



Sound and Symbol

Evaluation methodology

For this project we collected sources of both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data was collected by an external research team led by Professor Graham Welch and Professor Dominic Wyse from the UCL Institute of Education. Using a control intervention design, the researchers completed a range of assessments with the children both pre- and post-intervention that cover aspects of executive function, communication and language skills, and emergent literacy. Qualitative data comprised weekly journals completed by the music practitioner (MP) and early years practitioner (EYP), observations by the Creative Futures Creative Producer and additional observations by the research team.

The early years settings in which we worked faced significant challenges in staff recruitment and retention. Unfortunately, two of the EYPs with whom we were working left their settings part way through the project which made delivery and data collection more challenging. Mobility of children in and out of the setting was also an additional challenge in terms of pre- and post- testing. The quantitative data could be strengthened further by working with an even larger sample size and by including an active control. However the triangulation of data from multiple sources is helpful and the combination of qualitative and quantitative data complement each other; we are able to draw broad conclusions about effectiveness across the programme, while also being able to understand some rich and valuable stories about the impact for individual children and the 'real world' context of the project.

Analysis and interpretation of data

Throughout the project children had the opportunity to engage with a broad range of musical and story book-based experiences including adult-led group work and play with provocations.

Outcome: Musical Development

Practitioner journals show children creating new lyrics for songs in group time, composing their own songs, developing understanding of concepts such as tempo and dynamics, using these to make creative choices and direct group playing, developing skills in starting and stopping together, and anticipating key moments in the music.

Observations by the external research team show similar findings, particularly in the areas of tempo, pulse and group coordination:

"Musical skill development was clearly visible during two further observation time points later along the intervention programme timeline....At the late stages of the intervention, there were multiple examples of children drumming in time to the pulse of sung songs, as well as in groups. Children were also heard changing their drumming speed to enable them to fit in with others."

(Alice Bowmer, Researcher)

Children's self-identity as musicians also seems to have been reinforced through the project. As they realised their music was valued, children shared what they liked to listen to at home such as child R who shared a song from Fortnite, which then facilitated a conversation about an older sibling at home. At setting E, children were given responsibility for collecting all soundmakers in the setting, setting out all the equipment in new areas and redesigning their musical environment. We hope this will provide a positive foundation for children to explore and develop in their musical lives.

Communication development

Children's communication skills have also developed throughout the project. One EYP commented:

"We have seen such huge changes in the children's language and development and that is all thanks to the music sessions you have taught us. We have received such positive feedback from parents also".

(EYP, Setting F)

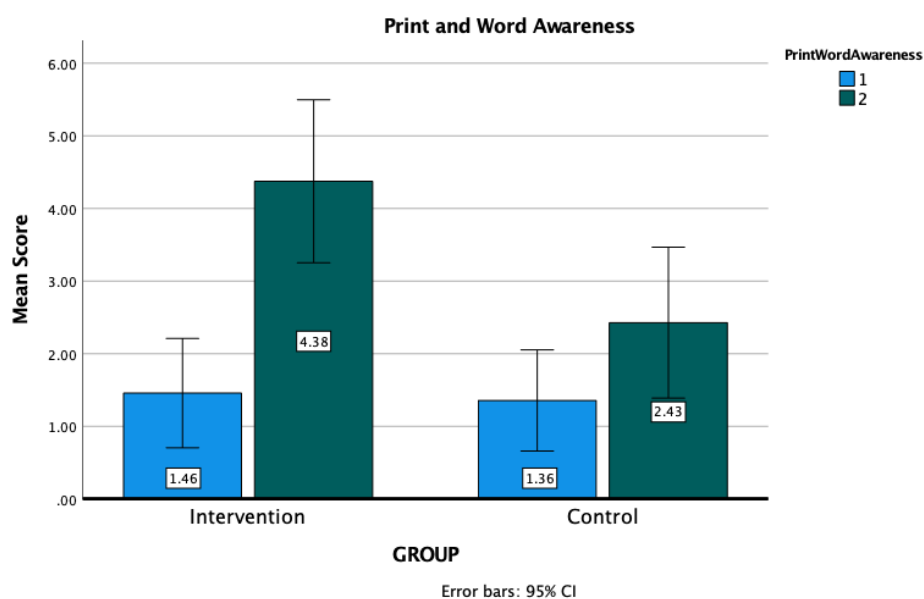
Qualitative sources suggest that the impact of the project has been particularly significant for non-verbal children. Journals kept by the MP and EYP across the four settings include numerous examples of non-verbal children having the opportunity to be highly communicative, express themselves and make

connections: using gesture to direct the playing of a group, taking part in instrument conversations, and using movement to create duets with a partner.

Child A, who had previously been selectively mute in the setting, even spoke his first words saying "let's do it again!" in reference to a music activity. In future weeks he used his own name and that of the MP to organize turn-taking in a musical interaction. In another nursery, a previously non-verbal child joined in singing a song in group time, his first verbal expression in the setting.

Across the whole sample, results for the children in the study were well below the national average on the two standardised language assessments completed by the research team, when initially tested in September 2021. Children in each of the four nurseries improved on all measures by the end of the study; some increase would be expected over time of course but intervention groups showed a greater improvement than the control groups on all tasks, which suggests the project has contributed to accelerated progress.

The graph below shows results for the print and word awareness task, where increase in development was particularly significant:



At follow-up testing (post-intervention) the intervention group scores significantly improved, bringing their achievement levels close to UK average on the standardised language assessments.

Outcome: Early Years Practitioner Development

EYPs involved in the project have developed their skills and confidence in music-making with children. Journals show that while the MP led group times at the start of the project, over the weeks EYPs started to co-lead and then take over group times. One EYP made a resource pack including everything she had learnt to share with colleagues so that they could try the same activities. Importantly, the resource pack reflects not only activities and songs to try but also pedagogical approaches such as to allow space for children to input their ideas into the song.

Discussion of findings

While it may seem self-evident, this project has reinforced the value of a musically experienced and confident adult in supporting children's music-making. A practitioner journal describes how Child K was singing a song over and over again and so the MP started accompanying them on the ukulele. Child K asked for it to be repeated so many times that the MP began to change the key each time and noted that each time Child K was able to adjust her singing to the new key, even without the MP singing along. It is possible that Child K is already very musically experienced and may sing a lot at home or in other settings in their community and it is difficult to establish causality in respect of development in this example; it does however demonstrate the musical skills that can be useful to an adult in not only recognising a child's competence but also in scaffolding an activity to provide, in the moment, an appropriate further level of challenge.

Using music to encourage engagement with books also seems to have been effective. At the start of the project, books weren't offered in setting A as staff felt that children couldn't be trusted to look after them properly. The MP's musical work with books has made them much more popular with children and towards the end of the project the MP reported that if she sat anywhere near the bookshelf, *"children would carefully bring me book after book and helped me to finish sentences, make up songs around the story and ask me detailed questions about the contents"*. Again, it is difficult to establish causality here as perhaps any adult interacting enthusiastically with books, musically or otherwise, might have had the same effect. However, from journals and observations, we wonder whether there are some aspects of music that may help:

1. Music can provide a structure for repetition, which may breed familiarity and then confidence.
2. That repetition and regularity can provide a base from which change can then be introduced to bring anticipation, surprise, humour, challenge etc.
3. Our musical approach was very multimodal/intermodal and included activities that combined music and movement, mark-making, play-doh, small world etc. This allowed us to link the books to children's interests, competencies, schemas.

We had originally planned to hold an introduction day for all the MPs and EYPs involved. Due to staffing challenges however we were unable to do this and so we offered individual meetings with each EYP in their setting. Although this allowed us to be more responsive to our partner settings those meetings had to be shorter than the full day we had planned; when we compare with our experiences on other projects where EYPs have had a fuller introduction to the project, the methodology, rationale, and musical approach, we feel not having such an extensive grounding may have created a lag in EYPs become as deeply involved in the project as quickly as they might. In future projects, where possible we would reinstate this fuller introductory programme.

The research team have suggested providing EYPs with access to a bank of songs, musical materials and videos in order to support their learning and this is something we will trial in future projects. We are mindful however of balancing this with promoting the importance of the process of the musical interaction in the moment and not just reproduction of the song as musical object and will be working on how to achieve this balance in recorded/printed resources.

Conclusion

Despite a number of challenges, Sound and Symbol has had many successes. The emerging findings from the assessments carried out by the researchers are extremely promising and we hope that they will make a valuable contribution to the development of work in this area. These cohort-level results are also complemented by stories of what this project has meant for individual children and practitioners and the power that music has to create a space where people can understand themselves and others differently.

One EYP described how she often had to take children into the foyer because the classrooms were too full. There were few resources in this space and it was tremendously challenging for her and the children. As she worked alongside the MP, she began to use more and more musical activities she had learnt in the foyer. She said *"I feel like it's something which is fun for me, and the children enjoy it - now they are clamouring to come outside with me"*. We are extremely pleased to have been able to contribute to this sense of joy in enormously difficult circumstances.



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