

# music

in the  
early years

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# planning for early years music

The staff of a West London nursery gather together for their weekly planning meeting. Below is a transcript of parts of their discussion:

*‘the singing area—we could put out the puppets for some voice games and singing play, and rig up the microphone and cassette recorder—who’ll work there with the children? Perhaps we can record some of their voice work? Playing with the puppet might encourage S. to use her voice? she still hasn’t spoken since she started...’*

*‘what songs for this week during carpet time? Is it time to teach a new one? And we’ll do some voice games this week...’*

*‘shall we put out the glockenspiel on the table with beaters? And hang the new chimes and rattles from the climbing frame outside if it’s fine—who will work at the music table with the children using the glock?...’*

*‘nursery rucksack to go home with J. and M. on Tuesday and Thursday—be sure the dual-language rhyme book is in for J. and the new tape of the music we are listening to...’*

Notice the many layers of planning which the staff cover in their discussion; typical for any early years educational setting. Organising equipment and people is as important in fostering music activity and learning as are the decisions for teacher led input, what song and what voice games. Notice too how provision is adjusted to meet children’s individual needs, for one who has not yet found any voice for the nursery and another who can voice in two languages.

They are planning to cover each of the following areas:

- creating an environment for music;
- observing, listening and responding to children’s music and musical behaviours;

- preparing teacher-guided input;
- catering for the learning needs of individual children.

Teachers working with young children in music need a special kind of flexibility. Selected materials and activity ideas are helpful, particularly for planning specific input, but are not enough. An understanding of the principles which lie behind planning for early years music will enable the teacher to make informed decisions. At the start of their schooling, all children bring with them a rich and individual accumulation of skills, knowledges and understanding of music. If teachers are to build a curriculum directly on what children can already do, they must find ways of discovering their abilities, collecting and using them as a basis for planning.

Coming to know 'where the child is' musically is a process of gradually building a picture over time and from many sources. Information will be gathered in from:

- discussions with parents;
- observation and listening to children in the nursery or classroom;
- planned music activities which are designed to enable the teacher to find out about children's abilities and experiences.

## *knowing what to look for*

Knowing what to look for, what kinds of knowledge, abilities and feelings towards music children might have acquired in the years prior to school will guide teachers in their information gathering. In other fields, such as language and number, early childhood teachers are increasingly coming to understand the sophisticated abilities children have acquired from family life and how these can provide a basis for first teachings.

A similar story of competences for music is beginning to emerge from studies of young children, together with an awareness that teaching approaches must be adjusted to take account of what children bring. Discovering that babies can hear and listen to music in the womb, and when born will recognise the music of their mother's culture in preference to other musics, (Woodward, 1994 and 1996) tells us that children have innate abilities to absorb musical information from all they hear around them. In their earliest years prior to schooling children will

have heard a wealth of music in all kinds of places and from many sources: radio, TV, videos, supermarkets, places of worship. Children come to early years schooling steeped in the music of their own culture.

Young children are equipped with acutely sensitive aural skills which can detect the smallest changes of pitch, timing, placing of stress. From earliest days if they are to communicate successfully with caregivers (and on this communication depends survival) they must listen attentively to the voices around them (Papousek, 1996). Equally, they can use their own voices with infinite variation, and are highly successful communicators and voice users even before speech develops.

Children from musically alive homes will have enjoyed traditional children's rhymes, games and songs with family members. Being bounced and jiggled on the knee in lap games lays the foundations of rhythmic awareness. By taking part and attempting to join in with songs and rhymes the children are making their first attempts at using voices in musical ways. And these early experiences of being musically active are wrapped in the warm contact of family. Perhaps not surprisingly, children from these families will grow up singing and responding to music more freely than from children from homes where there is less musical parenting (Kelly and Sutton-Smith, 1987). Modern working patterns may leave little time for childhood traditions of singing and game playing. The television, although a source of music to listen to, is a poor substitute for adults available to respond and play.

Social and cultural differences will result in great variation in the home music backgrounds children have experienced. Each child will have an individual musical identity which they are beginning to piece together from the ways in which music is used in their families and communities and the part they take in music (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994).

The kinds of knowledge, skills and feelings children will have acquired from home life are listed below. Each area is illustrated with examples which try to capture some sense of the variety of background experiences children will bring:

- knowledge of how music is used in their families and communities and their part in that musical activity; *song*

*singing used as an expressive aspect of parenting; spiritual music listened to in silence in the place of worship; joining in, singing along and dancing with the radio in the kitchen.*

- *knowledge of songs and rhymes learnt in the home: from family, friends, other adults, the media; snippets of Disney film songs learnt from a video; traditional lap-clapping game learnt from a grandparent.*
- *knowledge of how music from their own culture sounds, an intuitive understanding of its musical elements; listening to a Welsh male voice choir rehearsing; watching Hindi films and hearing the film songs.*
- *knowledge of home spoken language, dialect and possibly an additional language; the sounds and rhythms of their own language.*
- *knowledge of instruments, the way they are played and the kinds of sounds they will produce; pop-group instruments seen and heard on the television; hearing an adult practising an instrument at home.*
- *knowledge of materials and ways of making sounds from a range of materials and objects; tapping, banging play objects to discover the resulting sound.*
- *physical abilities, the feel of how the body moves, its rhythms, strengths and timings; action clapping game played with carer; dancing to Bhangra music with older sibling.*
- *aural abilities, the discrimination of fine differences in sound; being interested in sound for sound's sake, playing with sound-making objects.*
- *vocal abilities, using their voices in many ways; playing voice games, experimenting with variations of voice sounds.*
- *feelings towards different forms of musical activity, a sense of themselves as musical people. encouragement (or not) in their first efforts at singing; family pleasure in singing a happy birthday song; attentive support at first efforts to play an instrument.*

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## *discussion with parents*

There is a growing appreciation of the importance of parents as the child's first and continuing educators and of the valuable insights into their child's prior learning which they can provide for teachers (Steirer et al., 1995). Holding conversations with parents in which they can gather information enables teachers to begin to understand the range of the child's previous experiences of music. On this foundation they can build continuity of experience for the child and ensure that what is provided reflects and values the child's cultural background (Robson, 1996).

## *observing and listening*

Observing and listening to the child in music can help teachers to build a real understanding of 'where they are' which will help them plan music for each child.

Paying concentrated attention to what the child is really doing is one of the most difficult things for a teacher to do. It takes time, organisation, energy and a certain disposition to set aside preconceptions. Paley writes from her experiences as a nursery teacher, 'I was a stranger in the classroom, grown distant from the thinking of children' (Paley, 1990:15). And as adults we may be strangers to the child in music and have grown distant from children's musical thinking. Listening to children in music can challenge many long-held beliefs about the way music should be taught and what the long-term aims of music education are. The following describes one teacher's experiences:

❧ Mary Nicholson, a nursery teacher in Wandsworth, planned a regular weekly slot to observe one child, over one term, playing one instrument, first claves and then a glockenspiel.

Each ten minute session was tape recorded. Mary listened to the tapes later and made notes. This in-depth focus on one child provided her with insight which she might not have gained from more superficial observations of several children in general activity. She writes, 'I have worked with one child

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throughout, either on her own or with other children. I have shared far more with her than I ever envisaged and have learnt from her. Having the opportunity to work with one child in this way has given me an insight into the world of music making for the young child. It has helped me to develop a sense of what the child experiences at this stage of development.'

This caused Mary to reflect on her teaching role, 'Initially my role in this (the observation sessions) was to echo the patterns on a similar instrument in order to reinforce the recognition process. This was clearly an adult agenda, arising from the need to teach in some way. I imposed this adult agenda, and to some extent it was successful in that the child was able to create musical patterns and recreate them in further sessions. In hindsight using this sort of approach as a starting point is limiting. When we free ourselves of the reins of adult-led sessions and enable the child to evolve her own agenda the potential for exploration on the part of the child in conjunction with an adult is far greater' (Nicholson, 1995).

Later Paley writes, 'Paradoxically, as the focus shifted from me to the children—what do children think about in the classroom?—I began to see my own role more clearly' (Paley, 1990:15). Looking closely at children's activity can allow us to come to understand more about their music; it can also highlight teaching which is less effective than the teacher had imagined. Mary Nicholson continued to partner this child closely, but modified her teaching approach considerably in line with what she came to understand.

This model of listening-led teaching for music, in which careful observation of what the child is really doing guides teaching, threads its way through this book.

The following section looks in closer detail at starting music with a new class. It suggests an approach to planning in which setting up diagnostic activities for assessment and differentiation is woven into the ongoing work of the classroom.

## *starting music with a new class*

Meeting a new class at the beginning of a school year brings a mixed brew of feelings—of optimism, trepidation, a sense of fresh opportunities and new starts—and the challenge of needing to get to know each other quickly; for teachers and children alike. Both energy and adrenaline levels can be running high.



It is worth recognising this transition period clearly for what it is; from the point of view of music this settling in time can be fruitful in several ways if carefully planned for:

- the teacher can plan activities which allow her to hear and see something of the musical experience and capabilities children bring with them; future planning can be matched to these;
- music is a good vehicle for getting to know children in a multi-faceted way;
- musical activity is a useful way to bring a new group of children together as a group and to reinforce a sense of community in the classroom.

Music is also a very broadly based subject and is best taught in a climate where it is part of a whole learning environment—along the lines of how language is catered for—rather than confined to a single lesson slot once a week. The first few weeks is therefore a crucial time for introducing the range of musical opportunities and expectations.

The first half-term's work can be planned with all these factors in mind:

- it can be new work, aiming to stretch the children and move them on;
- it can have carefully thought out 'diagnostic' opportunities built in.

The latter need not be specially set up tasks or tests, simply planned-in ways of observing children engaged in a range of ordinary musical activities. And these activities can be designed to help everyone get used to working as a class together and to renew or establish relationships all round.

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## **assessment and differentiation**

- make a class song tape containing lots of solo contributions, particularly children's own spontaneous songs and a few short songs sung altogether to '*see how we sound as a class*':

Listen for and work on:

*voice skills;*  
*musical structures used in song compositions.*

- as a class, in a circle, make a ‘taking turns and joining in’ (see page) instrumental piece once a week for 3 weeks, a third of the class at a time; discuss the range of instruments in use; the listening two-thirds of the class discuss with improvisers each time how they heard and thought of the music; Listen for and work on: *instrumental skills, interactive skills—musically and socially, musical imagination; range of vocabulary and ways of talking about music.*
- as a class and in groups, listen to three given pieces of music on tape and agree on one to listen to again; discuss why it is a good choice.

Look for and work on:  
*attentive and detailed listening;*  
*understanding of music heard—elements;*  
*how the music affects me as a listener;*  
*range of vocabulary and ways of talking about music.*

## *planning the basics*

Music works best when it is a part of daily life in the classroom. For many activities ‘little and often’ is the key to success. Children’s natural enthusiasm for music makes it invaluable at coming-together times and as a way of helping the class to work as a social group. A song or some listening can be lively or calming alternatives to a story. Just enjoying the sound of sounds, a musical game or a newly -made composition can lift the mood of the whole group. Music in school can contribute to the quality of life just as it does outside it.

The more flexibility that can be managed in planning opportunities for music, the better. Music learning involves a very wide range of activities and these need planning for in different ways. For example:

- *singing: with the whole class, in smaller groups for work on skills, in pairs using song cards;*

- playing instruments: *individual work with structured provision, in small groups with a teacher or helper, accompanying class singing;*
- composing: *composing songs individually or in a class or group time; composing alone with an instrument; using the computer;*
- moving: *class work in hall time;*
- circle games: *with a small group or the class seated in a circle;*
- listening to music: *with the class as for story time; individually or in groups on headphones; on a video; or as an audience for a live performer.*

Young children move easily between the activities of composing, performing, moving, listening and appraising. Development of musical skills, knowledge and understanding also crosses these boundaries and planning should take account of this. Musical activities should be integrated where possible e.g. a composing activity followed up by listening to recorded music; listening to and appraising a tape recording of class singing.

Music has often been seen as a class activity e.g. singing together, with little monitoring of individual learning within this class setting and little opportunity for children to work by themselves or benefit from musical interaction with the teacher one-to-one. Planning work in different formats can give children more scope for practising skills and working with their own ideas at their own level. It also allows teachers to build in strategies for observing children and assessing their learning. The range of formats might include:

- teacher-led work with the whole class: *teacher input, class participation and opportunities for individual contributions or taking turns so that children are heard individually;*
- small group tutorials with the teacher or a helper: *planned activities in a music corner or round a table allowing differentiation between children and one-to-one musical interaction and talk;*
- individual play: *structured opportunities for free play; provision for bringing findings to share at a 'carpet time'; some observation or 'partnering' by the teacher;*
- individual or paired work in music area: *for more experienced children, opportunities for composition or practising with instruments; provision for saving work on tape; staffed by a 'listening helper' (e.g. a parent/carer, a pupil from a*

*local secondary school).*

If working in music in these ways is new to the school, the organisation and resources for this kind of provision can be introduced gradually. Developments can be planned for and need not all take place at once.

During the early years, musical progression depends on planning that differentiates enough to take account of the skills, knowledge, understanding and cultural background that each child brings and that matches teaching input to the child's learning needs. Planning curriculum content therefore is a matter of bringing together a knowledge of the areas which need to be covered with ongoing observation and assessment. As in all curriculum areas, teaching needs to be flexible enough to draw activities from the planned scheme and introduce them at appropriate times.

The later sections of this book discuss the kind of opportunities which can be provided in each main area of the music curriculum, outlining, as it were, the 'musical map' against which planning takes place. Each section also looks in some detail at strategies for observing and assessing children in each area with indications of what to look for and how to move children forward. This assumes an approach to teaching music which continually moves between the roles of:

- providing planned opportunities for music learning;
- observing and listening to children's work;
- noticing indicators of what is needed next;
- assessing learning with the children;
- choosing activities from the planned scheme of work which will move children forward.

This approach requires that during the process of planning activities, teachers build in:

- learning objectives that are clear and that can be made explicit to the children;
- strategies which will allow teachers to listen and observe individual children;
- clear ideas of what to look for in assessing progress;
- opportunities for assessment.

Involving children in assessment of their own learning is important if they are to develop their own understanding of what they are aiming for. Even with the youngest children, teachers can identify and discuss in simple terms one or two key objectives, e.g. *'we're going to see if we can sing 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star' with us all keeping together'* or *'we're going to practise the jump for our voices when we sing 'twinkle, twinkle'*. Children can then be involved in assessing how well these objectives were met and what made it easy or difficult. This can be done in a way which both registers achievements and always looks forward as well, e.g. *'we finished together very well at the end; it's hard to keep together all the time because you have to listen to everybody else and remember the song as well'* or *'finding that second note and singing it just exactly right is going to take lots of practice; we'll remember to try a voice-jumping game later on'*.

The teacher's agenda for assessment will be wider than the one shared with the children. Carrying out assessment whilst activities are in progress is not always easy, although it draws on the habit of observation that early years teachers apply in almost everything they do. Observing individual children does not, of course, imply that this is done only in one-to-one teaching situations. In a class situation it requires building in opportunities for hearing what individuals are doing, though some of this may be done while several children are playing or singing at once.

Nor is it possible to track all children all the time. Strategies of taking 'spot checks' round a group or focusing on a few children only within any one activity can be used. This works well enough as long as care is taken that over a stretch of time each child has had some close attention, however brief, across a reasonable range of activity. Observation is always easiest when it is clear what is being looked for, hence the need to clarify this as part of planning. As long as the teacher has a second sense which is open to picking up the unpredictable outcomes as well as those aimed for, this works well. It is also useful to remember that progression in music cannot be thought of in a simple linear way. Music learning is multi-dimensional; understanding develops within an expanding network of criss-crossing skills and knowledge, many of which are interdependent.

In order to secure continuity of learning, music planning will need to take place between groups of teachers and the whole staff of the school. Ideally, the

process of developing a music curriculum will always involve:

- some 'hands on' music workshop sessions for teachers as a group working together: *out of these can be developed some agreement about approaches to music in practice;*
- establishing a vocabulary in which to talk about music: *this emerges most easily from workshop sessions as above and is crucial in being consistent with children;*
- trying out new, jointly planned activities: *a group of teachers try these out with their own classes e.g. of different aged children, and come together again to evaluate the work;*
- listening together to samples of children's work on tape: *joint discussion helps to clarify what expectations are, what the range of ability is, issues of differentiation and progression.*

It is not possible to develop an agreed and effective scheme of work until there is a good basis of positive classroom practice in music which is already underway and in which a majority of teachers are involved. If this is supported by the kind of staff development strategies listed above, a climate of ongoing development evolves to a point where a scheme of work can be meaningfully prepared. This will outline long-term plans for each term and year group and bring ideas for resources and materials together with learning objectives and focuses for assessment. Neither the scheme of work nor any published resource scheme the school has can do more than provide half the picture, however. Working through a series of pre-planned activities without re-shaping work on a basis driven by observation of children and differentiation accordingly can severely reduce the quality of music learning. Unfortunately, the block by block sequence laid down by many schemes of work can't encompass the demands of a non-linear subject.

Some system of recording and profiling children's work is needed to support continuity, particularly at points of transfer, and reporting. This needs to be both effective and minimal. Once again, if this consideration is built into the planning of all music work, it can be more easily managed. Provision can be made for:

- a simple check system recording the child 'visiting' the range of specified