This Transitions project wanted to explore how music can support young people at risk of becoming disengaged at the time of transition between primary and secondary school. The delivery organisation, Oasis, has extensive experience through their Youth Inclusion teams, but wanted to see how their current work around transition through mentoring and activities could be enhanced through music.

Sound Connections approached Oasis to form a partnership, as both were interested in developing models that partners support workers with music leaders, to see how young people can express their concerns through music and develop new levels of confidence to support their move into secondary school education. The Music Leader, Loubna Khamlichi, had worked with older children, and she wanted to gain experience with a younger age group, so the partnership was based on mutual support and learning needs.

The aim was to deliver fun and engaging vocal workshops in which the young people developed confidence and expressed their concerns about transition through writing and vocal performance. The final group at Peckham Academy was made up of three boys and three girls although the primary phase of the project had been seven boys and three girls. It was a deliberately small group, to allow the participants the opportunity to relate to their peers and build confidence and trust. The reasons for referral by the primary schools included: low self esteem and confidence; anxiety about forming relationships; achievement and a new school; fighting and anger management; general disruptive behaviour and being easily distracted; unsteady temperament; struggles with challenges; often stressed and worried, withdrawn and/or de-motivated; English not being the first language (one student).

When Loubna and Adam held the first sessions, they found that they had to adjust the session plans, as there seemed to be limited music provision at the primary school, and for many of the young people this was their first experience of creating music themselves. The need to be adaptable, creative and sometimes spontaneous was essential.

The participants were given the option to perform their words as spoken word poetry, rap or singing in this group, and encouraged to use their vocals and body to provide the background music, i.e. clapping, stomping feet, vocal imitation of instruments such as a trumpet and vocal harmonies, while others would perform their written words over the top. This led to a final, small sharing session at the end of March. The topics explored were:

- My hopes and fears about Secondary School.
- Getting to my new school.
- Who’s who in my new school.
- Getting myself organised.
- Getting my homework done.
- Saying goodbye to my Primary school.

The Youth Worker would work with the young people in the morning using various activities to explore the topics above on a one-to-one basis, then the entire group would...
work through various musical training and games with the Music Leader and Youth Worker in the afternoon. The way Loubna approached the sessions was to design activities which combined well-known children’s games, with musical training and issue based work.

These words and ideas could then be used to write lyrics for a song. This was so successful that Loubna and Adam (then Megan) reused the activity throughout the term with various adaptations. Both Adam and Megan provided Loubna with feedback after each session, for example, Adam suggested using more visuals, varying standing and sitting positions for different activities (i.e. not always standing or sitting in a circle) and introducing more activities of a shorter duration into the sessions. As some of these young people struggled to stay focused (i.e. due to lack of confidence, low attention span) this feedback really helped to keep the session moving without too much distraction.

With each session, the young people’s engagement improved as the team focused more on developing the young people’s confidence and adapting the programme to suit. It was challenging to work with young people who had such a diverse range of needs but it helped to keep workshops fast moving and fun and to have a support worker who had already built up a relationship with the young people.

The future
The project was just completed in March 2009, after which Oasis want to reflect, feed the lessons back to the rest of the Youth Inclusion team and see how they can build on this pilot. There is no doubt that they wish to continue this type of work and have found it a very positive learning experience.

Loubna particularly valued the opportunity to work with this age group, whom she found inspirational as well as challenging: “they don’t have boundaries; they believe they can do and be anything.” She would very much like to continue the relationship with Oasis who have a clearly developed youth practice, bringing her musical experience and expertise to the work.

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“ All we need are the words. ”

What we would keep or build on
1 Using youth workers who were also musicians or had a clear interest in music, as it can provide greater understanding and collaboration. If the project was to be run with a support worker who did not have musical experience, it would be important that he/she was willing to take part in all the activities along with the young people.

2 Flexibility on both sides, to develop the project as the needs of the participants become clear.

What we would change
1 Organise workshops out of school hours in the secondary phase, as this causes timetabling problems, and can stigmatise some participants (some were enjoying the lessons and did not want to leave them, at which point the project was counter-productive).

2 Have a dedicated room or space in the school and better ways of maintaining contact within the school.

3 Ideally, reach a situation where the project is programmed into the main timetable of the school and is given equal value as other classes or activities.

What relationships need to be built
1 The Link Worker in the schools needs to be committed to projects like this, and ideally have the resources and time to work with the Youth Inclusion team and Music Leader

2 Contact with more schools: four of the original group couldn’t participate in the second phase of the project because they had gone to a non-participating secondary school.

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