

Sound Connections

Case study

innovate 2013: Liquid Vibrations

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The delivery organisation

[Liquid Vibrations](#) provide underwater music combined with aquatic body therapy for children and adults with special needs at varying levels of ability. The organisation are in the process of researching and observing the outcomes of their work.

The people

Participants: The project worked with children aged eight to twelve with complex needs, and their teachers and carers from The Bridge Special School, London. The school caters for children with autism and/or severe learning difficulties or profound and multiple learning difficulties

Staff: Adele Drake, Trustee; Joel Cahen, Composer/Artist; Steve Karle, Movement Specialist in Water; Stephanie Dutton, Movement Specialist in Water

The project

Previous projects run by Liquid Vibrations had found that participants found the sessions enjoyable and relaxing, and also showed increased listening skills and a freedom of movement within the water with the assistance of aquatic bodywork. With these outcomes in mind, this project aimed to gather more information on the possible benefits of a new practice and collect useful evidence.

Underwater music and aquatic body therapy

Liquid Vibrations describe the benefits of their sessions as being educational, physical and emotional. The sounds of the underwater music can be fully heard when a child's ears are immersed in the water and the vibrations of the sound can also be felt in the body (given that the child is sufficiently near to the speakers). As well as the element of sound, movement - aided by a Watsu specialist - is added to aid relaxation and movement of their head into the water, as many of the children have physical limitations. Listening sessions create interactive listening environments, which provide a basis for an understanding of the environment, and simply listening to the music provides a profoundly intimate experience with emotional resonance.

The seven sessions of the project took place in the Bridge Special School and all included work with a Watsu specialist, a technique introduced to the teachers who attended the project prior to sessions beginning. Unlike previous projects run by Liquid Vibrations, this project did not include 'dry' sessions nor were any participants wheelchair users, meaning the children were more physically independent and could move freely in the water if they chose, but were encouraged to float on their backs and listen to the music.

The Watsu technique promotes a deep state of relaxation and changes in the autonomic nervous system through graceful, fluid movements in warm water, though there is no research to verify these claims. This was combined with music and sounds centred around three concepts: tonal/familiar, which is believed to relax the participants into the new sensation and increase interaction; abstract music, which

places participants within and as part of the listening space; and narrative sounds, which included animals, environments, field recordings, sound effects and text. The musical and physical elements of this programme aimed to emotionally, educationally and physically benefit the children participating in the programme.

Evaluating the project and the *Sounds of Intent*

Observations were made during the sessions and through the use of video recordings, which were reviewed to note any responses of the children within sessions and were informed by the *Sounds of Intent* framework of musical development. This framework includes all ranges of ability from profound and multiple learning difficulties, to those with autism, with or without exceptional musical skill, and covers six levels of musical development within three domains ('reactive', 'proactive' and 'interactive'). Teachers were also asked about children's responses at the end of each session and in a final questionnaire.

The project showed positive responses from the participants overall, including creative use of movement, responses of relaxation and improved confidence in the water. The children enjoyed the sessions, although knowing exactly what the children were enjoying was difficult as only one child had (simple) speech. The children also showed improved listening skills, with some singing back melodies and songs, which is the first stage of musical improvisation. Unfortunately only half a term of sessions was insufficient for more definitive statements to be made, but it is hoped that the project will act as a framework for further research.

Challenges

Obtaining feedback on the course proved difficult, as not all staff provided written feedback, and the staff members who had undertaken Watsu training were not always able to be present at each session with their selected pupil. Also, although consent from the parents was obtained, there was no opportunity for those running the course to meet them and discuss the work, though this is understandable because of the difficulties parents face in making themselves available. As already mentioned, little feedback could be obtained from the children, as most were non-verbal and had little recognition of words.

What next?

Liquid Vibrations are hoping to follow through with the Bridge School, as well as further investigation and opportunities in research. Through Sound Connections events and networking, the organisation was able to share experiences and gain information, which has led to much interest in their work and an invite to a Consortium at Kent University.

