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# MERYC UK Conference 2016 – a briefing paper on the keynote address

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## Music Educators and Researchers of Young Children (MERYC UK) Fourth Annual Conference, 21 May 2016, Ormskirk

### Introduction

On my arrival at the MERYC conference, *Musical Faces of Childhood: Exploring Places and Faces*, I collected the programme, read through the descriptions of the eleven presentations and workshops that were scheduled throughout the day, and was faced with the task of deciding on the four that I would attend. With a range of topics to choose from the sense of missing out is inevitable, but it is encouraging to know that the development of music in relation to early years education is continually being addressed and researched through a wealth of approaches.

Thankfully, there are no choices to make regarding the keynote speaker. Sally Goddard-Blythe, International Director of the [Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology](#) in Chester, started the day with her keynote address, *Masters of Music and Mime: Exploring non-verbal foundations for language in early childhood*. Goddard-Blythe shared a fascinating insight to her work and research, which included humorous anecdotes and personal accounts. The report that follows is an account of her address.

### Clinical work and research

Goddard-Blythe began by outlining her clinical work, which relates to the theory that having gaps in movement development in the first year of life has an impact on the connections to the nervous system between the brain and the body, and will result in these not functioning as well as they should. To address this, she has been involved in designing physical movement intervention programmes to replicate certain movements omitted in the first year that she refers to as 'building blocks'.

Goddard-Blythe referred to extensive research relating to the benefits of musical training; how musical training affects cognitive development and helps to enhance the development of other skills, and how learning to play a musical instrument as a child may even predict academic performance. By drawing on the analogy of a musician's practice regime, she highlighted the importance of intensity of duration and regularity of practice as this correlates with instructional and functional adaptation of the brain. She maintained, therefore, that children who are introduced to music at an early age acquire a desire to develop that musical interest later on. The overriding message was to remind and reassure delegates that research support confirms that the work we do as music practitioners is incredibly important.

### Connection between movement, music and vocalisation

Goddard-Blythe talked about the origins of music and the connection between movement, music and vocalisation. She linked this to the influence of music in early development, maintaining that children learn the musical and mimetic aspects of language first as they are "perfect mime artists and they are also extremely good communicators, because their first language is this one of gesture". She stated that we understand what a child is trying to say by its posture, its movements, the position of its hands, the timing between eye contact and hand movement, and that these non-

verbal aspects of language, which are universal, contribute to up to 90% of effective communication. In addition to gesture, melodic phrases and babbling develop into spoken language.

Goddard-Blythe commented on the role that a baby's hands, mouth and feet play in the evolution of language, and how the hands and feet are always moving, grasping, opening and closing just before a young infant starts to verbalise. Hand, mouth and foot movements are all connected, and these connections have to become uncoupled at some stage for speech to develop. She pointed out that children with hand and mouth movements that remain coupled at five and six years of age often have difficulties with the fine motor skills needed for handwriting, and sometimes have a history of speech-related problems in their early development. She spoke about the colour, intention and emotion in words required for effective communication, and pointed out that with "no turn of variation and no music to the voice at all ... everybody is asleep within the first sentence." It seems evident that the elements involved in singing match the criteria needed for expressive speech and, therefore, effective communication, thus supporting her suggestion that singing develops good speech.

Goddard-Blythe referred to the work of Dalcroze, explaining that he had devised classes to improve musical technique through movement by using the body as the instrument of musical expression. She explained how Karin Greenhead, a leading teacher of the Dalcroze principles, uses a technique whereby musicians are made to play their instruments on a trampoline, as she claims that the uneven surface creates a unity between the body and the instrument, which prompts a release of the rigidity that is usually held in the body when nervous. Goddard-Blythe commented on the Musica Medica Method, developed by Prof. Dr. Yair Schiffan, which achieves a similar effect involving the use of headphones and transducers, whereby music is played to the ears and body at the same time. Goddard-Blythe described how she uses this method in her work with children with audio processing problems and those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), who may not be able to tolerate tactile stimulation from outside but are able to sense vibrations via the transducers as their body becomes an instrument of sound. She suggested that there should be greater use of this simple idea.

### Hearing and language development

On the impact that hearing has on language, Goddard-Blythe explained how, from two days after birth, babies' ears are open to frequencies of sound ranging from 20-20,000 hertz. During the first three to six years of life, through daily exposure to the sounds of language, "the brain learns to tune in rather like a radio to the station that is closest to its mother tongue." She stated that after this period, the brain tends not to pick up sounds that are outside the frequency range of the language it has been exposed to, which is one reason why learning a different language later on in life becomes harder. Goddard-Blythe highlighted the implications for children who experience ear, nose and throat problems during their formative years: the pathways to the brain that learn to discriminate between similar but different sounds become lazy because they are not being trained at the sensitive period. She maintained that, in addition to language, there are implications relating to learning phonics and also for musical training; although, she suggested that "it also conversely means that musical training perhaps has a really important role in those first three to six years in helping to ensure that those pathways remain open and responsive."

Goddard-Blythe referred to the fact that a human foetus shows signs of response to sounds from as early as the 24th week of gestation. She pointed out that the mother's voice acts as the acoustic bridge between pre- and post-natal life, and it is the melody, phrasing and cadences of her speech that is the beginning of the understanding of the music of language.

### What can singing do?

In response to the question 'what can singing do?' Goddard-Blythe shared a story about one of her sons, who has a history of hearing loss. After his first year at school, his teacher reported that they had never heard him speak and he showed no signs of being able to learn to read or write. At the age of eight, he joined a cathedral choir as a chorister. The master chorister claimed that choristers' reading age improves by a year within six months of joining the choir, irrespective of whether they were good or poor readers. She played a recording of her son singing, six months after joining the choir, which demonstrated that he had developed all the elements that an able singer should acquire,

including excellent diction and pitch. She claimed that “his learning, social and reading difficulties had disappeared ... despite predictions from ear, nose and throat specialists that he would have speech, language and reading difficulties probably for the remainder of his life.” The amount of hours her son had spent practising was one explanation for the improvement, which relates to the importance of duration and regularity of practice.

Goddard-Blythe went on to talk about the problems dyslexic children and those with phonological processing problems have with their ability to process the speed of sound. As it is slower than normal, digital training programmes have been developed to artificially slow down sounds of speech so the child can get better at hearing individual sounds before speeding them up. A potential (and cheaper) way of addressing the problem is simply to get children to sing; they can immediately stretch out sounds, particularly vowels sounds, which are the sounds that dyslexic children have difficulty in differentiating, and they can also match sounds to visual symbols. She added that as choristers learn to read music and match the sounds that they sing to what they see on the page, they also start learning to read liturgical and foreign languages, which is at a far more advanced level than their expected reading age. She gave examples of other advantages too: the experience of being able to hear the echo-effect that the enriched acoustic environment of a cathedral building provides, which relates to Paul Madaule’s ear-voice connection theory, and the positive benefits that singing in a group brings.

### Lateral preference

Goddard-Blythe talked about a system of sound therapy she uses in her clinical work developed by Danish researcher and teacher Kjeld Johansen, who found there was a correlation between dyslexia and ‘left-ear’ or ‘no-ear’ preference. The system involves the use of audiograms, hearing tests and recordings with frequency specific recordings using synthesised instruments. She pointed out that a standard hearing test will assess whether or not a child has a hearing problem but what it does not account for is what French otolaryngologist, Alfred A. Tomatis, called ‘optimum English language curve’. She described the process of the sound therapy system, which starts with a threshold hearing test. An audiogram is used to display the result of the measured hearing threshold plotted against the optimum curve, which will show the discrepancy between the two sets of data. The data pertaining to the hearing test will also reveal whether or not a preferred ear is established. The therapy that follows involves audio training, in which the child listens to an appropriate frequency-specific recording through headphones for ten minutes per day over a six-week period. Re-assessments are carried out regularly, with the music adapted to changes that have taken place over a nine to twelve month period.

Returning to the main aspect of her work, Goddard-Blythe talked about a movement programme that she devised for use in schools, in which she wanted to integrate music. She linked up with Michael Lazarev, a paediatrician with a PhD in Music whose work includes a musical programme that spans the third trimester of pregnancy up to the child’s seventh year. He agreed to compose a canon of songs which reflect the movements of animal characters and loosely mirror the evolutionary stages of movement development. The rationale for the programme is to give children “who might have missed out on early stages of development the opportunity to go back through play in a fun way; to put those missing pieces in place and also have the musical training that develops all the other skills.”

In her final comment Goddard-Blythe concluded that if she had her way, “the two teachers in primary education who would have pride of place would be the Music teacher and the Physical Education teacher.”

*Sally Goddard-Blythe is the author of seven books on aspects of child development. Further information can be found at:*

[www.inpp.org.uk](http://www.inpp.org.uk)

[www.sallygoddardblythe.co.uk](http://www.sallygoddardblythe.co.uk)