

Developing Social Competence in Children with Special Educational Needs through a Music Based Intervention Programme

Children with special educational needs can experience difficulties in social settings. This article outlines an approach to addressing issues of confidence and self-esteem for these children within the context of the Primary School Curricula for Music and Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and while using a Circle Time format.

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INTRODUCTION

The children at the centre of this project attend a mainstream primary school in a rapidly expanding village. There has been an influx of families with diverse needs and cultures and the once small, rural school has undergone exponential change. Consequently, pupils may not be known directly by all staff and could appear lost in a crowd. However, the continued aim of the staff is “to provide effective and positive learning environments and experiences for the individual needs and abilities of all the children” (Day, 2005, p. 85).

To provide for the individual needs of children, it is acknowledged that a positive school environment is of paramount importance. In addition to educational development, each pupil requires nurturing in a setting where they are respected and celebrated. Therefore, opportunities to develop positive self-esteem together with social and communication skills are necessary both in the classroom and play contexts. Opportunity, continuity and support are three vital conditions necessary for friendships to develop and for positive social interaction to take place among children with and without disabilities (Westwood, 2003). Therefore schools must provide the essential support for positive social exchanges to occur.

The staff and pupils currently put great thought, care and support into planned play-time, focusing on the reintroduction of yard games, designated skipping areas and marked out game templates on the play area. The smooth running and enjoyment of these facilities calls upon the social competence of the pupils. However, it is during these play-times and in developing new friendships that certain children have been observed as struggling or isolated. Children with intellectual difficulties are sometimes rejected by their peers as a result of their frustrating behaviours rather than because they are disabled (Snell and Brown (2000) and Taylor, Sternberg and Richards (1995) cited in Westwood (2003)).

It becomes apparent in identifying such children that there is a great need to be ‘socially skilled’ to survive in a group setting. How can these children be empowered to be a friend? How can they be included in the game and feel part of the scene? How can they speak out and listen appropriately? How best can they learn to take turns, to give

compliments, to praise and to lose graciously? Oden and Asher (1977) researched the value of coaching isolated children in social skills, focusing on participating in a game, turn-taking and sharing, communicating and supporting each other. The overall results of this research indicated that planned intervention might be effective in increasing children's peer acceptance. Forness and Kavale (1996) cited in Oden and Asher (1977) claim that the development of interpersonal skills is vital to future social survival, adding, "beyond the school years, situations requiring social competence tend to far outnumber those requiring academic skill" (p. 19).

RATIONALE FOR A MUSIC BASED INTERVENTION

According to Waksman (1998) and Walker (1983) cited in Westwood (2003), there is no shortage of social skills training programmes and curricula available to schools that can have lasting positive effects, particularly for pupils with milder degrees of socialisation difficulty. However, this project proposes an alternative approach to empowering such pupils. Based on the curriculum for music which is "so much part of every day life that its nature and purpose are rarely questioned...a diverse and lifelong activity, enjoyed by people of all ages" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999, p. 2).

As a resource teacher for children with special educational needs (SEN) in the above-mentioned school, the author has identified a small, yet diverse, group of pupils who experience difficulties as described above. These pupils also have another factor in common. They find music to be fun and exciting, responding to its motivational qualities. The music curriculum (NCCA, 1999) with its motivational qualities can help such children "to absorb concepts and knowledge that might otherwise seem daunting" (NCCA, 2002a, p. 3). Fun, excitement, an interest in music and its motivational qualities are all key factors in the rationale for this paper.

The children selected range from second to fifth class and while each has differing ability, they are all attending resource teachers for specific reasons. One, identified as having an autistic spectrum disorder, has a keen interest in composers and musical styles. Another, with a visual impairment and anxieties has an inherent love for music and is learning violin. Another, in fifth class, with special learning needs and a tendency to echolalia becomes confident when called upon in class to participate in improvised instrumental work. A little girl in second class with cerebral palsy and very limited speech delights in humming a tune. Finally, a girl in fourth class with epilepsy and learning difficulties shows great interest in performing and responding to music.

A programme based around music: listening and responding, composing and performing was planned for this group. The aim of such a programme was to "to develop the students' confidence and self-esteem and to equip them with skills and knowledge that will serve them in their future lives" (NCCA, 2002a, p. 5).

Working in Harmony – 'Gamelan Workshops'

A report was carried out by MacDonald and Miell (2000) on a series of music workshops organised by 'Sounds of Progress', a music production company based in Glasgow, who

specialise in working with people with special needs. These particular workshops ran over a period of eighteen months and had the specific objectives of enhancing the social skills and developing musical skills and social opportunities of the participants. All ‘Gamelan Workshops’ began with a warm up session involving participants standing in a circle and joining in rhythmic games on a Javanese Gamelan (drum). An essential element of this warm-up was to bring all the participants into the process, monitoring each other’s talk and actions. MacDonald and Miell likened this shared focus of attention to the concept of ‘shared social reality’ Rogoff (1999) cited in MacDonald and Miell (2000), where group members focus on strengthening communication through a goal and a task. The use of the inward facing circle format focuses the participants on each other, uniting the group and strengthening group dynamics.

The Child-centred Music Room

In an examination of the concept that child-centred learning in music programmes for young children can foster their emotional social, cognitive, and musical development, Turner (1999) noted that all children need singing, playing, listening, and movement experiences to develop their innate musicianship. His approach allowed children an adequate amount of time to make and interact with music in their own way, giving freedom of choice of instruments and activities. One activity that Turner found very successful was the ‘conducting centre’. Here children found a music stand, baton and a musical score. In practice it was not uncommon for children to gather around the ‘conductor’ to play their instrument or sing a song.

From a review of the literature and professional guidance given by Bríd Laffan (Lecturer, St. Patrick’s College of Education), at the formative stage of the project, it was clear that the development of social competence: interpersonal/communication skills, behavioural skills and assertive skills could be facilitated through small group, activity based learning, in a cross-curricular setting. Music, being recognised as having a tremendous influence on human behaviour and a significant role in society, is an ideal medium for the development of a social skills programme where listening and responding, and composing and performing could be used to strengthen foundation skills, interaction skills, affective skills and cognitive skills. The aim of such an intervention programme was “to develop the students’ confidence and self-esteem and to equip them with skills and knowledge that will serve them in their future lives” (NCCA, 2002a, p. 5).

INTERVENTION

In keeping with the collaborative approach that our school operates, the author spoke with the teachers of the children identified as the project group. The staff members welcomed the proposal and viewed the concept as relevant to the school’s commitment to the social skills development of all children. A literature review, undertaken by the author, helped consolidate her conviction to the project and provided a foundation on which to build a programme based around the three strands of the music curriculum (NCCA, 1999), and also addressing the aims of the social personal and health education (SPHE) curriculum (NCCA, 2002b) of helping develop positive self-esteem, social skills and good adaptive behaviour.

Stages of Implementation

The first stage of the intervention was to meet with each child's mainstream class teacher and if possible with the parents. Target skills were identified, relating to the three areas of social competence; interpersonal and communication skills, behavioural skills and assertive skills (Appendix). These skills were then matched to selected musical resources, offering a balance of activities covering the music strands; listening and responding, composing and performing.

The next stage was the implementation of the intervention programme. The timeframe for the music sessions was six weeks. The group met for forty minutes, once a week, in the resource room. After the six week programme, staff evaluated the children's participation. A period of some weeks followed during which the resource teacher and class teachers implemented collaborative sessions, where the whole class, or targeted groups, experienced aspects of the music programme (songs, games, response to music, improvisation). The objective for this period was to provide opportunities for the transfer of the targeted social skills into the child's daily life.

Once the intervention, the in-class follow through and an evaluation had been carried out, some staff members decided that interventions could run once a term, with music and activities themed with the seasons and cultural events. For each new programme, social skills would be targeted for the select group of children.

The Intervention Sessions

Circle Time, as outlined by Mosley (1996), was the natural choice as a lesson format for the intervention programme. The improvisation format of the Gamelan Workshops, MacDonald and Miell (2000) and the 'conducting centre' proposed by Turner (1999) provided the children with moments for expressive and cooperative play.

Each session began with the Introductory Phase, progressing to the Middle Phase-Open Forum and ending with the Closing Phase and the plan to meet again.

During the Introductory Phase, the children would warm up with a welcoming song, a 'passed-on' rhythm using percussion or a previously learned movement to music, such as "Step Back Baby/Chucka Hanka". Once settled, they moved into a round and focused on listening to each other's news and views. A talking object (a percussion instrument) was passed round as the symbol of good listening and the right to speak uninterrupted.

Moving into the Middle Phase, a specific musical activity would be explored in more depth. Actively listening and responding to music together targeted the social skills of maintaining a conversation, showing interest in each other and sharing opinions. Performing music together, both in a planned and improvised way, promoted cooperative skills, turn taking, eye contact and the ability to give and accept praise. Composing together helped the children grow in confidence to express their ideas independently and respect each other's creativity. The possibility of performing their compositions outside the group was discussed and spontaneous "concerts" took place. On one occasion the

group moved to a mainstream class mid session and performed bell ringing for their friends in third class. The class then joined them with singing and rhythm exercises.

Finally the session would move to the Closing Phase. It was important to celebrate success and thank each other for the opportunity to play together. A closing song, game or musical quiz formed part of the ending ritual and participants were encouraged, in the week ahead, to share aspects of the session with peers and family members.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

The central aim of the project was to plan for the development of social competence in children with SEN. The acquisition and transference of interpersonal/communication skills, behavioural skills and assertive skills was set against a musical backdrop, incorporating listening, responding, performing and composing. It is hoped that this music based programme offered the students a safe and relaxed setting in which to interact with each other and practice their social skills with increasing confidence. The desired outcome of this planned intervention was that, as their self-confidence and social competence grew, the children would, in turn, transfer these acquired social skills to their play and interaction with others, both on the yard and in class.

Over the course of the following school year, the Circle Time group expanded to include two other students identified by staff members as needing an outlet for emotional worries. They were welcomed by the group and one of the students in particular expressed his feelings with percussion instruments, believing he could voice fears in Circle Time without repercussions from anyone. Other group members had the opportunity to bring their musical confidence to performances with their class groups. The fifth class boy went on to have a pivotal role in the music at his Confirmation Service. His commitment to his instrument, the rainmaker, was an example for others, challenging another student with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) to commit to learning the tuned bells as an accompaniment to the recorder and strings group in sixth class. The young student skilled in the violin learned to pace herself and played along side her class as they learned new pieces on tin whistle.

Music has a tremendous influence on human behaviour and plays a significant role in society, making it possibly the “best subject within a school curriculum for connecting students to society overall” (Kelly, 2002, p. 41). Performing music together is recognised as a collaborative, interpersonal activity, which facilitates the development of social skills, enhances self-esteem, builds friendships and helps the children appreciate the world in which they live.

Working backwards from the large class group, the enclosed yard and the noisy play-times to the intimacy of the music-making Circle Time sessions was, I believe, a way forward for us, as educators, “to develop the students’ confidence and self-esteem and to equip them with skills and knowledge that will serve them in their future lives” (NCCA, 2002a, p. 5).

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Appendix

Social Competence:

Interpersonal & Communication Skills	Behaviour Skills	Assertive Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Eye contact ➤ Listening & responding ➤ Turn taking ➤ Introducing oneself ➤ Joining in ➤ Asking/offering to help ➤ Giving & receiving compliments ➤ Apologising ➤ Expressing opinions ➤ Understanding gestures, facial expressions & feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Assessing a social situation ➤ Selecting an appropriate skill & assessing its effect on others ➤ Dealing with stress ➤ Expressing feelings appropriately ➤ Having a positive attitude towards oneself ➤ Engaging in responsible behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Representing one's views without becoming aggressive or withdrawn ➤ Balanced social play ➤ Co-operative skills in older students.

These skills can be targeted during music sessions. Appropriate musical games, songs and instrumental activities can be chosen from Appendix C to provide the children with opportunities to interact successfully.

Adapted from: Laffan, B. (2005) *SPHE 1: Handout: Overview*, Graduate Diploma in Special Education, Dept. of Special Ed., St. Patrick's College.