

Visible Thinking: The Performance Arts Club

St Judes, Easton, Bristol; and in partnership with Rosemary Nursery: Spring 2014

Introduction

The session is just starting. A boy (7 years) and a girl (8 years) arrive with their grandmother. The children go first to the small table by the entrance and play freely with the small percussion instruments set out there. Then the boy, K., takes up a cello and Sarah shows him how to hold the bow and draw it over the strings. He starts to play a one-string drone. Sarah takes up her cello and improvises a melody over the drone; in a 'folk style'. Meanwhile Sandra pulls across a balafon to improvise with 3 year-old M. in the same tempo and style. Baby, sitting on the floor, is transfixed by the cello. The baby's mother mostly watches, listening, and joins in a little on a xylophone. Another mother takes up a xylophone and joins in with the same rhythmic ideas that Sarah has gradually introduced via melodic repeated patterns. Meanwhile grandmother has fetched a violin, and with a large smile (juggling violin and mobile phone to take a photo of her grandson K. to send to his mother) quietly adds a drone note.

In my scribbled notes I have added that the grandmother is originally from the Caribbean, her grandchildren born here, one mother with two children from Somalia and the other mother with the baby, I'm not sure, maybe from Syria or somewhere else in the middle East? This kind of demographic information of ethnic background is required in project evaluations, but when families in many inner city areas have arrived here from so many different places, at different times, for different reasons, does it matter, or is it even ethical, to distinguish families by simple ethnic labels? Now these children and parents and grandparents all live in St Judes, Bristol and now is what matters.

Visible Thinking: Background

Visible Thinking, as a team, have built up considerable experience over many years of designing and leading projects with young children, refugee and minority communities, in educational and community settings. They draw on their own skills of music, theatre and dance and can call upon a wide range of associates to add additional music and organisational skills. Their background in the Reggio-inspired project, 5X5X5 = Creativity¹ has schooled them in an approach to creative practice based on documentation, careful review of practice and discussion. They maintain

¹ 5X5X5= creativity is an independent arts-based action research organization which develops creative arts work inspired by the principles of the nurseries in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in educational settings in the Bath and Bristol area.

an open-minded and optimistic outlook on their practice which is conveyed in the work they develop and promote.

Having worked now for several years in minority communities in one part of Bristol, their knowledge of the practicalities of running projects is extensive and secure. They know the places, the spaces, the times of the week and day, when projects will work. They are well known by people in the community and trusted. The practicalities and attitudes to develop successful work with so-called 'hard-to-reach' families described in the recent report commissioned by Youth Music² are 'second nature' to Visible Thinking. On the day that I visited the project during its 7 week run, the total number of participants was 26 children aged 6 months to ten years and 12 parents. The music occasions that the VT team provide are self-evidently accessible. These are families who have been 'reached'.

The need for positive models of practice

While the Youth Music report focussing on so-called 'hard to reach' families contains a number of practical suggestions and prompts for thinking, it contains little concrete information about how to design the music work itself. Where it does discuss the content of the sessions, it is mainly to advise on what not to do (e.g. not to be over-structured or 'middle class' in approach). It does not suggest positive models from which to build practice apart from a recommendation to include more popular music and a broad recommendation to be culturally sensitive.

New Thinking

There are two main new dimensions to this project that we believe represent 'new thinking' in the conversation about making music work accessible to diverse families.

- 1 Immigrant communities today in many UK cities are not made up of one predominant cultural group (as in the past) but are very diverse. Vertovec terms this 'super-diversity'³.
- 2 To work with 'super-diverse' communities, new models of practice are required. These will look outside conventional early years music education and multicultural music education and draw on models of practice evolved from community music, music therapy (particularly community music therapy⁴) and cross-arts work including children's theatre and dance.

We discuss each dimension in turn:

1. Immigration to the UK in recent years has changed. Whereas immigration was dominated by arrivals from the former British colonies who tended to settle in close-knit communities, over the last ten to fifteen years immigration has changed

² Osgood, J., Albon, D., Allen, K. and Hollingsworth, S. (2013) *Engaging 'Hard to Reach' Parents in Early Years Music Making*: Report commissioned by Youth Music.

³ Vertovec, S. (2010). (Ed.) *Anthropology of Migration and Multiculturalism: New Directions*. London: Routledge.

⁴ Stige, B., Ansdell, G., Elefant, C. and Pavlicevic, M. (2010) *Where Music helps: Community Music Therapy in Action and Reflection*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

dramatically. To put it simply, more people are now migrating from more places. Visible Thinking are aware of the following ethnic backgrounds of families participating in their Saturday sessions: Sri Lankan (Tamil), Kurdish, Polish, Sudanese, Somali, Senegalese, Jamaican, White British, Iranian, Kenyan, Cameroonian, Iraqi. The 'new migration' is resulting in multiple patterns of difference; not just in ethnicity, but also in length of residence, language competence, immigration status, religion and more.

What this means is that ideas and approaches developed for 'old migration' are no longer appropriate. 'Old migration' led to multicultural policies developed from the 1960s onwards that sought to respect and accommodate culture-based differences. In music work this might, for example, translate into the inclusion of South Asian songs and dholak play in a children's centre project working with majority South Asian communities. In working with the 'super-diverse' groups of families, the multicultural approach with its ideology of inclusive approaches for predominantly single cultural groups can no longer work. New approaches that are flexible to multiple patterns of difference – and also that recognise similarities in the here, now and future, rather than focussing on historical differences - are required.

2 To develop a model of practice which is accessible and respectful to 'new migration' families, practitioners need to be knowledgeable of a wide range of approaches and able to make judgements to select what will 'work' most successfully. In part this needs knowledge and skilled, confident experienced professionals. The core members of Visible Thinking have a long-standing background in music, dance, drama and theatre. In addition they have a network of artists, musicians and community workers on whom they can call when designing projects. In part it also needs careful monitoring of how the work is being received and constant small adjustments made - both immediate and intuitive 'on the hoof', and longer-term in the post-session review and reflection.

The Team

The artists/musicians working in this project were:

A 'cellist

A balafon player

A Djembe player

A singer

A ukulele player

A dancer/creative practitioner

A facilitator

Thus the team consisted of multi-skilled practitioners who could access many different musical styles.

The Models of Practice

The models of practice on which the full team could draw were:

- Community music
- Therapeutic arts
- Contemporary children's theatre
- Principles of Reggio Emilia
- Work with deaf children
- Formal music education (school-based)

Thus the team could draw on a range of models of practice in developing their work with families.

The Session Structure

The usual structure for across the 3-hour sessions was as follows:

- 1 Preliminary settling
- 2 Whole group improvisation
- 3 Whole group focused activity: story
- 4 Break-out: Small group work with individual instruments and singing
- 5 Whole group improvisation and performances from small groups

1 Preliminary Settling

Families were free to arrive and leave as they wish. A facilitator stood at the door to welcome, sign in and usher. Early arrivals were settled in to some preliminary instrumental activities that were deliberately 'low key'. There was an atmosphere of quiet, warm but not overwhelming welcome.

Observation

A mother with a small 3-year-old boy and a baby of 6 months arrives. She is helped to park the pushchair and welcomed in. She sits on the floor with the baby and S. fetches a xylophone (an Orff xylophone). The boy is given a beater and tentatively starts to play. The mother plays too. Sandra interacts with both mother and boy, giving the mother a short melodic pattern to learn and some instruction on notation, and improvising interactively with the boy.

2 Whole Group Improvisation

When sufficient numbers had arrived, a group improvisation evolved from a rhythmic and melodic 'riff'. This drew in all participants from children of all ages, to mothers, grandmothers and babies sitting on the floor taking it all in. [See *observation at the start of this document.*]

3 Whole Group Focused Activity

A group focused activity introduced a key idea: a 'provocation' (to use the Reggio term). On the day I observed this was based on converting your own name in to a short melodic pattern. This idea presented the conventional 5 line stave and notation, but short notational ideas could be made into little 'boats' that sailed along a giant paper stave. The making of little boats from materials provided on a side table was an additional activity for children not directly occupied in music-making activities. It connected with story, dance and shadow-play.

4 Break-out: Small group work with individual instruments and singing

On the day I observed Alfonse (balafon player) worked with children in a separate room teaching them melodies to play on both balafon and keyboard. Sarah was outside (it was an unusually warm day) with violins and cellos. Kirby had taken a room outside with a small circle for some focussed drumming work. Celestine had a small group for singing. Sandra attended a table with the art activity. Deasi was 'minding the door' and facilitating.

Observation

C. is working with three mothers who have opted for the singing group. One has a baby in a pushchair that she is jiggling to and fro to soothe. C. has introduced a simple part song based on a repeated ostinato-like foundation part which can then be elaborated harmonically. She invites the mothers to contribute words which describe their morning routine. This brings smiles of recognition as they share the scramble to get children up, breakfasted and ready for school. The words are selected in to simple semi-chanted phrases. C. asks the mothers to pitch a two note riff. Two of them have difficulty finding an appropriate vocal tone and in pitching their voices accurately. C. does not give up, nor compromise and I watch five minutes of very focused vocal production and pitching work take place. Later the mothers sing this short semi-improvised song in a short final performance.

5 Whole group improvisation and performances from small groups

The afternoon concludes with a short presentation-performance from each of the individual groups on the activity that they have been doing in the break-out groups. Each small group presents to the others in turn, both mothers and children.

Identifying Elements

In reviewing and reflecting on the work at the end of the series of sessions we tried to extract those elements of musical content that are central to success.

Instruments of Many Types

There were cellos, violins, West African drums, balafons, electric keyboards, ukuleles, xylophones and percussion instruments. The instruments were 'real' instruments representative of many different musical styles. At key points during the afternoon, the team musicians played their respective instruments; thus providing a model of musical performance on these various instruments. They could play them skilfully and improvise at ease in a range of styles. However, the team

musicians played within improvisations which involved everyone, there was no formal performance that created a musical boundary.

There were a surprising number of instruments, enough for everyone to find something to play and to ring the changes. While there was some obvious care taken over the more fragile instruments (stringed instruments for example) they were all easily accessible to all who wanted to pick up and play. There was an implicit message, however, that this was not a 'free-for-all' session. Proper handling and that 'we will play these properly' were conveyed; but again in a facilitative rather than negative way.

The team were concerned that on a busy afternoon such as the afternoon I visited, it became at moments over-busy and over-noisy. Possibly. But that certainly wasn't the impression I received. It was musically busy in a productive way.

Drumming and 'riffing'

In larger group improvisations the presence of the drum in 'holding' the group together and creating a collective, positive dynamic was often very important. There were additional drums to allow for more children and parents to participate in drumming. Collective drumming is well known to enhance well-being and increase 'prosocial' behaviour⁵.

Small Group Teaching

The group work with instruments had specific learning aims. It was the view of the Visible Thinking team that the participating children and adults should be given serious and focussed 'teaching' in certain musical, instrumental and singing skills. This aim raised questions about the pedagogical approach. Teaching is a term that is often avoided in creative project and community music work because it is thought to carry overtones of control, constraint and to stifle creativity.

However, on reflection, the team considered that learning how to play an instrument or to sing, and progressing, usually involves some form of 'teaching' by a more expert player. Looking at how novices learn to play (or sing) in many musical styles; listen, watch and copy is the main pedagogical approach. They also held the view that to have expectations of skill-learning conveyed important messages of respect and value to those taking part. Importantly, across the whole afternoon the more formal pedagogy was blended with adult and child-centred improvisation so that skills acquired could be directly used in more creative activity.

Communication

⁵ Kokal I, Engel A, Kirschner S, Keysers C (2011) Synchronized Drumming Enhances Activity in the Caudate and Facilitates Prosocial Commitment - If the Rhythm Comes Easily. PLoS ONE 6(11): e27272. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0027272

Throughout the afternoon, for the group activities verbal instructions were minimal. Gestures and musical cues were given, but the activities were such that they could develop by inference alone and verbal instructions were not necessary.

Observation

H. (10 years) and her younger sister A. (8 years) arrive with their mother and another sibling, a younger brother. [I notice that A. is wearing a headscarf, leggings and a fairy skirt and I smile at the mix of clothing that is symbolic of the many worlds she crosses.] H. makes straight for a djembe. Kirby starts a drum riff which H. imitates almost immediately. Her mother too takes up a drum and starts to join in. A. is flitting about, exploring the side table laid out with many smaller percussion instruments and occasionally joins in the drumming, or opts out again. H. spends almost all of the afternoon with the drumming circle, either playing in the improvisations or in the focused teaching session. During a pause I talk with her. 'I like the drums, I like to play them a lot' she says. And her mother adds, 'yes, we've come every week, we like it, we like the music, it relaxes us'.