence for these benefits is growing, there are risks in 'justify[ing] the arts by reference to nonaesthetic values' (Rauscher & Hinton, 2011: 225) and neglecting to acknowledge the importance of musical participation in its own right.

This desirably broader perspective on children's musical lives is provided by the work of Young (2003), Tafuri (2008) and Campbell (2002, 2010) amongst others, each of whom offer rich descriptions of young children engaging with music and gaining satisfaction and skills from doing so. Their studies illustrate the continuity from musical encounters in the home, shown in Tafuri's (2008) study with Italian infants and their parents, through spontaneous

learning in school settings (Campbell, 2010), to more deliberately structured activities supported by practitioners, including their responses to children's musical play (Young, 2003). Young writes of the need to 'listen and tune into the under-fours' (p. 132), and describes a multitude of ways in which children's instinctive physical exploration of instruments, voices and improvised sound-makers can be harnessed as the raw ingredients of musical skill development. She draws a parallel between music and language learning, noting how an adult's responses to these musical fragments are 'much the same process which adults use when helping children to talk' (p. 114):

The child says something, which is a little unformed and the adult, trying to make sense of it, repeats it back to them. The children retain the initiative, the music-making is on their own terms, but they experience playing, singing or moving in harmony with someone else. (Young, 2003: 114)

Young's description shows the close connection between musical enjoyment, satisfaction and skill development – all of which need to underpin the neural and linguistic development described elsewhere if musical learning is to have value for its own sake. Barrett (2016), similarly, has observed how music serves many functions: as an expression of identity, a source of interaction and shared interests with close adults and peers, and a way of heightening activity, as in the case of a spontaneous song to accompany rhythmic bouncing on a trampoline (p. 11). Spontaneous musicality has been observed similarly in subways (Custodero et al., 2016) and school dining halls (Campbell, 2010), and such early musical interactions and explorations have been shown to have lasting effects on children's later pro-social skills and attentional regulation (Williams et al., 2015: 122). In the Soundplay research, we aimed to pay attention to all elements of musical activity, measuring the children's linguistic progress and social confidence across the year, while also recognising their musical development and engagement in its own right.

## **Research Methods and Approaches**

### ***Research Context and Aims***

The Soundplay project involved the delivery of fortnightly, two hour music workshops in two Sheffield nurseries and two pre-schools (for which the term 'settings' will be used here to include both types of provision), as well as two concerts, a practitioner network conference, a series of teacher in-service training sessions, and online video and audio materials for use by parents and practitioners. The workshops included around an hour of leader-directed 'circle time,' including songs, rhythm activities and games, some with a phonics and language focus, followed by around forty minutes of child-directed 'free play' with instruments and other resources in the setting, and a final circle time, concluding with a goodbye song.

The aims of the Soundplay project, as articulated in the successful funding bid to Youth Music, were translated into related research questions that would be of relevance to the wider practitioner community and would respond to Lonie's (2010) call for the greater integration of research and delivery. Through the provision of workshop sessions and training for practitioners, Soundplay aimed to improve standards of music delivery and embed effective practice, and to increase the personal, social and emotional development of children at risk of development delay, as well improving their skills in communication, language and literacy. The research aims associated with these practical goals were agreed as follows:

- To investigate nursery practitioners' confidence with music at the start and end of the year, along with their understanding of the impact of music on children's language and development,
- To investigate children's engagement in the workshops, observing their personal creativity and social interactions in the circle time and free play activities,
- To evaluate children's language skills at the start of the project, and their development through the year; and to look for evidence that these changes were supported through the workshop activities, and
- To investigate the children's, parents' and practitioners' understandings of music and its relevance to them, and to monitor how this changed over the year.

### ***Developing a Mixed Methods Research Design***

The research design for this project sought to be both rigorous, in its measurement of children's musical and linguistic development, and reflective, in its inclusion of detailed observation and encouragement of responses from practitioners, parents and workshop leaders. Discussions took place between the workshop leaders and the research team at the start of the project, in which the following mixed methods design was agreed:

- Use of pre-existing music and language trackers (explained in the overview of findings below) to monitor the children's development across the year,
- Detailed observations to be carried out by researchers who would also participate in the sessions and interact with the children during freeplay activities, and
- Questionnaires to parents and practitioners at the start and end of the project.

The main challenge of this research was to capture the detail of the children's musical experiences in each session, in order to provide rich data that would help to explain any changes in their musical and linguistic competence across the year. While the quantitative measures were valuable and necessary tools for evaluating the effectiveness of the musical intervention, the qualitative investigation of the children's musical experiences and

understanding, alongside the views of the practitioners, workshop leaders and parents, was an essential component of the research design. Models from the existing literature were consulted for guidance on effective observation of young children's musical interactions, including Robson and Rowe's (2012) adaptation of the 'analysing children's creative thinking' (ACCT) framework (Fumoto et al., 2012, cited in Robson & Rowe, 2012: 352) with its categorisations of 'exploration, involvement and enjoyment, and persistence'. Also informative was Nutbrown and Jones's (2006) framework for understanding the ways in which arts practitioners and activities provide 'opportunities, recognition, interaction and modelling' (ORIM). Combining these two points of focus, on the children's behaviour and that of the workshop leaders, an observation guide was produced that directed researchers' and practitioners' attention to the creativity, music, speech and social skills that were the focus of the project, and considered how these were directed by the leaders and children (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Observation Grid for the Soundplay Sessions*

	<i>Creativity and imagination</i>	<i>Musical skills</i>	<i>Speech and language</i>	<i>Concentration and interaction</i>
<b>Teacher-led</b>				
<b>Child-led</b>				

Workshop leaders and practitioners were also encouraged to submit freeform observations and responses at any time, though in practice few took up this invitation, and the majority of the observations were done by the two participant researchers, Katy Robinson in Term 1, and (following Katy's departure to another job) Kate Thompson in Terms 2 and 3. Kate combined her role as researcher with being the administrator for the project, which gave her useful insider access to the planning of the sessions and the debriefing of workshop leaders and practitioners each term; both observers participated in the freeplay sessions and interacted with the children to ensure that all responses, not just the loudest or most visible, formed part of our data collection.

### ***Ethics***

Ethical approval was granted through the University of Sheffield's review procedures, and information sheets and consent forms were distributed to the practitioners and parents at the start of the project. Pseudonyms were assigned to the early years settings involved in the project, and to the children, but the real names of the workshop leaders (Polly, Vanessa, and Martha) and the researchers (Katy and Kate) have been used with permission, to acknowledge their contribution to this research.

### ***Participants and Settings***

The four early years settings were chosen before the research began by the Soundplay leaders and ESCAL project manager, having been identified as including children at risk of developmental delay, where an increase in musical activity might be beneficial to both children and practitioners. National indices of deprivation show Sheffield (the fourth largest city in England), to be a city that is socio-economically polarised, with one of the wealthiest postcodes in the country only a few miles away from some of the most deprived (DCLG, 2015). Early years education is a stated council priority, intended to address the concern that Sheffield has a higher proportion of children than the national average with low levels of development (Dabinett et al., 2016: 8). Within this priority, the ESCAL project has increased the monitoring of language and communication attainment and focused resources on communities with a high level of need (Sheffield City Council, n.d.). The Soundplay settings were all in the least privileged areas of the city, and included a high proportion of children with identified risk factors for personal, emotional and communication development (e.g. special educational needs, ethnic minority and traveller families, English as an additional language and/or severe economic disadvantage).

Two of the settings were privately owned nurseries (Diamond and Dainton), and two were pre-schools attached to neighbouring primary schools (Firth and Hadow): historically, nursery settings have provided childcare with an emphasis on play while pre-schools have focused more explicitly on preparation for school, but these differences are becoming less marked now that all settings now fall within the same regulatory inspection framework (Ofsted, 2015a), and best practice across all settings closely links play and learning (Ofsted, 2015b). The settings (as described in Table 2) varied in their youngest intake age and in the proportion of their children who had English as an additional language (EAL), though all were close to or higher than the average percentage of EAL children in Sheffield primary schools, which in 2013 was 20.2% (NALDIC, 2013). Across the four settings, roughly sixty children took part in the workshops, though numbers participating in the research were lower, and attendance fluctuated between the three terms and from week to week.

Table 2

*The Four Soundplay Settings*

Setting (number of children involved in research)	Type of setting	Age of intake	% of EAL children involved in research
Firth (n = 12)	Pre-school	3 – 5 years	91.6% (n = 11)
Dainton (n = 11)	Private nursery	0 – 5 years	27.2% (n = 3)
Diamond (n = 10)	Private nursery	0 – 5 years	20% (n = 2)
Hadow (n = 19)	Pre-school	2 – 5 years	21% (n = 4)

It will be apparent that the variables of group size, average age and EAL proportions make statistical comparisons across the four settings problematic: the much higher EAL intake at Firth, for example, is combined with higher average age and a pre-school setting, which might be expected to increase practitioner expectations of the children even while the levels of linguistic challenge are higher than in other settings. Children participating in the Soundplay project and its related research were generally aged between two and four years, so including the youngest in some settings, but the mid-range of others. Given all these confounding factors, and the relatively small numbers in each setting, the analysis that follows places an emphasis on using qualitative insight from the observations and questionnaires to interrogate the descriptive statistics arrived at through the quantitative measures.

### **Overview of Findings: Music and Language Development across the Four Settings**

In order to provide an overview of the children's music and language development across the duration of the Soundplay project, the research made use of pre-existing assessment trackers, which were administered in the settings by the practitioners (for the language tracker) and the workshop trainee or research assistant (for the music tracker).

The music tracker was adopted from Youth Music's evaluation tools (Youth Music, n.d.), and consisted of a simple rating scale addressing components of musical development that would be expected of children within the 2-5 year age range (based on research by Evans, 2007; Young, 2003). These components included participating in and learning songs, developing rhythmic coordination, imitating the musical actions of others, singing spontaneously, matching pitch, keeping in time, responding to music through listening and movement, and developing musical ideas into structures (Youth Music, n.d.). Scores nearer to 5 indicated children achieving the expected level for their age, and the results in Table 3 show an increase in children attaining this score across the project in all four settings.



Table 3

*Music Tracker Results*

Setting (number of children)	Average change in scores	Range of scores at start of project	Average score at start of project	Range of scores at end of project	Average score at end of project
Firth (n = 12)	+ 1.78	1.9 – 3.7	2.79	4 – 5	4.58
Dainton (n = 11)	+ 1.33	2.1 – 4.4	3.35	3.9 – 5	4.68
Diamond (n = 10)	+ 0.95	2.7 – 4.6	3.59	3.2 – 5	4.54
Hadow (n = 19)	+ 0.92	3 – 4.7	3.79	4.2 – 5	4.7

The increase was logically smaller in settings where children started with a higher average score; nonetheless all children improved across the year, and some in each setting reached the maximum score and were therefore unable to demonstrate higher attainment within the design of the measurement tool. The substantial increase in the lowest of the scores shows the clearest evidence of improvement, most notably from 1.9 to 4 at Firth, indicating a narrowing of the gap in musical ability within the group. There is a problematic ceiling effect in the tracker results, such that most children were achieving close to the maximum score of 5 by the end of the project: the limitations of the tracker therefore preclude statistical analysis, but do offer a quantifiable comparison between the settings, which will be examined in further detail through the qualitative exploration that follows in the next section. Similarly, while some of the change can be explained by the children's greater maturity and confidence in group interaction over the course of the project, an improvement in musical response and understanding is demonstrated, and the reasons for this will be illuminated in discussion of the observations.

The language tracker used was drawn from a citywide language development project already in place in the settings, 'Every Sheffield Child Articulate and Literate' (ESCAL, n.d.). The measurement tool was therefore already familiar to the practitioners, and was implemented as part of their ongoing recording of children's progress. Children's speech and language development was assessed in relation to the expected level of attainment for their age, in areas including listening with concentration and recall, learning and understanding new words, asking and answering questions, initiating and joining in with conversations, and extending vocabulary in increasingly complex sentences. Results were released to the research team and analysed in consultation with the ESCAL project manager, who was able to provide contextual knowledge of how the results in the four Soundplay settings differed from citywide expectations. Children were assessed as being below, within or above the expected level of

attainment for listening, understanding, talking and social communication, as summarised for each of the four settings in Table 4.

Table 4

*ESCAL Tracker Results*

Setting (number of children)	Children below expected level at start of project	Children within or above expected level at end of project	Improved listening (% of children showing beyond expected improvement)	Improved understanding	Improved talking	Improved social communication
Firth (12)	83%	92%	75%	67%	75%	67%
Dainton (11)	36%	64%	18%	0%	0%	9%
Diamond (11)	45%	91%	55%	45%	45%	45%
Hadow (19)	74%	79%	47%	74%	79%	89%

Although the percentages in Table 4 refer to small numbers of children, they nonetheless demonstrate a marked and consistent improvement across the duration of the project. Taking an average across the four settings, 62% of children began the project below the expected language levels, but this proportion had reduced to 19% by the end of the project. This can of course be partly attributed to the children's developmentally increasing language skills over time, but the figures reported in Columns 4 – 7 show the proportion of children who improved beyond those typical developmental expectations. With her substantial experience of interpreting these tracker results, the ESCAL project manager was confident in asserting that the musical intervention had contributed to this difference. Each of the four settings showed an improvement, though Dainton had notably lower scores than the other three: the children here were younger on average, and this was a nursery setting rather than a pre-school, so perhaps more focused on play and less on specific skill-building. Where Dainton scored notably low, Firth presented consistently high results: additional reasons for variation here might be that the practitioners were more or less familiar with the tracker as a diagnostic tool. (In future studies, this could be addressed by having an independent assessor verifying all of the results, but that was not possible within the scope of this research project.) Even within the variability of these results, it is evident that the children showed greatest improvement in listening and social communication, and least in understanding, suggesting that the

prominence of interactive listening activities in the music sessions (and perhaps the lack of deliberate focus on understanding) was responsible for at least some of this change in their language attainment.

Within the limitations of consistency and sample size noted above, the trackers in music and language convincingly demonstrated improvement in skills and understanding across the duration of the project. As a result, ESCAL have adopted the project model as part of their practitioner training, encouraging teachers across early years settings in Sheffield to use music as part of their speech, language and communication teaching. This success and the support it has generated is certainly to be celebrated, but the tracker overviews provide limited insight on how the improvements in children's language attainment occurred, and so further questions remain in understanding how and why the music project has worked so well. The next section of analysis therefore draws upon the extensive qualitative data collected during the research, aiming to illustrate how the musical activities enhanced language development, and what the factors were that made the music intervention more or less effective for particular children and settings.

### ***Exploring the Evidence for Music and Language Development***

The qualitative data gathered through weekly observations and practitioner and parent questionnaires helped to capture the richness of individual experience that lay behind the broad quantitative evidence. In particular, the data collection and analysis focused on the identification of progress in music, language and confidence by individual children, and followed the guidance of practitioners and workshop leaders in recognising particular breakthroughs and outstanding results. The division of each workshop setting into a 'circle time' of directed activities followed by 'free play' provided a range of opportunities for the children to interact with each other and with the adults in the settings, and different children thrived in the structure or freedom of these two approaches. At the end of the project, the practitioners and workshop leaders were asked to identify children whose progress had been particularly striking: some chose children who had made rapid progress, while others identified the contribution that the workshops had made to overcoming specific language or communication difficulties. These selections were then cross-referenced with the observations and tracker scores to form representative case studies, set in the context of the general results across the cohort. Three of these children are now presented as offering some of the most detailed available narratives, and in order to give examples of the interaction of music, language and confidence in the children's development across the year.

*Case Study 1: Lucy (Firth)*

Lucy was nominated by the Firth practitioners as a child who had particularly benefited from the Soundplay sessions, not least in finding a communicative outlet that compensated for her difficulties with language: she scored below expected levels at both the beginning and the end of the project, but made improvement beyond expectations in understanding, listening and social communication. The description of Lucy in the end of project practitioner questionnaire showed how the music workshops had affected not just her confidence and development, but also the setting's understanding of her needs:

Lucy had very limited English when she started here. Her vocabulary has improved no end – in fact the other day she could name more musical instruments than colours! She can get quite frustrated and moody but the Soundplay workshops have helped this a lot – she has learnt how to take turns, to watch others and she responds well to the structure. She has loved freeplay because she can be creative one-on-one and be challenged and as music isn't a language, she hasn't had any barriers. She has come to life – she has found her thing! (Firth, practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

There is much evidence in the observations to support this interpretation of Lucy's experience of Soundplay, and she featured frequently in Katy and Kate's fieldnotes as someone who was eager to participate and volunteer in the circle time activities:

Term 1/Week 1: Martha plays a rhythm on a drum and Lucy imitates – also demonstrating good imitation of Martha's loud and quiet playing.

T1/W3: Fairuza is chosen to conduct [the horn player] playing Calele; Lucy sings along (just "le le") and Tawfiq pushes her gently to make her stop.

T2/W2: *Five Little Monkeys*: When all monkeys had gone, Lucy said "zero" without being asked.

T2/W5: *Bear Hunt*: after the line "no more bear hunts today," Lucy said "tomorrow."

Lucy's musical interaction was sensitive right from the first week and there are other recorded instances of her engaging in duets with other children, or acting as a conductor, and showing particular awareness of dynamics and tempo. Gradually this responsiveness extended to unprompted use of language too, though she would often withdraw if asked a direct question that depended on language knowledge:

T2/W4: Polly asked "what's your name?" Lucy answered, moving the crocodile's mouth "crocodile." "Does crocodile know a song?" "Yes" Lucy then moved the crocodile's mouth but didn't sing anything.

Despite her evident language limitations, Lucy was adept at finding ways to interact with others, and musical activities helped her in this, reaching a final triumph of social interaction in the last free play session of the project:

T3/W5: Lucy played the drum. She said words whilst playing it and gave one drum beat per syllable. She then stood up and said “march!” and led a group marching around the classroom with the drum.

It could be argued that Lucy was avoiding language use by communicating through music instead, but it seems more likely that her engagement in group activities was being sustained by having a means of joining in and effecting change through her musical actions. The frustration reported by the nursery practitioners was not really evident in the Soundplay workshops, though it was notable that Lucy spoke rarely, and tended to do this spontaneously rather than when prompted. Her musical confidence was therefore not matched by linguistic confidence, but being able to sing loudly during circle time songs allowed her to make her presence felt in the group, with potential benefits for her friendships and social interactions.

*Case Study 2: Imogen (Dainton)*

One of the youngest of the Soundplay participants, Imogen was quiet and wide-eyed in the first sessions as she sat in the circle and observed the activities. The practitioners at the setting described how she had “gained more confidence and joins in with the songs and actions more” over the course of the project, and reported that her mother was practising the songs with her at home and taking her to other musical sessions during the week. The parents’ questionnaire provided further information on Imogen’s home life and parental support for music:

A huge part of my childhood included music which I very much enjoyed. If Imogen wants to play instruments, sing in a choir, then I would support her in this. [...] A conversation usually comes about when I hear her sing a song I'm not familiar with, so I ask about the song which I am told is a song from nursery. (Parent start of project questionnaire, June 2014)

This supportive home environment, where Imogen’s musical activities are noticed and encouraged by her mother, is likely to have had an effect on her receptiveness to the Soundplay workshops, where from the outset she was obviously happy in the sessions, even if not always fully participating:

Term 1/Week 1: During ‘Row, row, row, your boat,’ Polly asks Imogen to catch the toy mouse and pass it to her. Imogen picks it up, and says ‘squeak squeak!’

T1/W5: During 'Listen Listen' Imogen and Bobby both looked to Martha for instruction during their 'solo.'

T2/W3: Polly showed a picture of a cat and asked Imogen what we should call it, Imogen took a long time to answer so Amelia said "we should call it Robbie."

As one of the youngest children in the session (and a younger sibling, as the parent questionnaire revealed), Imogen appeared to be more comfortable in a peripheral role in the group activities, but often took a stronger or more independent lead in the free play sessions, interacting confidently with adults, both musically and verbally:

T2/W3: Imogen and Polly playing on the xylophone, copying each other; Imogen took the lead.

T3/W1: Imogen was dressed up as a baker, Kate asked "what are you going to bake?" Imogen said "a Princess cake" she then sang "make a cake..." to her own tune whilst pretending to make cakes. Children kept running across her pretend cakes and she said "they've gone." Later she used a bell as if a whisk; Kate asked "is that a whisk?" she said "no, it's a bell."

In the final session, the observation notes recorded that Imogen "put her [name] sticker on her head and said "I got it on my head" – she's never said something so loudly in a session before." With the practitioners and workshop leaders all reporting that Imogen was quiet in the nursery setting, it is perhaps surprising that the parent questionnaire described highly developed language in the home:

It is hard to say [what effect the workshops have had on speaking and listening] as Imogen's 'speaking' is very good. If I had been able to attend the sessions I could comment on her listening skills whilst she participated, as I would be able to compare this to her singing sessions at her playgroup. (Parent end of project questionnaire, March 2015)

For Imogen, there was a marked contrast between circle time activities, where she was possibly overwhelmed by other children who were quicker and louder in their responses, and free play, where she was able to take control of interactions with other children and with adults. Perhaps the latter situation is more similar to her supportive home environment, where singing along with her older sister, who had experienced some of the songs in her infant school, was also reported. Certainly, there was an increase in Imogen's participation and confidence across the three terms, though it could be that this language ability was always present, but masked by the unfamiliarity of the social setting and group activities. Her experiences therefore demonstrate the value of sustained musical interventions, as the growing

familiarity of the workshop format, and the opportunities for one to one interactions in free play, are likely to have contributed to her increasing confidence and participation.

*Case Study 3: Oscar (Diamond)*

The final case study comes from Diamond where Oscar, from a Polish family, was one of several children who had little or no English when he started the sessions, scoring low in all areas of the language tracker, but showing improvement in all areas by the end of the project. Oscar was one of six new children in the setting who joined the project in its second term, therefore at an initial disadvantage as other children were already familiar with the songs and activities. Kate described him in her fieldnotes as follows:

Oscar found the sessions very overwhelming and would clutch his teddy and comfort blanket, cover his ears and sometimes cry because of the noise. He didn't join in circle time and sometimes needed to be taken out of freeplay as he was so upset. Over time, he started to engage with adults during freeplay which would then lead to joining in the second circle time. Eventually he joined in fully with circle time, singing loudly, laughing and interacting with other children. He would also be able to interact with children during freeplay. (Project summary notes, May 2015)

Oscar's initial reaction shows how the musical, social and emotional elements of the sessions are intertwined, resulting in enthusiasm from many children but proving to be too much for a young child facing numerous unfamiliar experiences on a daily basis.

The observations of the sessions illustrated Oscar's increasing integration and showed evidence of musical responsiveness, compromised by social and linguistic uncertainty. The breakthrough seemed to come in Week 4 of his first term (Term 2), when he interacted musically and spoke in English for the first time:

Term 2/Week 4: Hello song: Oscar copied the facial expressions, didn't sing. He began mouthing along to "it's you I see" during the 'angry' version.

T2/W4: *Old MacDonald* board: Lots of singing, Oscar sang the 'ee i, ee i, oh'

T2/W4: Freeplay: Kate sat and played bells next to Oscar (who was sitting on his own) he then started to play them too and a pattern emerged of them copying what the other was doing. Oscar then pointed to new things that he wanted to do.

T2/W4: At the end of the session Oscar (who had only spoken in Polish previously) said "see you later" in English.

This change in Oscar's behaviour was noted by one of the practitioners in the setting, who "mentioned Oscar who has come out of his shell in the last couple of sessions; she said he was speaking a lot more English now" (Fieldnotes, T2/W5). As a result, Oscar's involvement during Term 3 was greatly increased, and his understanding of the musical activities and the language surrounding them became much more evident:

Term 3/Week 1: *Who's got the...:* Oscar sang "I've got the ambulance – nee nor, nee nor."

T3/W2: Freeplay: Oscar agreed to sing into the Dictaphone (he has never done this before); when he listened to it back he giggled and said "it's me."

T3/W5: *Hello:* during this song Vanessa asked "what's next?" Oscar said "Little Johnny Dances."

Oscar's mother, whose first language is Polish, was one of very few parents who completed a questionnaire at the start and end of the project, which was in itself one measure of her support for Oscar's musical activities. She reported that she used to play in an orchestra and "would love to see him playing instrument," and also commented on improvements in Oscar's speaking and listening over the year, hinting that he sang the workshop songs, including 'Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star' at home: "star shining a lot in English." She described how Oscar was "trying to play baby guitar at home and singing (more for fun)" and also that "He learn different 'volume' of sing songs. He has developed strong sense of hearing." In a home where Oscar and his mother "are singing and dancing together," it is perhaps surprising that Oscar's initial reaction to the Soundplay workshops was one of distress – unless this was indicative, not of being overwhelmed by the noise, but rather of being emotionally touched by experiences that reminded him of home and so made him more aware of his linguistic isolation in the nursery setting. When activities enjoyed with his mother were made unfamiliar by being led in English by an unknown workshop leader, Oscar could well have felt de-skilled musically as well as linguistically. The workshop leaders and nursery practitioners showed sensitivity to his distress throughout his first term, but reaching a nuanced interpretation was made possible by the systematic observation that was taking place as part of the project, which suggested that it was not the noise that was upsetting Oscar, but the activities and perhaps their associations of home. Oscar's experiences are a reminder of how the musical worlds of school and home affect one another – ultimately in positive ways, through his mother's support and reinforcement of activities, but with some emotional challenges along the way.

#### *Early Years Practitioner Perspectives*

The three case studies have provided representative examples of how the children engaged with the workshops, how the workshop leaders responded to their needs and development, and



in some cases, how parents' influences shaped the children's responses and engagement. So far, the early years practitioners' voices have been relatively absent, and this is not least because of the variation across the settings in the extent to which practitioners were involved in the sessions, and therefore able to contribute to the research. At Diamond, where awareness of Oscar's changing behaviour was demonstrated (in Case Study 3), the practitioners were present in all sessions, and showed in their end of project questionnaire their awareness of the importance of this support from the setting:

It is so important for all our staff to be involved in this, to be examples to the children, to join in and share at their level. Children need to see and share with an adult experiencing things the way they do, and we can see that the communication between all the children and staff when singing together is incredible, connections are made and relationships strengthened because of it. (Diamond practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

Unfortunately, this attitude was not evident across all the settings: at Hadow, the practitioners were rarely in the sessions, and also failed to return their questionnaires, so their views are not fully represented in the research – though their partial or non-involvement is consistent with problems of engaging generalist practitioners in 'specialist' workshops as reported in other music projects (e.g. de Vries, 2006). The Firth and Dainton practitioners fell some way between, engaging with the sessions – to the extent that one Dainton practitioner changed her holiday plans in order to be able to attend the final performance – but deferring strongly to the workshop leaders and showing willingness but limited confidence in their own musical expertise:

I'd really like to continue to develop what I do. And now we know about Music in the Round and the concerts, I really hope that we can organise coming to these ourselves. Because none of us can play instruments I think we will really miss this so we'll do our best! (Dainton practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

I have definitely got more confidence. Doing music with children so young is quite daunting for me. I was so inspired [by] the conference. (Firth practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

Reference to the conference and the four in-service training sessions showed how the professional development provided as part of the Soundplay project had been appreciated by the practitioners, as had the related online resources made available for use in settings and homes – though accommodating some parents' first languages was reported to need further consideration:

The videos have been useful. It's good for the parents to have something they can choose to do at home – some will, some won't but at least they have the opportunity. I'm not sure the song sheets worked really well for our families as many of them don't speak English (and many of them don't know traditional English songs to set tunes to) but again it was good for them to access if they wished. We could improve on this in the future. (Firth practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

Practitioners also demonstrated their awareness of how the musical activities had impacted upon the children's language development, suggesting that "when you put phonics in a song it somehow seems easier" (Firth):

The simple way of breaking down words and setting phonic sounds to music have made them easy to remember and more enjoyable to the children, they don't notice they are learning as it's so enjoyable. Children are sounding out phonics and letters more freely, making different mouth shapes and sounds together. (Diamond practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

Children in all settings were reported to have looked forward to the Soundplay sessions – asking when they were next happening and singing the songs spontaneously between sessions. Some practitioners also observed a more general change in the children's readiness to learn:

They are much better than any group I have ever had before at sitting still when asked, listening, waiting their turn, sharing, focusing on activities, being creative which is all because of Soundplay's circle time sessions. (Dainton practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

This Dainton practitioner explained at greater length how she had learnt from the Soundplay approach to ask the children for suggestions as they developed musical activities together, "so we can add in new percussion sounds, discuss the different characters or change the words of the song so we can include more of our general learning in music time". She wrote of extending that approach into art work and outside play, and also of thinking more about the "structure of 'learning' time", by incorporating the routine of a 'Hello' song and cues to start and stop activities. This practitioner's receptiveness to adopting and applying the Soundplay approaches is clearly a substantial part of her success in doing so, but she provides a strong testimony to the value of embedding music and musical approaches across children's learning.

At Diamond, where regular music sessions were already in place, the practitioners felt that they had gained new resources and confidence through participation in the workshops: "We

sing a lot at our nursery and really value music as a necessary component to children's learning and development but these sessions have brought out the best in all of us." For many of these settings, communicating with parents across linguistic and cultural barriers can be a challenge, and the Diamond practitioners were particularly pleased by the change they had seen as a result of Soundplay:

Our parents have thoroughly enjoyed the experience, have welcomed the project and taken part well. Parents have used the resources, letters home, song sheets, videos and recordings at home and many have noticed improvement in their children's speech and language and confidence in music, spontaneously singing on the bus or in the street. (Diamond practitioner questionnaire, March 2015)

The involvement of parents had been less successful in other settings, though Dainton reported that "over time, they have understood the project better and better," and Firth recognised that involvement had improved, even if not universally: "It's good for the parents to have something they can choose to do at home – some will, some won't but at least they have the opportunity."

### ***Reflections From the Workshop Leaders***

Having considered the children's, parents' and practitioners' experiences of the project, the final perspective comes from the music leaders who led and supported the workshops: Polly and Vanessa, the workshop leaders, Martha, the project trainee, and Kate, who observed and interacted with the children in the second and third terms of the project. From the outset, the music leaders had aimed to make this a reflective project, by keeping their own weekly notes on the sessions as well as having access to the ongoing observations of the research team. They also met regularly for continuing professional development (CPD) sessions, and intermittently blogged about their experiences of the project. During the writing of this article, they commented on drafts and contributed additional thoughts, some of which have been included as data or have informed the analysis.

For Polly, an experienced music workshop leader with a long association with Music in the Round (see Pitts, 2014), the new challenges of this project were the development of 'freeplay' alongside more familiar 'circle time' activities, and the building of strategies to support non-verbal child-led musicianship. Martha and Kate also both observed that the freeplay sessions allowed quieter children to interact more confidently with adults: "These children seem to thrive more in a one-to-one environment and often come alive during freeplay, when they can feel free to explore the instruments and toys independently" (Martha, MitR blog, February 2015).

Vanessa, a trained singer and workshop leader, clearly took particular delight in the children “finding their voices” (MitR blog, January 2015) and noted their greater confidence in the second term of the project, adding these observations to those made by Kate:

Confident, happy singing from a boy whose voice suddenly burst out over the others in an explosion of uncontrolled musical delight. Sounding out phonics with precision and volume, words and syllables sung in time with the pulse. Trying out new languages together, singing confidently and understanding the meaning of the words sung. [...] Children singing a round in two parts, excitement on their faces and sounding in their voices, noticing the shared thrill when harmonies ring out and rhythms cross, and watching their shared satisfaction of a job well done. Wonderful tapping and beating skills today, children instinctively knowing when to beat pulse, crotchets, quavers, stop and start. Hearing voices drifting away still singing songs from our sessions as children leave the classroom ready for home time. (Vanessa, MitR blog, January 2015)

Vanessa’s reflections show how her own satisfaction in the session is closely linked to that of the children, and also illustrate the intertwining of musical skills that seem “instinctive” with those that are more deliberately modelled and taught, such as singing in a round or learning new song lyrics. Her observations are more specifically musical than those of the nursery practitioners, who tended to notice cooperation, confidence and other general learning skills, rather than musical development. The research observations tried to find a balance between both elements, but Vanessa’s blog is a useful reminder of how the musical elements of children’s formative learning can too easily be seen mainly as a vehicle for wider learning, and not so highly valued for their own sake.

The trainee workshop leader, Martha, was “learning on the job” in all aspects of the workshops, and her observations helped to make explicit the skills that Polly and Vanessa might take for granted:

One vital skill I have learned from them is how to keep children focused. Whether it be stopping them fiddling with the instruments, by getting them to copy where you put your hands/woodblocks (“hands on your head, hands on your knees”), singing a different song that they know well then going back to the previous song or hiding the instruments under scarves/ribbons, it is essential not to make it seem like discipline. If a child feels they are in trouble then they will lose interest. (Martha, MitR blog, February 2015)

Like the nursery practitioners who were most involved in the sessions, Martha applied strategies from one activity to another, quickly learning the value of routine and clear visual

and non-verbal signals for keeping the interest and involvement of children in early years settings. Polly reflected on how the whole team were learning through the project: “we piloted, developed and showcased new methods for developing speech and language by composing new songs exploring phonics, new vocal and physical warm-up activities devised to develop sound production, and new techniques for encouraging children with delayed speech and language” (email, September 2015). Focusing their planning and preparation on specific language learning goals brought a new dimension to the direction of the sessions and their measures of success, and perhaps facilitated communication across the various partners and practitioners, who were able to see how their goals aligned with others. One example of this came in the partnership working with both the ESCAL project and the Sheffield Music Hub, providers of instrumental tuition in the city, with representatives from both council-funded departments coming to sessions and providing feedback and guidance to the workshop leaders. The workshop leaders were also supported in their learning by professional development sessions led by the ESCAL project manager and by experts in early years music. The sharing of expertise and perspectives was therefore embedded in the design of the project, allowing for empathy and exchange between practitioners and researchers and providing a welcome example of how effective educational research and professional development can operate in tandem.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The Soundplay project itself was clearly judged to be a success by the practitioners and children involved, meeting its aims of embedding good practice in early years settings, and increasing understanding of the value of musical learning amongst (some) practitioners and parents. The results of the music and language trackers indicated improvement in the children’s skills across the year, which could be attributed partly to their involvement in the workshops, since they exceeded expectations for children of similar age and circumstances. The research evidence for improving practitioners’ confidence with music was also compelling, though in some settings more than others, and practitioners’ strategies for applying the project’s approaches in future musical learning and more widely were apparent in their end of project questionnaires.

The research project had aimed to address Lonie’s (2010) call for more integrated empirical research, and used the observations of workshop assistants and leaders as the basis for this, contributing to detailed case studies that illustrated the interaction of musical and linguistic confidence in the children’s development across the year. The risk remains that the tendency to provide positive evaluations, also noted by Lonie, has influenced the research despite its attempts to be systematic and objective: those parents and practitioners who responded are likely to have been the most well-informed and favourably disposed towards the project, and so the voices of the less engaged are still under-represented. The research also aimed to avoid

the separation of quantitative and qualitative measures of children's progress, using the rich material of the observations to explore the reasons for the increased attainment scores, and revealing complexities in how children respond to music in an early years setting. The limitations of the music tracker tool and the potential inconsistencies of different scorers on the language tracker compromised the quantitative components of the research to some extent, and improvements could be made to the research design in future, learning from the greater control and consistency of larger-scale studies, notably Williams et al.'s use of the *Growing Up in Australia* data (Williams et al., 2015) and Ilari et al.'s monitoring of a one year El Sistema-inspired intervention in Los Angeles (Ilari et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the qualitative emphasis in this research enabled detailed comparisons of the children's behaviour in freeplay and circle time, and showed how their confidence with language affected their interactions with adults and other children, with higher levels of understanding sometimes revealed through a musical response than could have been expressed in words.

The project has had an impact, not just in the four settings where the workshops took place, but more widely across the city, through the conferences and training events that were open to teachers in other schools, and in informing an early years music strategy in partnership with the Sheffield Music Hub. There remains a bigger challenge, to communicate good practice in early years music beyond its locality, and to raise the profile of music in the training and policies of early years settings. This research has shown that early years practitioners are receptive to the potential of music for their young pupils, but that the guidance of expert musicians and facilitators is a catalyst for increasing practitioner confidence and the incentive to include music in their classrooms. By modelling workshop leading and providing resources for classroom use, this project convinced its partners of the value of the momentary musical interactions that contribute to children's linguistic and social development. Further work remains to be done by both practitioners and researchers in ensuring that those convictions are spread more widely, so equipping greater numbers of practitioners with confidence to use music in early years, and ensuring that the benefits of doing so are experienced by all children, across the great diversity of early years learning contexts.

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