

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

## **Abstract**

There is a documented record of success in ensemble music making projects in mainstream education. Yet, the awareness and shared practice of ensemble projects in special educational needs (SEN) settings is minimal. Our aim is to support and promote the value of ensemble music-making as part of musical learning for SEN young people. Existing research into ensemble music-making in SEN settings is still in its early stages and further investigation is required to ascertain its impact. In their book 'Exceptional music pedagogy for children with exceptionalities' Blair and McCord (2015) present studies which outline the potential benefits of ensemble experiences e.g to support inclusion, motivation and the musical, personal and academic goals of individuals with SEN. In order for SEN individuals to access a holistic music education with opportunities equal to that of their mainstream peers, this research needs to be disseminated and applied in the music education and SEN sectors.

Over the course of a year we have provided 30 music sessions to three ensembles of SEN individuals, across KS2-4. The participants needs included PMLD, SLD and ASD. The ensembles were led by two workshop leaders and supported by teaching assistants. Each group comprised 6-12 participants. Music sessions enabled instrumental and vocal music making, as well as composition, improvisation and performing skills. The participants were observed throughout the year and their musical and social skills, as well as their engagement in the ensemble sessions, were monitored. Six students were further assessed through a framework of musical development: 'Sounds of Intent' (SoI)<sup>1</sup>.

Results suggest a progression of musical skills, engagement and social awareness. The group setting encouraged peer-to-peer learning, including responses that may not have otherwise been inspired or observed, e.g through individual lessons or teacher-student dialogues. Through our research we demonstrated that musical skills with SEN individuals can be enabled and progressed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://soundsofintent.org/about-soi>

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

through ensemble work, providing access to an essential part of musical learning and experience as demanded by the National Plan for Music (The importance of music, 2011).

Our research recognises that ensemble music-making for SEN individuals is a valid and essential part of a young person's musical education. It also supports recent findings into the potential benefits of ensemble experiences and provides a pedagogical approach for practitioners (*soundLINCS*, 2016). However this field requires further research in order to support and broaden musical learning pathways in special education.

## **Introduction**

Making music with others is a valid part of any person's music education and research suggests that group musical experiences may benefit both musical and wider learning (cf. Hallam, 2010; Eren, 2015; Jellison, Brown & Draper, 2015). It has the potential to promote learning through peer relationships, as well as develop musical, communicative and social skills (Darrow, 2012). In mainstream education, there is a documented record of success in ensemble music making projects (cf. Green, 2014; The importance of music, 2011). Yet in SEN settings, the practice and awareness of, and the participation in ensemble projects is minimal (Sharp, 2015). Perspectives from music educators also suggest that training and support for implementing group musical experiences in SEN settings is insufficient (Whipple & VanWeelden, 2012).

Musical learning in a group setting is a requirement of the National Music Plan (NMP) (The importance of music, 2011:7). However, SEN children are hugely underrepresented in music ensembles (Sharp 2015:17) and research into the musical experiences of students with special education needs often focuses on music as an intervention and its potential therapeutic gains, rather than the educational benefits of musical learning. In order for SEN individuals to access a holistic music education with opportunities equal to that of their mainstream peers, the impact of ensemble music making on SEN students needs further investigation and documentation.

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

The NMP also expects that all children will have the chance to learn music in and out of school, with a range of hub partners supporting the musical progression of an individual from the ages of 5-18. The role of music hubs is to implement the NMP working in partnership with schools and other community organisations to provide this provision. However, young people attending SEN schools may encounter additional barriers to accessing musical learning pathways in comparison to their mainstream counterparts and may not have the same access to their music hubs and therefore an inequality in opportunity.

This paper will discuss Music Making SENSE's (MMS) group music making project, which explored the musical and social development of SEN students learning through ensembles. Music Making SENSE is a delivery partner of Lambeth Music Hub, whose role is to make connections with SEN schools and to look at the inclusivity and accessibility of music provision in Lambeth.

## **Context**

The principles underpinning Music Making SENSE's ensemble project draw on the recorded benefits of group music making and peer learning in mainstream education. The efficacy of ensemble learning has been acknowledged by the Department for Education (DfE) through the educational aims advocated by the NMP and through the continued, and considerable, investment in ensemble programmes such as In Harmony<sup>2</sup>, El Sistema England<sup>3</sup> and the National Youth Music ensembles (The importance of music, 2011:4). Research suggests that ensemble music making can have a positive affect on the musical, social and individual development of the group's participants. Coffman and Higgins (2012) suggest that our intrinsic need to form bonds with others and the communality of music, inspires ensemble practices and the sharing of music. When assessing the 'In Harmony' ensemble provision in Liverpool, Burns and Bewick (2013:4) found compelling

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sistemaengland.org.uk/in-harmony-lambeth/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sistemaengland.org.uk>

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

evidence for ‘holistic and enriching musical education resulting in a positive impact on the personal, social, emotional and educational development of children and young people.

For many years, community music practices have drawn on the social motivators of music to enable learning and engagement for everyone, including those who experience barriers to participation. The inclusive nature of informal group learning is increasingly gaining recognition in mainstream education, and we have seen this development through initiatives such as Wider Opportunities<sup>4</sup> and, more recently, Musical Futures<sup>5</sup>; a programme across key stages that encourages musical learning for all (i.e. mainstream and SEN young people, and those in challenging circumstances) through ensembles.

Within ensembles there are specific musical skills that can be harnessed as a direct result of interaction with others. Ensembles enable participants to learn together and perform together, and share a sense of achievement. They also enable participants to:

- (i) understand group dynamics
- (ii) develop leadership and supporting roles (Lord, Sharp, Harland, Mehta & White, 2016)
- (iii) develop skills in turn taking through solo, sectional and whole group playing
- (iv) develop performing and listening skills.

Ensembles can be an open and inclusive setting for learning. When well-managed, they enable participants of all abilities to engage and contribute towards a shared activity (Lord et al., 2016). Therefore the accessibility of this form of music making lends itself to SEN education, and creates a fantastic opportunity for social learning, overcoming the challenges of group work which may be experienced in other areas of the curriculum. Current educational practice is already benefitting from the impact of social ecology, including practices within SEN settings

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/413347/Music\\_in\\_schools\\_wider\\_still\\_and\\_wider.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413347/Music_in_schools_wider_still_and_wider.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.musicalfutures.org>

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

(Jellison, 2012). Yet, despite the accessibility and equality promoted by learning through ensembles, and the research that suggests the benefits on musical learning and individual development, SEN young people are underrepresented in ensembles (Lord et al., 2016). Consequently our project aimed to enable opportunities for SEN young people to play in ensembles, to encourage group music-making in SEN settings and to share our practice to support others in creating and leading ensembles.

As well as the potential for whole group gains, ensemble music making can promote musical and individual development through peer interaction. In their research on peer tutoring in special education, Kaufman and Burden (2004:114) state that young people “with significant and even profound learning disabilities can function very effectively as peer tutors and learning agents for each other, and that they actively enjoy working in this capacity”. The nature of ensembles supports opportunities for peer interaction and peer-to-peer learning. Ensembles in SEN settings can be particularly effective for musical and individual development as potential social challenges faced by individuals with SEN may be less of a barrier in a musical environment e.g. the importance of comprehending verbal and non-verbal communications diminishes as music making provides alternative channels for communication (Darrow, 2012). In response, these musical interactions can be acknowledged in a variety of ways, including language and music, or positive behaviours modelled and or supported by peers.

## **What does holistic music education look like:**

In 2011’s ‘The importance of music: a national plan for music education’ the government outlined their vision and demands for the musical education of all young people across England. The plan included four key areas of experience (The importance of music, 2011:7).

- (i) Music education across the age range and supported both in and out of school,
- (ii) National Curriculum music in all maintained schools for all five to fourteen year olds
- (iii) Whole-class ensemble teaching programmes for ideally a year (but for a

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

minimum of a term); opportunities to play in ensembles and to perform; clear progression routes available and affordable; and for a singing strategy to ensure every child sings regularly.

- (iv) Music technology used to enable, deliver, support and extend the good teaching of music.

Our project aimed to address some of the inequalities of musical experience within Lambeth. Whilst not commonplace in all Lambeth SEN schools, it is not unusual for schools to provide music technology experiences, and thanks to technological development, continuing professional development events, community music leaders and organisations such as Drake Music<sup>6</sup>, there is a growing field of research and practice in this area. Therefore our project focuses on ensemble practice and participation, and opportunities ‘in and out of school’. Our practice also includes other musical experiences we feel are essential: the opportunity to experience a range of instruments, to encounter devised music, and to compose, as well as to improvise. This enables the participants to have an experience on par with their mainstream counterparts, as well as to take ownership of their creations and to respond in the moment.

## **Method**

Our project focused on the creation of three ensembles. The ensembles took place in two SEN schools in Lambeth; one in a primary school that drew together students from across Key Stage 2 (KS2), and two in a secondary school formed by students from two different classes (one from KS3 and one from KS4). Ensembles ranged in size from 6-12 participants depending on participant needs and levels of staff support available. All of the ensembles were supported by two music leaders and several teaching assistants. Staff at each school received mentoring in musical and support skills, provided with practical skills for music making, and a guide to identifying

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.drakemusic.org>

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

musical responses. Each group included participants with a diagnosis of one or more specific needs including ASD, PMLD and SLD.

Each ensemble received thirty music sessions over the course of a year. Sessions lasted for approximately forty-five minutes. Each session followed a similar structure, with space to tailor and vary activities to the needs and contributions of the participants: Welcome, rhythmic activity, composition / improvisation activity, farewell. Within each stage of the session a number of compositions (devised or original) were utilised, and repeated over the course of a school term. Each stage promoted and stimulated a variety of participant skills, which have been noted in Appendix 1. Over the second half of the project, participants completed their 'Explorer Arts Award'<sup>7</sup>, a flexible, accredited qualification that in the case of our participants required them to encounter the music taking place within their community, to respond creatively to the music they experienced and communicate their responses to others.

## **Results**

We collated several streams of data: 1) from the staff of one school to investigate the impact of our professional development training 2) assessment of 76 students from across the two participating schools using an accessible skills framework we had developed to enable school staff to assess musical development 3) six participants were assessed using the SoI framework.

### **MMS Participant Assessment:**

Across the two schools 90% of participants showed improvement in musical skills (vocal, physical and instrumental responses assessed across 5 different activities - hello and goodbye, movement and vocal warmup, rhythm, skills consolidation); 0% showed a decline in skills.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.artsaward.org.uk/site/?id=2301>

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

Participants were assessed over three terms (including a baseline measurement) for musical skills, using a scale of 0-3 with a total of 40 marks available. At the secondary school the average improvement score was +3.47, students from communications (i.e. needs were predominantly SLD and ASD) classes improving by +3.5 marks on average and PMLD +3.44; the average baseline score was 24, with communications students scoring 32.77 on average for musical skills and the PMLD students 14.25. At the primary school participants on average improved by +4.97 marks, with communications students advancing by +5.2 marks and PMLD students +4.37; the average baseline mark for all students was 17.93, for communications students 19.82 and PMLD 15.8.

Participants were also monitored for engagement and social awareness. At the secondary school, on average engagement improved by +0.35 marks, with PMLD students showing greater social awareness on average at +0.69 marks and communications students +0.05. At the primary school engagement improved by +0.4 marks on average with communications students showing greater average engagement at +0.45 and PMLD students +0.28. At the secondary school, social awareness improved by 0.2 marks, with PMLD students making great advancements scoring +0.31 on average, compared with an improvement of +0.11 for communications students. At the primary school, the average improvement for social awareness was +0.33, with communications students improving by +0.38 on average and PMLD students +0.22.

There was no relationship between the gain and frequency of participation in musical activities, as each participant developed at their own speed.

## **Sounds of Intent (SoI):**

Six students; 2 from each ensemble (4 secondary and 2 primary displaying a variety of needs), were further monitored using the SoI framework (NB one participant left the project after two terms). All participants saw improvement in at least one area (reactive, proactive and interactive music making). Out of the 18 scores, 13 showed an improvement of at least one stage. There were

## **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

no trends as to the occurrence of students progress; in each area this happened at different stages of the project for each individual.

The secondary students were the most 'reactive': all increased by at least one stage over the course of the project. Minimal changes were exhibited by the primary school students. Further case studies would be required to explore the significance of this but it should be noted that both of these participants experienced problems that affected their engagement in the project including absence and behavioural developments. With the exception of one primary participant, all students showed a great increase in their intention to create sound and the musicality of those sounds. This result suggests that group projects that include composition and improvisation activities have the potential to inspire and develop individual creativity and musical learning. In term of interactivity, all but one primary student showed improvement in this area. One of the students with PMLD showed no improvement and the other a small gain of half a stage. The remaining students, who were diagnosed with ASD and SLD, improved by over one stage 1. These results suggest that group music making encourages interactivity, responding, listening to and communicating with others, and being inspired by others. The SoI framework does not currently monitor whether these responses are as a result of peer or teacher-led interactions but the results do indicate an increase in social awareness through ensemble music.

### **Staff Results:**

Results suggest that schools are facing several challenges in leading musical activities themselves. We surveyed all 39 staff; teachers and teaching and learning assistants (TLAs) at one school regarding training. On average the teachers had just over an hour of music training during their PGCE and the TLAs less than 15 minutes training. Until our project, no staff member had received any music professional development training. 62% of TLAs and 50% of teachers had studied music until the age of 14 years; 38% of TLAs and 40% of teachers had studied music until the end of primary school. Only two members of staff had taken a GCSE in music; none had studied

## **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

further. These results indicate a lack of training and skills required for teaching music, and therefore, it is unsurprising that there is a lack of ensemble teaching in SEN schools.

Our data indicates several issues and areas for development:

- 1) SEN school staff receive very little if any training in music delivery and planning, resulting in a lack of confidence and skills in teaching the subject. The consequence is a workforce that in some cases is ill equipped to deliver the demands of the NMP without external support, demonstrating the importance of and potential for the role of music hubs.
- 2) There were clear advancements made as a result of our one year music making project. The SoI results indicate changes can be temporarily inconsistent but over a longer term show improvement. This is particularly important for PMLD students who tended to need more time and space to engage in a project and to then respond to it; ASD students tended to show more immediate results, but further time would help demonstrate the efficacy and longer term impact of ensemble music making. However, through consistency and an awareness of our project limitations, even those facing the most difficult challenges to participation have been able to maintain their engagement and participate successfully in the ensemble experience.
- 3) Assessing the subtle responses and incremental developments, and quantifying the magnitude of one response in comparison to another is an exceedingly difficult task. Through our assessment tool we were able to quickly demonstrate to teachers how to track musical progression. However, we were unable to capture the wide range of reactions and developments. SoI is a useful assessment tool generating a large amount of data. However, in order to extend SEN ensemble research we need to be able to differentiate interactivity between making music in pairs and a group, and responses resulting from peer to peer learning in comparison to teacher-led dialogues.

# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

## **Discussion / Conclusion**

Working in an ensemble setting with young people with SEN can present challenges which may impact whole class activities within SEN schools. Challenges may include behavioural difficulties, sensory sensitivities - including sound sensitivity - and social and communication challenges when working with others. Research supports the idea that a musical environment may overcome many of these challenges and provide opportunities for students to succeed in ensemble experiences (Darrow, 2012). Planning and implementation of any ensemble music programme needs to take these potential challenges into consideration. Recommended strategies to overcome these challenges and support individuals in engaging effectively in ensemble activities may include communication with staff and teachers about behaviour, education plans in place to support individuals, a clear lesson structure, consistent learning environment, visual cues and communication systems (cf. Eren, 2015; Blair & McCord, 2015; Hourigan & Hammel, 2009).

The aim of this project was to start to address the inequality in music education for SEN young people, particularly those educated in SEN settings. Whilst in terms of practical implementation our project has been localised to a small number of schools in Lambeth, our objective is to develop a pedagogical practice that can be emulated nationwide. In order to do this, there are several areas that need to be supported: developing stronger partnerships between music hubs and SEN settings, up-skilling music leaders and SEN staff to enable ensembles in SEN settings, and the development and dissemination of training resources and research. Therefore we have created and shared a Toolkit<sup>8</sup> for use by SEN teachers and music leaders, developed in response to the training we offered SEN teachers and support staff in our participating schools, and blogged discussion points from our project.

The results from our project support and promote the importance of ensemble music making experience for SEN young people and highlight both the challenges and considerations for future

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.musicmakingsense.com/youth-music-project>

## **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

research and practice. In the future, we aim to create further ensembles and widen the scope of our work to include a longitudinal study into musical pathways for SEN young people. Also, by showing the value of ensemble practice for SEN young people, we hope that music hubs will not only increase the inclusivity and accessibility of their existing programmes but also, where necessary, implement new programmes so that every child in their borough has an equal opportunity to learn music.

# Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education

## Appendix 1

Stages of session	Type of activity	Skills
Welcome	Group perform a song. The song welcomes each participant individually and encourages the group to sing or play along to pulse / rhythm to unite everyone. The song is important in signalling the beginning of the music session and the structure to follow.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- whole group music making</li> <li>- peer awareness</li> <li>- turn-taking</li> <li>- listening</li> <li>- responding to the music</li> <li>- supporting others</li> </ul>
Rhythmic Activity	<p>Supported by vocal repertoire, the group perform songs using their voices and / or percussion instruments. The repertoire enables the introduction and practise of improvisation skills as each participant leads a solo before returning to whole group playing.</p> <p>For some groups, this activity may include the use of notation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- whole group and solo music making</li> <li>- turn-taking</li> <li>- listening</li> <li>- leadership and supporting others</li> <li>- improvisation</li> <li>- responding to the music of the group and or individuals</li> <li>- peer awareness and interaction</li> <li>- specific musical skills such as pulse, duration, form, dynamics and tempo</li> </ul>
Composition / Improvisation	Starting from a theme, set repertoire or a student-led idea, the ensemble create an original work. Throughout this work there are opportunities for participants to perform together and solo, inspired by their improvisations or compositional ideas.	<p>As above, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- improvisation and composition</li> <li>- verbal and non verbal-communication of ideas</li> <li>- in addition to the specific musical skills above: timbre, use of melody and harmony, genre, lyric writing, syncopation, instrumental techniques, duetting.</li> </ul>
Farewell	Same repertoire as the welcome activity. Participants are encouraged to contribute vocally as the repertoire signals the end of the music session.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- whole group music making</li> <li>- listening</li> <li>- responding to the music</li> </ul>

# Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education

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# **Learning Through Ensembles: Developing Research and Shared Practice in Ensemble Music Making for SEN Young People, and Promoting Equality across British Music Education**

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