



Sound Connections
Action Research Reports
ENABLING MUSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

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For London Early Years Music Network (LEYMN)



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1.0 Introduction

The aim of this research project was to explore the influence that instruments have on children's movements during their music-making and to raise awareness as to how musical instruments can be used by practitioners or teachers in settings to encourage movement and support children's creative music-making.

"Music and movement are inseparable. We physically sense the movement in music and 'hear' the music silently made by movement. The qualities of timing, rhythmic patterning, phrasing and intensity are shared by both. So it makes sense to work with children in music and movement together both in musical terms and in terms of children's learning."

(Young and Glover 1998, p.36)

The research was conducted by two LEYMN (London Early Years Music Network) members, Nicola Burke and Trish Power.

1.1 Rationale

Both Trish and Nicola have extensive experience of working within a range of early years settings across the country and are consistently exploring how to create rich musical environments for young children. Musical instruments are often stored on a trolley, in baskets, in cupboards and in boxes and, although often accessible for children, they are not often displayed and presented for children carefully to encourage music-making, either independently, in pairs, in groups or with adults.

Traditionally early years music-making is adult-led and is largely focused upon singing. Instruments are often used within circle-time activities but are not always displayed within free play as part of continuous provision. Movement and music in early years settings is often planned for within adult-led music sessions and tends to focus on encouraging children to make specific action and movements to songs with little room for creative or expressive movement. Within the current *Expressive arts and design* specific area of learning within the *Development Matters* document, it is suggested that children aged 30-50 months 'imitate movement in response to music' (Early Education 2012, p.44). This document states that children reproduce movements to music as opposed to creating their own. This supports the general tradition mentioned above that music is often used to control movement and not to encourage expressive movement. This project aimed to explore the influence that instruments have, and particularly the influence that layout and display of instruments have on children's movements.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Pedagogy

The philosophy of Harry Roberts Nursery School in Tower Hamlets is loosely based on the pedagogy of Friedrich Froebel (1782 – 1852) and Reggio Emilia.

Froebel, a German pedagogue believed that play was a necessary developmental phase in educating the ‘Whole Child’ – prior to this thinking it was widely believed that play was idle and that children should be made ready for the world of work as soon as possible. The Reggio Emilia approach was born in a town in Northern Italy and came out of the chaos of the Second World War. Parents no longer wanted their children to be indoctrinated by external powers-that-be. The pedagogy is based on child-centred learning where the interests of the child are observed closely and artists are integral to the process of open-ended learning. The environment and resources are carefully sourced to enable the learning and development of young children.

2.2 Early Years Setting

The research took place at Harry Roberts Nursery School in Tower Hamlets. The school is housed in a single storey 1970s building which is at the heart of the local community on the Ocean Estate in the East of London within the Borough of Tower Hamlets. This estate is ranked in the top 10% of the most deprived wards in the index of multiple deprivations. Many of the children live in overcrowded homes with no wage earner and little access to outdoor play.

There are 80 children aged three and four, the majority of which attend the school full time. 90% of the children are from minority ethnic backgrounds, mainly of Bangladeshi heritage. English is spoken as an additional language in most cases. In total there are 11 languages spoken in the school.

As play is the corner stone of its ethos, Harry Roberts Nursery School is arranged to enable the children to encounter as many rich experiences as possible through play. This includes having a large well equipped outdoor area – part of which has an outdoor musical instrument section. There is also a music area inside the centre. The Nursery is very keen to use music to encourage self-expression and communication between the children and with the adults working with them.

The indoor environment comprises two large classrooms connected by a corridor, which enables children to move freely from one space to another. They can also go outside if they so wish. The rooms are set up with a range of resources to allow for children to choose what they would like to engage with independently. There are also two smaller rooms for group activities, such as story time.

2.3 Children

All 80 children attending the setting had access to the musical activity within each session planned. There was not a specific set of children invited to participate in the research. The study focused upon musical environments and how instruments influence children’s movements. The type of instruments used were instruments which the setting themselves owned and were therefore familiar to the children.

2.4 Preparation

- Research Design: planning musical environments – this involved designing specific scenarios for instrument layouts; which instruments were to be used and how they were to be laid out e.g. hand percussion instruments to be grouped together and displayed for children to access, instruments displayed on tables, on the floor, inside, outside.
- Discussion with the setting to ensure that project-aims and intentions were clear. This was to ensure that the research did not impinge on the day-to-day running of the school and workload of the practitioners/teachers; it was agreed that they would not be distracted from their regular routines by having to assist. The staff therefore had little involvement; they were aware that Nicola and Trish would be visiting and of what the project entailed. The project had been discussed and planned with the Head teacher who then disseminated to her staff.

2.5 Timeframe

Observation Sessions	• Sessions at the setting took place between November 2013 and January 2014. • Film was taken by one music leader and observation notes were taken by the other.
Analysis	• Film footage of the children using instruments was analysed along with the notes taken at the time of observation – January/February 2014.
Report Writing	• February/March 2014

2.6 Session Planning

The sessions in the setting were carefully planned, detailing the exact scenarios that were to be explored in each session to ensure that they were able to research their question clearly. Ten scenarios were created which focused upon 'What affect do varying musical environments have on young children's movements?' The aim was to experiment with different ways of displaying instruments within the nursery environment to explore the affect on children's movements during music-making. The music leaders also aimed to assist practitioners to use newly acquired instruments in varying scenarios by demonstrating a range of layouts within the everyday life of the nursery environment.

Trish has previously worked at the setting on various projects and had recently delivered an Inset training day. Taking on board the pedagogy of the setting that environment and resources are key to children's learning and development, Trish recommended instruments for them to purchase. The instruments chosen were chosen for the quality of the sound and aesthetic beauty and included both large and small tuned and untuned instruments.

Instruments used throughout the research were:

Tuned instruments	Hand percussion	Drums
• Alto xylobars • Soprano chime bars • Swirl xylo	• Egg shakers • Mini cymbals • Tibetan bells • Wrist bells • Claves	• Djembes – 25” in height and 13” across the top of the drum • Large ocean drum 22” across the top of the drum

The use of space was a key factor, the research explored

- Instruments inside and outside
- The layout of instruments on different levels – on tables, on the floor
- Groupings of instruments - placing instruments in circles, placing them in lines.
- Placing instruments in clusters
- Placing instruments in baskets
- Varying the combination of instruments used at any one time

3.0 Findings

3.1 Scenario 1 –Xylobars

Four sets of xylobars placed on a table



Children were observed:

- Standing, holding each beater at the end of the beater, one in each hand sometimes playing the beaters simultaneously whilst at other times individually.
- Crossing over hands to explore different pitches with different hands
- Experimenting with crossing arms and beaters.
- Sitting down next to xylobars, holding beaters near to the top which enables control of the beaters drawing upon fine motor skills
- Moving around the table to explore all 4 sets
- Standing next to a set of bars using both beaters simultaneously sweeping them across the bars whilst moving the torso and twisting

3.2 Scenario 2 – Djembes

10 djembes placed in a line outside



Children were observed:

- Moving djembes out of the line to take away and play alone
- Moving down the line of the djembes whilst on scooters, playing each djembe in turn, one at a time
- Moving up and down the whole line of djembes whilst dancing – movements were sophisticated and incorporated the use of legs, arms and hands whilst listening to the sound that the djembes created
- Using both hands on djembes whilst moving up and down the line
- Using one hand on the djembes whilst going up the line and then using the other hand whilst moving back down the line

3.3 Scenario 3 - Djembes

10 djembes placed in a circle outside



Children were observed:

- Playing in a sway/ see-saw like movement with stretched out arms from shoulder to waist with hands going below the waist on either side
- Walking around the circle of djembes tapping each djembe as they walked
- Running, skipping and leaping around the larger circle of djembes and playing them with large dramatic gestures

3.4 Scenario 4 -Djembes

10 djembes placed in a circle inside



Children were observed:

- Standing next to the drum, leaning over and turning their head to listen whilst gently tapping the drum and shimmying from the waist rhythmically
- Pushing, using their upper body weight to add extra force whilst playing the djembe in a repeated rhythmic pattern.
- Similar to outside, children walked around the circle of djembes and tapped each djembe as they walked.

3.4b Scenario 4b -Djembes

10 djembes placed in a circle inside with chairs



Children were observed:

- Tapping the djembe with one hand and with two hands
- Creating movements which were refined to the upper body; more stilted when children were seated compared to standing

3.5 Scenario 5 - Hand percussion

Egg shakers and wrist bells lay on a table



Children were observed:

- Carefully shaking egg shakers in one hand, moving up and down using whole arms from the shoulder

3.5b Scenario 5b - Hand percussion

Tibetan bells and mini cymbals were introduced to the table to accompany the egg shakers and wrist bells



Children were observed:

- Moving instruments away to other areas
- Creating flamenco type gestures whilst holding one mini cymbal in each hand
- Carefully using fine motor skills to play mini cymbals

3.6 Scenario 6 - Xylobars

Four sets of xylobars in a row on a long thin table, inside and outside



Children were observed:

- Individually explored the bars each using of their arms from the elbow down repeatedly playing them up and down without moving their torsos or feet.
- Moving up and down the length of the bars whilst singing
- Sliding the beater across all of the bars twisting the body from left to right (almost like a tennis serve)
- Sweeping movements across all of the bars using both hands
- Vocalising whilst moving and playing the bars
- Vocalising whilst moving around the bars but not playing them
- Synchronised jumping whilst playing the bars

3.7 Scenario 7 - Xylobars

Four sets of xylobars in a row on the floor.



Children were observed:

- Kneeling to access the instruments
- Using large arm/hand movements moving their arms up and down
- Swinging their beaters from left to right with large movements from the knee upwards to play the whole length of the bars
- Gathering closer together and close to the xylobars to play

3.8 Scenario 8 - Swirl Xylo & Claves

Four sets of swirlxylo and eight sets of claves placed on a long thin table in a line indoors



Children were observed:

- Using small hand movements to explore the instruments drawing upon their fine motor skills
- Exploring the swirl xylo with a range of hand movements such as wrist rotation whilst holding a beater and tapping the outside of the swirl xylo moving their hands carefully around the instruments
- Bringing chairs to the table to sit down to explore and play
- Not moving the instruments around or away from the table

3.8b Scenario 8b – Swirl Xylo & Claves

Mini cymbals, Tibetan bells and small individual chime bars with beaters were introduced to the table to accompany the swirl xylos and claves.



Children were observed:

- Making intricate and delicate movements whilst intensely focussing upon keeping one Tibetan bell steady in one hand whilst moving their other hand down to strike the other bell and make a sound (like playing conkers!)

3.9 Scenario 9 – Ocean Drum

A large ocean drum was introduced into the nursery environment by Trish. Trish held the drum up high in the air and created ocean type sounds by moving the drum gently left to right.



Children were observed:

- Standing, looking & listening whilst the adult created sounds
- Stretching and reaching for the drum standing on tip toes with hands raised as high as possible

The drum was then offered to the children and whilst the children were playing with the drum themselves, children were observed:

- Sitting on the floor using their whole body to embrace and move the drum.
- Standing and rolling the drum
- Rolling the drum whilst walking
- Twisting the drum from side to side (almost like a screw)
- Beating the drum with their hands whilst kneeling
- Groups of children gathering together, crouching down on the floor around the drum and playing together
- Bending right over the drum to listen carefully
- Hand held rocking movements
- Standing holding the drum with 2 hands outstretched, moving the drum from side to side twisting from the waist, bending knees, squatting up and down, eyes transfixed to the drum whilst following the drum with the head

“Those of us trained to listen to music in conventional ways in which the aural sensory impression is the one which predominates can so easily push aside our instinctive responses to the physical gesture, to the direct impact of sound as aural vibration, to the visual activity we see, to the meaningfulness of the moment of human contact and communication, and decide that there is nothing recognisably 'musical' in such moments.” (Young 1995, p.53).

3.10 Scenario 10 – Gathering Drum

Nicola introduced a gathering drum to the area and children introduced djembes into the area on the own accord



Children were observed:

- Creating similar movements as used whilst playing the ocean drum but the children knelt in an upright position as the drum is slightly higher
- Playing the ocean drum and gathering drum in a see-saw motion alternating between the 2 drums using left and right hands alternately
- Sitting on the gathering drum in order to play the djembe – the height of the gathering drum enabled the children to sit comfortably in a seemingly ideal position
- Jumping up in the air and then using the whole body weight to add extra force whilst playing the djembe in a repeated rhythmic pattern, almost dance like

4.0 Conclusions

This study has clearly identified that some children are provoked to move with the sound of an acoustic instrument. It is therefore important within early years settings that opportunities are provided for movement with this in mind. Children's movements should be observed and acknowledged, not just in response to music but also within their individual instrumental music play. It is clear from the analysis of the film footage that children move whilst they *make* music not just when they are *listening to* music.

On the whole and not surprisingly, standing appeared to encourage more mobility, for example dancing, jumping, and walking around tables whilst playing with xylobars. The positioning of the xylobars on tables and the positioning of djembes, whether this be in a line or in a circle encouraged children to be active in their musical play. The positioning of the instruments also influenced the pattern of sounds that children created. Children were observed walking around a circle of djembes and tapping each djembe as they walked. Young, 2003, p. 106, refers to children's playing being 'organised as sequences and patterns of bodily movement.' This study has found that the positioning and layout of instruments does affect children's movements, which in turn affect the patterns and music that they create.

Whilst sitting down on chairs children's movements were limited more to upper body movement whilst playing instruments compared to standing. Kneeling to play instruments on the floor encouraged large upper body movements and large arm movements.

When presented with hand percussion such as mini cymbals, egg shakers, Tibetan bells and wrist bells, children made use of their fine motor skills to play the instruments delicately and carefully. These small hand percussion instruments were also taken away and moved within the nursery. This is not particularly surprising as the instruments are portable and easy to move. These types of instruments allow for children to move freely whilst playing. Other less portable instruments such as xylobars do not enable children to move around a room whilst playing. Instruments such as claves and swirl xylos were not taken away from the table that they were placed on. These instruments require hand eye coordination to play and it is therefore more difficult to move and play – children often need to look at the instrument and their hands whilst playing.

Large drums such as the ocean drum and gathering drum together with djembes in the environment had a significant impact on the way that children moved. Children were observed stretching, reaching, sitting, walking, kneeling, crouching, standing, jumping and squatting all as a result of their musical interaction with the instruments.

The type of instruments available in settings needs to be carefully considered for musical activity, not purely for the sound possibilities but also for movement possibilities. Portable instruments may encourage children to move more freely, where instruments are positioned in terms of height may have an impact on how they are played.

This study has found that the nature and type of the instruments available and how they are presented within an environment clearly impacts children's movements. Children's instrument play is clearly connected with movement and these two aspects are fused together within children's creativity.

This is in accord with Marsh and Young's (2006, p.290) suggestion of multimodality:

“There are, however, certain characteristics of musical play that persist across all ages. A key characteristic is multimodality: children blend movement with singing and, if available, with making sounds with objects or instruments. They are therefore as visually and kinaesthetically active as they are aurally.”

Music-making can be, and often is, noisy and can be therefore more difficult to plan for than other art forms. For example, consider 10 children painting around a table compared to 10 children each with a drum. The latter proves more challenging because of the levels of sound that could be created within the environment. We need to think carefully about the instruments that we offer for children in the different environments of settings. Drums and large cymbals are often avoided in early years settings because they are “too noisy”. These particular instruments can be great in an outdoor environment where the sound is not so confined and therefore not so disruptive.

Both Trish & Nicola strongly believe that music is part of being human and that we are all born musical. We, as educators, should be nurturing children’s musicality, acknowledging their vocalisations and movements and encouraging creative and musical expressiveness.

“Wherever humans are, there is dance, music-making and music listening.” (Malloch 2005, p.14).

4.1 Other Findings

Although this research focused upon the influence of instruments and environments on children’s *movements*, we also observed influences on many other aspects of children’s learning and development.

Children’s communication and interactions within their play were affected by the nature and layout of the instruments. For example, whilst playing with xylobars set in a line on a table, two children were involved in intimate chatter. Their conversation was interspersed with regular and rhythmic playing of the xylobars; the playing seemed to extend their secretive and playful conversation and the instruments were interwoven into their conversation. The playing of the instruments changed as their conversation changed. The playing mirrored their conversation, for example when the children spoke quietly they then played quietly, when they spoke excitedly they then played excitedly.

“If, as seems to be, young children’s music arises from interactive and playful movements acted out upon the instruments around them, then we can only expect to find understanding by seeking out the motional substructure of which it is an extension and by which it is organised.” (Young, 1995, p.54).

Children often observed each other and learnt from one another, they often mirrored one another’s movements and the musical play seemed to create contagion. Children initiated their own spontaneous musical games together, games in pairs and in small groups. They organised their own turn taking and sharing without any adult intervention.

Children’s vocalising was influenced by the use of instruments. Throughout our observations many children weaved vocalisations into their musical play and movement. A variety of vocalising was observed ranging from free-flowing singing, short melodic phrases, repeating short repetitive sounds to full length songs being sung whilst children played with instruments. This occurred with individual children, pairs of children and children in small groups.

“Any movement activity, small or large, also brings with it singing and other vocalisations, or the playing of a portable instrument, actual or improvised. The

deep-rooted connection between moving and 'sounding' is of prime importance as a source of young children's musical expression. These parallel modes of time-based activity seem to be intrinsically connected." (Glover, 2000, p.42).

Children had longer periods of sustained concentration whilst playing with smaller portable complex instruments compared to the larger less complex instruments.

Adult intervention was a key factor within the way that children interacted with instruments. For example, djembes particularly seemed to require adult intervention. When the djembes were placed in a circle children did not play with them until an adult did so; it appeared that children expected an adult to lead them. Instruments took on different meanings within established areas in the setting, for example when djembes were left in the construction area the children explored them fully both as instruments and as building blocks. Also, unbeknownst to us, we had inadvertently placed the more complex hand held instruments in the science area. A teacher who happened to be walking past commented as to 'how funny' it was that the children were closely scrutinising the actual make - up of the instruments in a methodical way. 'I wonder if it's because they're in the Science area?' It appeared that the normal activity that takes place in an environment influenced the activity that then occurred with the instrument. An adult interacting within this play therefore needs to recognise that children do not only see instruments as instruments. Djembes were often used as tables for toys to sit on, drums were used as seats.

"It appears that children explore musical instruments with several of their senses, not merely their hearing. While the exploration seems directed towards the production of sounds, the production is experienced in tactile, kinaesthetic and visual as well as aural modes. These various ways of experiencing the event seem unified to the child." (Cohen, 1980, in Young 1995, p.53).

4.2 Recommendations to create effective music areas

Consider the following:

- Is it possible that you can create a music space or music area?
- If you do have a music space/area does it have to be static or can it be a moveable feast, i.e. can you change the area regularly?
- Can you place instruments in many areas so that you can create many musical environments at any one time?
- Think about the provision that you have for visual art in your settings and compare it to the music provision that you have – can children independently make music and are they encouraged to play instruments?
- What instruments do you get out and why?
- Experiment with different sets of instruments
- Experiment with placing instruments on different levels
- When instruments are laid out in the environment it is key to have adult observation
- Musical adult intervention and modelling is necessary at times to encourage, nurture and extend children's musical play
- Bear in mind that sometimes less can be more – you do not need to present all instruments at any given time
- Think carefully about the types of instruments that you offer within the environment; for example xylobars with beaters next to drums will encourage children to use beaters on drums. Drums played with beaters can be extremely noisy and using hands can be far more desirable.

- Do you have to change the layout of instruments each day? It can be useful to replicate the layout over a period of days. This is to allow children to re – visit their musical play – exploring and extending their original ideas.

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