

## Learning together: connecting Higher Education with Soundwaves Network SW, Take Art.

This blog recounts a reflective discussion between Jane Parker, Soundwaves Network SW, Take Art (south-west) project lead, Dr Louise Webber, BA (Bachelor of Arts) Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree programme lead; Dr Karen Wickett, ECS academic; Chloe Chiplin, an undergraduate ECS student and Rachel Horrell, Doctoral music student. They share their experiences and learning during their involvement in the innovative Soundwaves Network SW, early childhood (EC) music programme.

### Setting the scene

Soundwaves Network SW is a three-year EC music education programme; led by Take Art Ltd, funded by Youth Music and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. An aim of the project is to develop a high-quality EC music infrastructure across the region. Key to this ambition is identifying and developing partnerships with Higher Education and Further Education (HE/FE) institutions. These collaborations provide opportunities to grow the future early years (EY) and music workforces.

University of Plymouth academics provide many opportunities in and beyond the curriculum for BA ECS and music students. These include Work Based Learning (WBL), student internships and Knowledge Exchange (KE) activities. WBL modules provide students the opportunity to embark on a placement, enabling them to make links between academic theory and practice, foster their reflective dispositions, and consider their career trajectory. Student internships are an extra-curricular paid placement that support students to develop their personal, academic and professional outcomes. KE activities enable academics to collaborate with partners to research and grow interdisciplinary projects.

ECS students have been involved in previous Soundwaves programmes. When designing Soundwaves Network SW, Jane and Karen were keen to try

something different. Karen's research findings suggest, to develop sustainable enriching EC music experiences, music students should also be involved in the Soundwaves Network SW. Building on this finding Rachel, a music PhD intern, joined Chloe an ECS WBL student.

Below they discuss their previous assumptions and changing understanding of children and EC music. Following this, Louise and Jane explain how the collaboration has contributed to their organisations.

### Student reflections

#### *Previous assumptions*

Chloe shared, 'Previously I believed that the adults would 'lead' sessions, and the children would follow. For example, by sitting in a circle singing, with the adult leads the songs. I also assumed that children need to play with musical instruments or to sing for it to 'count' as a music activity'.

Rachel shared, 'Prior to this opportunity, I had zero experience in an early childhood music and absolutely no idea how to interact with children. I had always believed that EC music consisted of singing rhymes in a circle and clapping; because how would children be "good" at music if they were not trained?'

#### *Considering new practices*

Chloe shared, 'During the first session, I found myself play partnering with children, rather than showing them how they should be playing with the objects – something I at first struggled with. It was clear that the children are the leaders, and adults follow their direction. It is important that we therefore always listen to children. As I do not play an instrument, I was nervous around music but watching the musician and the music student with the children provided me with more confidence'.

Rachel shared, 'The first session left me feeling amazed at how naturally musical children are, and how they did not need traditional musical instruments to be able to explore music and their musicality. I was fascinated how the musical rhymes helped children with their speech and language development, movements and listening skills. After these sessions, I spent time observing how different age groups (0 to 4 years) incorporated music into their daily routines. I noticed how the children "banged" on the tables in a steady beat, hit plastic cups and plates as if they were drums, and babies would hit/shake objects onto the floor in a steady beat – all without any prompting. While I left feeling amazed by what I had learnt, I also left feeling saddened at how the adults lacked confidence when it came to singing and engaging in musical activities. We are educated into believing that to be "good" at music, we must be a trained musician. It can be extremely limiting if all EY practitioners thought you need a music specialist to incorporate music into the early years setting'.

### Student learning

Chloe shared, 'Children are natural musicians, and we do not give them enough credit for the amount that they can do. Adults lack confidence as they think that they cannot sing to play an instrument, but this does not matter. It is important for musicians and practitioners to work together, as everyone has different experiences and knowledge. My understanding has gone from thinking music is sitting in a circle singing songs, to posting objects through a tube and noticing the sounds the children create. In my future practice, I will be more attuned to what children are doing, as my perception of EC music continues to change.'

Rachel shared, 'Without this opportunity I would not have experienced and learnt about EC music theory and how it is implemented in early years (EY)

settings. EC music has not been a feature of my undergraduate or post-graduate music courses. Collaborating with Chloe enabled us to combine our knowledge and learn from and with each other. Going forward, I want to research how music contributes to the experiences of very young children and early years practitioners and musician. I aim to an advocate for early years music by embedding it into my academic work.

#### Dr Louise Webber's programme lead reflection

Through deeper reflection, Chloe and Rachel were able to examine their values, uncover biases and previous ways of doing things (see Bolton, 2018 and Mezirow, 1991). They were able to shed light on previous understandings and through collaboration with others and a questioning, flexible approach they developed new insights which has led to altered practices. Both Chloe and Rachel have changed how they perceive children, now seeing them as powerful and capable individuals, able to take the lead and be a partner in music making. This has implications for their own personal development but also impacts the wider field as they interact with others within early years and music during their future careers.

The Soundwaves Network SW project compliments the vision of the ECS degree. We aspire for our students to be advocates for children and their families, to be innovative, creative and confident enough to practice differently. This unique placement, offered through the Soundwaves Network SW, has shown all participants the power of being curious, to ask questions, to observe and to step back from practice; reflecting with new eyes on what they are seeing and experiencing. These collaborations are so important for our ECS students, as they grow personally, academically and as a professional.

#### Jane Parker's SoundWaves Network SW Project Lead reflection:

When Take Art applied to Youth Music for support with funding a new three year Early Childhood Music programme (SoundWaves Network SW), we felt it was very important to develop an Early Childhood (EC) music education programme with training not only for the current workforce, but also for the future EY and music workforces. We wanted to support students in growing their conviction and understanding in the value of musical play and the belief that babies and young children should have the very best musical opportunities to learn and develop. Whilst also recognising key to the very best early childhood music practice is for musicians and practitioners (and children) to be partners in designing the curriculum. To fulfil this ambition, we turned to those working in universities, further education colleges and training providers. In collaboration with Karen, it was agreed to invite a University of Plymouth music student to join the ECS student on placement. We were thrilled when our EYFS project setting agreed to host the two University of Plymouth students (an undergraduate and a PhD student) to work alongside our music leader and their setting staff.

#### Concluding remarks by Karen

It became apparent the Soundwaves Network SW provided the space and web of collaborations between, ECS students, Music Interns, programme manager and academics to grow. A principle that underpins this web of collaborations is each member recognises the strengths that each person brings to the collaboration and draws on these to negotiate and construct understandings (Nakata, 2006) and ways of working. Just as it is important for the students to have the opportunity to connect with a wider community of early childhood music practice it is also beneficial for academics and arts and cultural organisations to connect and collaborate. These collaborations are not static but dynamic powerful opportunities for reflection and change. Thus, informing and shaping research, knowledge exchange, the music and ECS courses and Soundwaves Network SW, as well as the individuals involved.

## References

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