



Making music with young people with special educational needs

A briefing paper written by Graham Dowdall, July 2016

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Introduction

Music plays a special role in most people's lives as listeners, performers, players or dancers, and for young people with special educational needs (SEN) things are no different. Music has long played a role in SEN education as people have felt instinctively that music is a good activity and something that young people enjoy engaging with. In recent years, we have started to more formally evaluate and assess the potential benefits that music can bring for young people with SEN and disabilities (SEND). These can range from mood enhancement such as calming, energising, lifting spirits, pride, achievement, and self-expression; communication skills, teamwork, sharing, listening, empathy (which may have particular benefits for young people on the Autistic spectrum); cross-curricular learning, development of numeracy and literacy skills, geography, understanding the world; and physical benefits such as increased strength, co-ordination, and flexibility.

To offer SEND participants the greatest and most effective benefits from music, practitioners need to plan and deliver a range of activities that are truly accessible and engaging. They should take into account the diverse needs, abilities, aspirations and tastes of the young people we work with, and address specific challenges. The way we work needs to be genuinely inclusive, and may involve quite deep and subtle ways of communicating and inspiring our young people to be creative.

In this briefing paper I want to share some of the ideas and ways of working that I have developed through my own practice. Not all of these ideas are original – in fact, many may be common practice or based in common sense – but I hope that there might be new ways to use or adapt them. I call my work 'community music' – I work mostly with groups rather than one-to-one, and often at an interface between music education and music therapy where acquisition of skills takes place though not necessarily as a primary aim, and therapeutic interactions definitely take place but not within any formal clinical context.

Understanding some conditions likely to be encountered in SEND contexts

Special Educational Needs and Disability

The Department for Education¹ defines four areas of SEN which address different needs. These are:

1. **Communicating and interacting** – for example, where children and young people have speech, language and communication difficulties which make it difficult for them to make sense of language or to understand how to communicate effectively and appropriately with others.
2. **Cognition and learning** – for example, where children and young people learn at a slower pace than others their age, have difficulty in understanding parts of the curriculum, have difficulties with organisation and memory skills, or have a specific difficulty affecting one particular part of their learning performance such as in literacy or numeracy.

¹ Special educational needs and disability, a guide for parents and carers; August 2014 - https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/417435/Special_educational_needs_and_disabilities_guide_for_parents_and_carers.pdf

3. **Social, emotional and mental health difficulties** – for example, where children and young people have difficulty in managing their relationships with other people, are withdrawn, or if they behave in ways that may hinder their and other children’s learning, or that have an impact on their health and wellbeing.
4. **Sensory and/or physical needs** – for example, children and young people with visual and/or hearing impairments, or a physical need that means they must have additional ongoing support and equipment.

Some children and young people may have SEND that covers more than one of these areas. What follows is a list of some of the most common SEND conditions you can expect to come across when making music in an SEND setting:

Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs)²

SpLDs affect the way information is learned and processed. They are neurological (rather than psychological), usually run in families and occur independently of intelligence. They can have significant impact on education and learning and on the acquisition of literacy skills. SpLD is an umbrella term used to cover a range of frequently co-occurring difficulties, more commonly:

- Dyslexia
- Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), also known as Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)

Down’s syndrome

Down's syndrome is a genetic condition that typically causes some level of learning disability and characteristic physical features. Down's syndrome is caused by the presence of an extra copy of chromosome 21 in a baby's cells. People with Down's syndrome also vary in personality and ability. Everyone born with Down's syndrome will have a degree of learning disability, but the level of disability will be different for each individual.³

Autism spectrum disorder

Autism is a complex developmental disorder affecting the way we relate and communicate. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a very wide-ranging condition defined by common characteristics that are found in an otherwise very diverse group of people. Some young people with ASD may be highly intelligent but some may have additional learning difficulties, may be non-verbal, and/or have physical and major cognitive challenges. People with Asperger syndrome are of average or above average intelligence. They do not usually have the learning disabilities that many people with ASD have, but they may have specific learning difficulties. They have fewer problems with speech but may still have difficulties with understanding and processing language.⁴

The Triad of Impairment⁵ is used to define autism:

- Difficulty with social and emotional understanding
- Difficulty with interaction and communication
- Difficulties with flexible thinking and behaving

As autism affects how people relate to each other, people with ASD may not understand certain social signals, jokes, or find social relationships rewarding. ASD can affect the ability to understand things from some else’s point of view, and the world can seem a very confusing place, full of disorder, which can induce anxiety. The way information is structured may overwhelm a highly sensitive processing system, and judgement of time may be challenging. ASD can affect the functioning of daily cycles of sleep, hunger, waiting, etc. Anxiety may result in behaviour traits like rocking the body or

² British Dyslexia Association, What are specific learning difficulties? – <http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/educator/what-are-specific-learning-difficulties>

³ NHS Health A-Z, Down’s syndrome – <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/downs-syndrome/pages/introduction.aspx>

⁴ National Autistic Society, What is Asperger syndrome? – <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asperger.aspx>

⁵ National Autistic Society, Asperger syndrome: the triad of impairments – <http://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/breaking-barriers/asperger.aspx>

hand-waving, which along with a need for familiar routine, special interests, and systems that create security and certainty, can help to make sense of this. People with ASD may exhibit obsessive behaviour, resort to known activities for security, and may be echolalic, i.e. repeat exactly what has just been said to them. Some people may have sensory anomalies and difficulty with sensory modulation, and may have aversions or dislikes to (or be drawn to) particular sounds, surfaces, etc.

“Everyone with autism is an individual and it’s important that we treat them as such.”

Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD)

People with profound and multiple learning disabilities:

- have more than one disability
- have a profound learning disability
- have great difficulty communicating
- need high levels of support
- may have additional sensory or physical disabilities,
- complex health needs or mental health difficulties
- may have behaviours that challenge us.⁶

Global Developmental Delay (GDD)

A child may be described as having GDD if they have not reached two or more milestones in all areas of development (called developmental domains). These areas are:

- **Motor skills** – either gross motor skills, like sitting up or rolling over and fine motor skills, for example picking up small objects.
- **Speech and language** – which also includes babbling, imitating speech and identifying sounds, as well as understanding what other people are trying to communicate to them.
- **Cognitive skills** – the ability to learn new things, process information, organise their thoughts and remember things.
- **Social and emotional skills** – interacting with others and development of personal traits and feelings, as well as starting to understanding and respond to the needs and feelings of others.⁷

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral palsy is a condition that affects muscle control and movement. It is usually caused by an injury to the brain before, during or after birth. Children with cerebral palsy have difficulties in controlling muscles and movements as they grow and develop. Some people with cerebral palsy may have associated conditions; while others may not⁸.

Social model of disability

Though the social model of disability⁹ and how it should influence music practitioners’ work in SEND settings is a topic worthy of its own briefing paper, it is pertinent to reference it here to spotlight the changing language around SEND and the politicisation of disability in society.

⁶ PMLD Network, Who are we campaigning for? - http://www.pmldnetwork.org/what_do_we_want/who_are_we_campaigning_for.htm

⁷ Contact a Family, Global Development Delay - <http://www.cafamily.org.uk/medical-information/conditions/g/global-developmental-delay/>

⁸ Scope, Cerebral palsy - <http://www.scope.org.uk/support/families/diagnosis/cerebral-palsy>

⁹ Scope, The social model of disability - <http://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/our-brand/social-model-of-disability>

Things to consider in preparation for working with children and young people with SEND

Inclusion

Inclusion doesn't simply mean opening a door, or having wheelchair access to a room. Inclusion is a mindset that guides the way we work, our attitudes, the way we communicate, the way we adapt to our participants' abilities, the musical materials we use, and the environment we operate in and create.

Planning

Planning is essential for music making in any context but there are extra factors to take into account when working with SEND groups. We have to consider the:

- **Aims** of our sessions; considering what we are trying to achieve in musical and extra-musical ways.
- **Structure** – it can be especially important to signal the start and end of sessions by using welcoming, naming, and hello songs to aid transitions. Using familiar Hello and Finish activities can be really helpful.
- **Resources** – using appropriate instruments and other equipment. For instance, having soft beaters for playing hand drums as some young people (e.g. with autism) may not like the feel of a drum; thinking about the colour of visual resources and scores for people with Dyslexia; thinking about instruments that might make enticing sounds and also be physically accessible and enjoyable to play.
- **Environment** can be especially important. Ideally we work in designated music spaces where young people expect to make music. This isn't always possible, but there are ways of making the space feel dedicated to music, e.g. playing music as people enter, having different lighting, using textiles and props, etc. Consider the acoustics of your space; rooms with an echo can be troubling to those who find loud uncontrolled sounds disturbing.

Making music

I have found that it is important to offer a range of activities that respond directly to the individuals in a group, and the way a session is going. Whilst having a structure is important, the ability to change tack quickly and introduce a very different activity can be really useful. What follows are some suggestions for skills and activities to integrate into a music making session with children and young people with SEND.

Warm-ups

Warming up sets the atmosphere and gets people ready for making music together. Rhythmic exercises, name games, sound or instrument passing, and co-ordination games can be fun and act as ice-breakers. It is good to use the same warm-ups over a number of sessions so they become familiar to the participants.

Instrumental work

Make the most of the resources you have available and ways you can make them more accessible; consider the sound, playability, feel, weight, size, and flexibility of the instruments. Offering choice and managing choosing is important; make choosing a part of the musical experience. Sharing and taking turns is also a valuable learning experience. Consider non-conventional ways of playing as appropriate. For example, pentatonic (five-note scales) can make group play effective and 'tuneful'.

Technology

Music technology can have a major role in SEND music making, whether it's the huge range of apps available and the accessibility of iPad interfaces, or using bespoke instruments like Skoog or Soundbeam, and many more devices and techniques. It is outside the remit of this briefing paper to explore the range of music technologies, so I refer you to [Drake Music](#), the leading national organisation working in music, disability and technology, for more information.

Improvisation

Improvisation allows people to express and be creative spontaneously, without constraint, and without the need for conventional skills. Consider how to facilitate and get the most out of it:

- Allow improvisations to start and evolve in different ways, and be able to pick up on individual contributions and bring focus to them.
- Develop the improvisation through individual interactions and interplay, e.g. call and response and modelling. Consider different types of improvisation; rhythmic, free, melodic, and using devices to stimulate interesting and creative musical ideas.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to make even a silent solo. Count into and out of solos and name the next soloist.
- Spontaneous compositions can be created using physical gestures as conducting a form of conducting. Offering participants the chance to conduct the group is empowering.

Rhythm and pulse

Rhythm is at the heart of music making, and there are suggestions that rhythmic music making can have specific benefits for some people with autism¹⁰. Using pattern-based material (e.g. drum rhythms, songs, repeated motifs) can help to create a safe and connected place in which people can relax, interact, and express themselves. Create rhythms for vocal chanting using names from the group, which could then lead to beating instruments. Drumming can support numeracy, encourage co-ordination, and be great physiotherapy. Body percussion is excellent for co-ordination and building strength for those who can. Be aware of volume and a need to place instruments carefully, or adapt ways of playing to the participants' needs. Simply rubbing a drum with the palm of a hand can be very satisfying for the player, while creating a good sound.

Soundscapes

Soundscapes are a great way of getting young people to consider the different sounds they might encounter in new environments and situations. Soundscapes can help to make participants more comfortable in these new situations (e.g. journeys, places, seasons) and feel less threatened. Taking 'soundwalks' to develop listening skills and environmental awareness can also be very useful.

Co-composing

People with SEND can have very little power and control in their lives. Encouraging their input and ownership into the creative process can be incredibly empowering and a source of pride. A method I use is to begin with a theme and to ask the group for words that they might associate with that theme. I then find a rhythm from those words to create a groove and develop this into a song with a simple melody.

Vocal work/singing

Vocal work can range from making abstract vocal sounds to singing well-known songs and everything in between. Abstract vocal work can be a way for non-verbal young people to start vocalising, and feeling comfortable and competent to do so. Using a microphone and different sound effects can be a liberating and empowering experience. Well-known songs that are memorable can be very engaging. When teaching words to young people who have difficulties with language, I have found singing quite closely to them and drawing attention to my mouthing quite effective.

Using backing tracks and holding sounds

It is great to be able to accompany group singing on an instrument, but sometimes a music leader needs to engage closely with individuals, encourage and facilitate their participation. Using backing tracks for songs can give you the freedom to move around and support the group.

Musicking

¹⁰ Rhythm, movement, and autism: using rhythmic rehabilitation research as a model for autism; Michelle W. Hardy and A. Blythe LaGasse, 2013 – <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3610079/>

This is a term that describes the various ways that we engage with music, including composing, performing and listening. Thinking about this wider approach to engaging in music can be very helpful especially when working with PMLD young people. Being in a creative musical environment can be a great first step towards those more active ways of musicking.

Leadership

The way we deliver our music is as important as the music itself, and to work effectively in SEND contexts we may need to adapt our ways of working.

Communication

We may need to be more physically demonstrative. Consider your physical position; sometimes sitting on the floor or crouching is a better way to communicate with participants than standing up. Name and praise young people for their achievements.

Pacing

Make sure you are working at an appropriate speed and allow things to happen as slowly as they need to. Try to maintain a flow so there are no long gaps between activities. Be ready to make things easy to begin with in order to engage the participants, but try to work to ensure potential for progression for everyone, whatever that looks like.

Group work

Working as a group can develop communication skills, emphasise the importance of taking turns, and create big and exciting sounds. However, we additionally need to establish one-to-one relationships and interactions with participants at the same time. This is often best achieved by working in a circle and moving around the group. Try to encourage and make use of teaching assistants, carers and others who may be in the room – they know their young people better than us usually; value their input.

Protection and touch

In most contexts we try to avoid physical contact with participants. However, when working with people with SEND sometimes we may need to physically support them to play or join in. Always seek consent before you make physical contact, even with non-verbal young people. Ask “Is it ok if...”, and respect their right not to be touched. Try to use ‘hand over hand’ rather than palm-to-palm touching, support an elbow, and make contact as non-intimate as possible. Be guided by the advice of teaching assistants, carers or teachers.

Evaluation

Observing the changes and developments that occur through music making is important for evaluating the success of impact of a project, but can be tricky to achieve. [Sounds of Intent](#) is a brilliant tool for measuring musical development in these contexts.

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