How Music Can Change Your Life

Unit 2 – Podcast Transcript

How music can change the lives of children, educators, and others working in schools by Dr Daphne Rickson

Kia Ora. I am Dr Daphne Rickson, Senior Lecturer at Te Koki, the New Zealand School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington, in New Zealand. And I’m a Registered Music Therapist. In this podcast I am going to argue that by creating musical cultures in our schools, we can change the lives of children, educators, and others who work in school communities. Bringing examples from research and music therapy practice I intend to demonstrate that music is a natural resource which can engage, motivate and enable student participation; foster collaborations; support identity formation, and lead to a sense of individual and collective belonging and well-being in schools. If all children were able to access such a resource, our world would be greatly changed!

But first, I begin with a personal introduction. I was a piano teacher and band musician when my daughter was diagnosed with a profound congenital hearing loss over thirty years ago. We attended a programme for hearing impaired and deaf pre-schoolers, where I was invited to co-facilitate a music programme to help these very young children to make sense of sound, to begin to vocalise, sing, and eventually to speak. I quickly noticed that the group music also seemed to help them to develop confidence, social skills, and a sense of belonging. This experience led me to music therapy training and later to work in several special schools and units which supported students who had various and often multiple physical, cognitive, social and emotional difficulties. I now have over twenty years of experience with music therapy in schools.

During this time I have noticed how motivated students are to access music; how hard they work to express themselves musically, and how often – when they are actively engaged in music – their achievements exceed the expectations of families, teachers, and others. Tony Wigram, a very well known music therapist, said over 15 years ago that music therapy was a place where students could reveal their potential to respond to other forms of therapy or intervention - and my experiences certainly seem to support this idea. Other researchers including Cochavit Elefant, Tony Wigram, Christian Gold, Martin Voracek, Judith Jellison, Louise Montello and Edgar Coons, were providing good quality evidence that music therapy could help children with disabilities to develop various skills and behaviours. And my own research also suggested that music therapy was a promising intervention to reduce aggressive behaviours exhibited by adolescent boys who had significant social and emotional difficulties; and to diminish the symptoms of ADHD.

However over the 20 year period when I was working in special schools and units, families and educators were increasingly arguing that children with disabilities had the right, and should be given opportunities, to participate fully in education settings of their choice. We began to recognise that all children had a right to learn at their local schools with their peers. Then in 2009, UNESCO published their Policy Guidelines on Inclusion. At the time, the philosophy of inclusion was mostly well received. Yet general classroom teachers seemed to lack the knowledge, skills and resources to work with the diverse range of students they found in their classrooms. It was crucial to stimulate discussions and actions that would encourage positive attitudes, and support the development of inclusive practices.

1 (Elefant & Wigram, 2005; Gold, Voracek, & Wigram, 2004; Gold, Wigram, & Elefant, 2006; Jellison, 2000; Montello & Coons, 1998)
Theories of ‘communicative musicality’ suggest that all humans have the ability to participate in music making and to develop their musicianship. So it seemed logical to assume that general educators would have the potential to engage in music making with students, and that there would be considerable advantage in doing so. As Colwyn Trevarthen said in an interview in 1997, “(musical) communication is not a matter of cleverness, it’s a matter of authenticity.” (p.64). Communicative musicality is a concept developed by Colwyn and Stephen Malloch to describe the qualities of mother-infant interaction. You will be able to learn more about this in another unit. Sufficient to say that from their work we can deduce that human beings are born with the motivation for sympathetic, cooperative, and musical communication, and that that musicality is present regardless of cognitive ability.

The idea that musicality is innate, and that humans are naturally musical, is reinforced in the work of music therapists Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins, and Ken Aigen. These experts also argue that humans have an innate capacity and need to relate musically, that every child is engaged by music, finds it meaningful, and responds accordingly. Paul and Clive introduced the concept of “the music child” in the 1970s to describe the musical self that exists at the core of a child’s being, and from which other areas of functioning and awareness radiate. Music therapist Mercedes Pavlicevic talks about their theories and practices in full, in her podcast. It is important for me to reinforce here though, that their message that since musical experience and expression are inherent, beneficial human activities, people are highly motivated to participate in music. This desire to be involved is often the reason that people will come to music therapy, and why it can enable them to overcome some of their challenges. Within the ‘music child’ framework, music making, sometimes called ‘musicking’, engages the most central aspects of the person’s being.

Christopher Small (in 1998) and David Elliot (in 1995) both used the word musicking although Small included a ‘k’ in the spelling of it. These musicologists independently yet almost simultaneously put forward the argument that music is a diverse, global, human practice - not a ‘thing’, but something we do. They both argued that the act of musicking is an enjoyable and meaningful human experience essential to self-development, and we do it because it embodies our implicit musical knowledge. It provides us with creative, expressive, aesthetic, social and communal opportunities which are essential to human well-being. And they argued that the creation of meaning and beauty is not limited to great performers. Rather, throughout the world, people sing and play without musical scores, “drawing on remembered melodies and rhythms and on their own powers of invention”. People, generally, love to make music. It’s fun. Social psychologists Chris Leorch & Nathan Arbuckle argue that the pleasure associated with music making may be associated with our evolution as cooperative beings. That is, it may serve an important purpose in group living because it can influence the mood and behaviour of many people at once, helping individuals to meld into a coordinated group. 21:32

So why don’t we all just do it? David Elliott, whom I mentioned earlier, argued that the lived experience of musicking is an educational tool and that all people are not only able but also entitled to participate in music making and to develop their musicianship. Yet Western classical music has served to disempower and exclude all but a privileged or ‘talented’ few from participating. Musician and disability advocate Alex Lubet, takes this further, suggesting that the “fiercely exclusive nature of Western music, with its orientation toward ‘talent’, eventually discourages nearly all but the hyper-able from any role beyond passive listening” (p. 731). He goes on to suggest that winnowing out the ‘not good enough’ begins very young, sometimes even before formal schooling and a large majority of people are left to feel inadequately musical, musically defective, or musically disabled. And so, while music is an essential human
activity, it has become disconnected from our daily lives and many people are left to be consumers of music rather than participants.

I’m now going to introduce three contrasting examples of my practice-based research, to demonstrate how music can support the development of relationships and foster a sense of well-being in schools.

Working in a special school

The first involves the adolescent boys I mentioned earlier. These young men had significant social and emotional difficulties. Some had learning difficulties, but many of them had experienced early psychological or physical trauma which impacted on their ability to develop healthy relationships. Some displayed externalising behaviours including bullying, threatening or intimidating, serious aggression and cruelty; while others internalised their distress and confusion, were quiet, withdrawn, anxious, and had low self-esteem - often appearing, shy, and slow. Regardless of whether their responses were externalised or internalised they had difficulty making friends and were wary of adults in authority. They avoided tasks to prevent failure, and yet might also sabotage their own work to avoid praise because they didn’t believe they were worthy of it. Early attachment difficulties meant that they found it hard to trust others.

Yet they generally maintained a positive view of music and were motivated to engage with other people in a music context, even when they were resistant to verbal interaction. They came to have fun, and they would learn to cooperate with their peers because they wanted to create or perform a particular piece of music that needed to involve others. Those who engaged in music making usually felt better, could attend to others more readily, and could contribute to a reciprocal interaction. In time, they would begin to develop musical and other relationships based on mutual respect and trust.

Initially the boys would be able to focus on music as something ‘separate’ - not me, not you, not us – and this distance felt safer to them. But gradually the music would bridge the communication gap. With some boys we could talk about song lyrics, what they might mean to the composer, to other listeners, and eventually to the boys themselves. By sharing their own music, feelings, and life story though recorded music they could start to examine and let go of the negative projections they placed on others and learn to appreciate the things they had in common. Some boys would, at least initially, bring R18 or banned recordings which sometimes were difficult for me to engage with. However, regardless of their motives for bringing this music, listening to it with them in a non-judgemental manner was important to promote a sense of mutuality and to begin to develop reciprocal interaction.

We would also improvise music, and in doing so the boys would be offering a personal expression and practising the skills of communicative exchange. Often as they began to develop confidence they would want to learn a musical instrument or to do some song writing. We would find music that they could relate to, and ensure that it was simple enough for them to gain a sense of achievement. When learning an instrument they would need to accept instruction and evaluative feedback, to ask questions, solve problems, and practise set tasks. This helped them to improve their interpersonal communication, to develop tolerance, and to manage frustration. Their success also meant we could more readily draw attention to their growing motivation, positive attitude, safe emotional expression, and positive communication. Eventually they would be able to offer positive self-statements. Similarly, during a song writing process we would provide them with a clear structure to build on, and they gradually developed confidence to add their contributions. The ‘blues’ for example was a popular framework.
Supporting students who had very high special education needs

This work contrasted with the music therapy consultations I undertook with educators in mainstream schools who wanted to use music with students who had high or very high special education needs. Each of the teams I consulted with had identified a student that they felt would benefit from the enrichment of a musical environment, and these individual cases remained the focus of their consultation. However, we all noticed the ‘ripple effects’ of their music making. Those who were directly involved said that the musicking significantly enhanced their relationships with students and that the strategies they developed for specific students were helpful for many others. Most of the people who were involved in the consultations were not formally trained or experienced musicians in the formal sense, yet they became confident and relaxed about their ability to ‘musick’ with students in their care. They began to sing and play naturally; and learnt to be flexible with the elements of music in a planned way. Their students, in turn, were able to respond with maximum independence. Let me give you more specific instances.

- They noticed that young students who were difficult to manage in the school environment would respond positively if they were sung to. The students, who had limited opportunities to participate in the mainstream environment, were participating successfully in musical exchanges. The educators could foster musical communication by listening to students’ sounds and imitating or extending them. Students would attend if the lyrics were personalised; and they would respond more readily when a pause in the music invited them to respond.

- A previously inhibited teacher began singing to a girl who had severe disabilities. After closely observing her responses, she began to recognise and appreciate the subtle communication her student was offering.

- The educators noticed that when they worked with the students’ natural rhythms, and timed their music with what the students were doing, the resulting sense of synchrony communicated acceptance, togetherness, and belonging.

- Finally they noticed that the structure of music could give the students a sense of familiarity and provide security. But it could also be altered to challenge risk taking. And the repetition that is inherent in music could be used to help students to rehearse tasks.

Over time music became the foundation for new and enjoyable ways for educators to connect, relate, and to communicate, with all students, not only those with identified special needs. Team members who were directly involved in these projects developed an ongoing passion for using music as a communicative tool and their excitement inspired colleagues to work similarly, fostering a culture of music in their schools.

Singing for Well-being

The third project I am going to refer to is based at a school which was created from the merger of two primary schools in the aftermath of the devastating 2010 and 2011 earthquakes in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand. The areas where the schools were located was one of the hardest hit, with over 50% of the school zone designated “Red Zone”, i.e. temporarily or permanently uninhabitable. The school motto, ‘creating a new community school together’, is a reflection of the significant ongoing psychological and environmental challenges students, staff, and families face, including ongoing effects of trauma, new ways of doing things, job insecurities, high staff absences, working across two sites, homes being rebuilt or repaired, and substantial road works.
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Since the earthquakes, teachers have been engaging students in singing every day, specifically to enhance well-being, to help maintain a sense of community, and to promote enjoyment and readiness to learn. To facilitate the singing, they mostly use YouTube with lyrics on a screen, although one, a specialist music teacher, will often accompany with guitar or piano, and another will sometimes use guitar. Very occasionally someone will engage the children in unaccompanied singing.

The classroom singing repertoire is chosen mainly by the children, and the opportunity to choose is sometimes offered to individuals as a reward. Teachers encourage children to enter their favourite songs into Google Docs, where they examine them to ensure the lyrics are appropriate before producing a singing playlist. The students are enthusiastic about a wide variety of genres, yet also tend to choose songs with inspirational lyrics, and/or music they are connected with in some way, such as songs their parents like. Thus they have a strong tendency to “own” their music and to be proud when others join in with it. Teachers believe that the stories that songs tell are important, and often engage the children in discussion about what the lyrics might mean.

The teachers argue that students need to be allowed to participate in classroom singing their own way (e.g. listening, moving, as well as or instead of singing), and strongly advocate for a non-judgemental approach. The teachers suggest that children need to be passionate about what they are being asked to engage with and emphasise the importance of enabling children to choose what musical activities they will participate in, and how they will participate. The teachers demonstrate a passion for singing for and with children, and strongly believe that singing is good for their students. Interestingly, while they are disparaging of their own music skills, they are generally very relaxed about their facilitation of classroom singing. They argue strongly that music is for everyone, not just an ‘elite’ few, and that singing is an ‘equalising’, ‘accessible’ highly motivating and ‘connecting’ activity. Music is considered to be ‘natural’ in their school environment.

This passion, together with an enthusiasm for “having a go” and “seeing what works” has enabled singing initiatives and other music activities to be sustained within the ‘crowded curriculum’. Children are eager to participate in classroom singing, and the playground is full of joyful spontaneous singing. Despite the significant challenges this community has had and continues to face, school well-being data indicated that learners felt safe, valued and supported. Teachers, administrators, students and others have clearly developed a culture of music in the school and teachers strongly believe that music programmes, particularly classroom singing, have made a significant contribution to individual and school well-being.

The teachers’ rejection of a music education focus when implementing the specific singing for well-being programme, is clear. This is important because there is little evidence to suggest that traditional music education and curriculum activities lead to academic or well-being outcomes. Alex Crooke and Katrina McFerran argue vehemently that “wellbeing benefits do not inevitably flow from participation in classroom music” which focuses on achievement outcomes. Rather music programmes must focus specifically on wellbeing rather than curriculum, and be tailored to the needs and interests of school communities. Alex and Katrina note there is a recognised need to employ quality facilitators such as music therapists who have unique skills and training in creating the conditions that disadvantaged students need in order to interact with others and to develop meaningful relationships at school.

Music therapists Katrina McFerran and Helen Shoemark describe an individual case study of music therapy with a young man with profound and multiple disabilities which took place in a mainstream school setting. They highlight the centrality of caring relationships in school wellbeing generally, and the capacity that individuals with profound and multiple disabilities have for the development of relationships, personality, lifestyle preferences and emotional capacity – all of which are fundamental indicators of wellbeing. They reinforce the idea that it can be extremely difficult for classroom teachers to engage students who experience profound and multiple disabilities in curricula
activity. Nevertheless their human right to share relationships with others can and should be facilitated within the school context. Schools should aim for students to become independent well-balanced individuals who have a strong sense of self-knowledge and identity yet have respect, empathy, and tolerance for others.

Collaborations between music therapists and others in education systems are necessary to ensure music can be used more widely as a health resource in schools. Many educators working with children who have special needs do incorporate music in their work, while others lack the skills and confidence to do so. The persistent view that ‘being a musician’ implies training and experience in formal traditions, means that a large majority of educators may have had their natural musicality suppressed after experiencing little or no encouragement, or receiving discouraging comments, from significant others. When working with students who have special education needs they might be further disheartened by their students’ limited observable responses, or behaviours that are difficult to manage. Moreover, while Katrina McFerran, Grace Thomson and Lucy Bolger found that teachers were able to develop new individualised strategies which they confidently utilised within the classroom with children who have ASD, they also strongly suggested the teachers would need ongoing support to sustain their music making.

To sum up, music can enrich the lives of all who participate in school communities. As Alex Crooke writes in his review which is available within this MOOC, “musical participation offers opportunities to practice expression and understanding, …experience and recognise beauty, pain, love, and despair; and it has potential in helping students engage with learning in other areas”. Music is an essential human activity, yet it is evident that active music making is no longer embedded in our daily lives. Sadly many – perhaps even most – teachers and other professionals in school communities would not presume to have the necessary skills to interact with students in music. Yet musicking is a fundamental human activity, and we all have the capacity, motivation, and right to engage with it. Unfortunately again, many teachers would also argue that they don’t have the resources they need to manage the diverse students they find in their classrooms. Yet all young people have a right to participate genuinely and meaningfully in their school community. Music teachers, music therapists, and music lovers therefore all have a crucial role in supporting teachers and others in school communities to engage in musical encounters.

People with little or no formal training or experience in music can facilitate music experiences that will help students to engage with the school environment. Their use of music can be natural, communicative, and meaningful, and a pleasurable way to communicate with students, and in time they – and their students – are likely to become increasingly comfortable using their voices and bodies to communicate musically with others. This scenario signals the potential for a cultural shift which rejects the privileging of music for a talented few, and brings musicking – that is active music making – back into our daily lives. The act of musicking creates unique conditions in which staff, students, teachers, and others can come to know each other. This in turn leads to the development of inclusive communities in which participants attend carefully to each other, demonstrate sensitive respect for what diverse others are communicating, and have strong and positive relationships. Music therefore has significant potential to foster wellbeing in and of school communities, and in turn to change the lives of children, educators, administrators and families.
Key Messages (Not Spoken)

• Humans are born with the motivation and skills for musical communication – Musicality is innate
• People are generally highly motivated to participate in music
• Musicking is an enjoyable and meaningful human experience essential to self-development
• Music might serve an important sociological purpose, helping individuals meld into a coordinated group
• While all people have the ability and entitlement to participate in music, many people feel they are not good enough to do so. Teachers may not feel able to engage their students in music
• Students are highly influenced by the actions and interactions of others. Schools play a crucial role and have an enduring effect on human well-being.
• Nurturing school environments are significant contributors to the health and well-being of children and young people
• Music is non-threatening and can support adolescents who have interpersonal difficulties to build relationships with peers and adults
• Educators can, and should, be supported to develop the confidence to connect, relate, and to communicate with all students in music, not only those with identified with special needs
• Music has significant potential to foster the well-being of school communities and therefore to change the lives of children, educators, administrators and families.
References
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