

Practice-sharing case study

Developing a choir in an EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) Centre



Swindon Music Service (SMS) has been working with Riverside Centre EOTAS for two-and-a-half years, helping students who aren't able to attend mainstream school to make music through one-to-one and small group instrumental and band tuition, and a choir. This case study looks at how SMS developed a choir at the Centre – despite being told *'it will never work'* – what happened and what they learned.

About this case study

This case study has been written to share practice and prompt reflection, discussion and development of musical inclusion work. It has been written for music practitioners working with children in challenging circumstances, as well as funders and project leads/managers, as part of the legacy of Swindon Wiltshire and Gloucestershire's [Musical Inclusion](#) programme (see also last page).

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The story of the project

The Riverside Centre caters for Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils who are referred by their mainstream schools due to anxiety, lack of confidence, and low self-esteem. It's attached to Stratton Education Centre, an Alternative Schools Provision setting, which takes young people who are excluded or at risk of exclusion. Pupils attend in the same way as they would for school, and study a core curriculum – but with a focus on personalised learning and building confidence and self-esteem. The aim is to support pupils to reintegrate successfully into a mainstream setting or college.

Swindon Music Service (SMS) has been running a choir at the Centre since 2012, as well as providing music tuition to pupils in small groups and one-to-one (through guitar, keyboard, bass guitar and Handsonic drumpad). The work has two aims: to give students opportunities to develop music skills that they wouldn't otherwise have received; and to provide emerging music leaders with the chance to develop their skills for working with young people in such settings, as part of a trainee programme.

The challenge of creating a choir with a group of transient pupils

Although choirs are a common feature of mainstream school, it's rare to find one in non-mainstream educational settings, and particularly not with older pupils. Chris Mawdsley, teacher at the school says: "We had a few girls interested in singing, but they were very shy, so we needed some way of involving them outside of the one-to-one lessons." SMS Delivery Manager, Paul Rowe, approached Catherine Shillaker to lead the choir, as he'd heard about her work as a choir leader and a Special Needs teacher.

Catherine remembers: "A lot of people said we'd never make it happen – particularly because of the transient nature of the students. Some are there for a matter of weeks, some there for years. Many have days when they can't attend. But the head and one of the teachers, both of whom are musicians, were hopeful it could work".

Initially, Catherine, Paul, and a trainee, Louis Cormack met with students to find out what they wanted to do. Some were keen to join a choir but many just wanted to learn the guitar and keyboards. The school took a somewhat risky approach in response: "They said, you need to be in the choir if you want to be involved in the music. Their thinking was, many students may not have the confidence to try it out, when really they could benefit. It ended up being a good strategy initially, so students could then make an informed choice about whether they stayed. And most did."

Bringing choir and instrumentalists together



For the first year, the three music leaders worked at the school together. This enabled Catherine to establish her way of working as a music leader in this type of setting, with Paul's help and guidance. Catherine now leads the project overall as well as running the choir, and Zak Mabblerly, the latest trainee, leads the instrumental work.

The work takes place each Friday morning, currently for two hours. Initially, the choir was quite separate from the instrumental tuition: "When we first went in," remembers Catherine, "Paul and Louis used to take groups of twos or threes to have a band session. I used to help out with that bit, then there was the choir. But it was all quite separate. Now, the choir and band operate together some of the time too."

Although each term begins with Catherine and the trainee working separately with students, they now gradually work out what songs instrumentalists and vocalists might work on together. Sessions then become more integrated, leading to a performance at the end of term. Having the choir and instrumentalists working on shared pieces and towards a common goal is clearly part of the glue that holds the project together, despite the transient nature of students.

Focusing on the music that students want to learn: being flexible, responsive

Catherine says that letting students choose the music they want to learn – covers of pop, rock and urban music – has also been fundamental to the project's success: "You can teach students good music skills by using songs they like. Singing and playing songs that have meaning for them makes all the difference. It just means they're motivated to learn how to play or sing them well. If they feel able to come along and say, 'I really want to do this,' you've got them hooked!"

This may be particularly important for these students: "If you have an affinity to a particular song, on a conscious level you might not understand it, but you need to get something out of yourself by singing, playing or listening to it – that's why teenagers listen over

and over again to the same thing.”

Learning covers wasn't planned though, and came about in response to students: “In the early sessions, they'd ask Louis, our first trainee

who was 18, if they could play things like Red Hot Chili Peppers, and so over time we focused on doing covers in the instrumental work. And that helps me work out what to do with the choir.”

The process is harder for the music leaders, because it means they can't turn up with a set plan. Catherine also spends a lot of her own time writing and learning arrangements of current rock and pop music, but she says the results in terms of engagement are far better: “You've got to try things out, and be prepared to drop things. You might start out with eight songs but end up with three, because they're the ones that work, and suit the levels of experience. In a school, you tend to be driven to finish everything whether the pupils want to or not. You have to concentrate on the things that you can actually turn into something they'd be proud of.”

Taking it a step further to enable students to create their own songs has not been so successful: “We did try to do some songwriting. I managed to get some working in twos and threes writing some good lyrics, but then they completely bottled out. When we got together the next week, they'd lost confidence – they'd put themselves out there on paper, written something personal, and didn't want to take it further.”

Young emerging leaders: the benefits of rapport, and the challenges of discipline

Had it not been for the students developing a rapport with the trainee music leaders – who've tended to be similar in age and musical tastes – the project may not have developed in this way, or been so successful: “I think it's helped to have somebody young and cool in there. Students can relate to them and they feel comfortable with them,” says Catherine.

In the beginning, Louis, struggled with this: “He felt that being closer in age to them meant he wasn't firm enough with them: but I feel it was a good balance, as his presence helped them to feel comfortable, to see this as being very different from a formal education environment.”

Catherine was also concerned about how she managed this. In the past, she'd mainly worked with primary age children: “It's really different from being a teacher in a school, it's quite a fine balance between control that you have to have in a classroom, and being more relaxed in a music setting. Through this project, I've learned to be able to do that, but I couldn't have had I not had a teenage son. Because they're anxious and vulnerable, I have made the occasional mistake where I've been too strict. We don't know all of their backgrounds, and they can be a boisterous group. It's hard to know when to come down heavy and when to let it go, that's been a big learning curve for me.”

“We had a group of students who came to choir and were being very rowdy and messing about,” she continues. “With one of them, I said ‘If you carry on I'll need to ask you to leave’. She was a new pupil and she didn't come back – and she was friendly with a couple of students already in the choir, and they

didn't come back either. So that was upsetting. My policy is, even if you want to be inclusive, you can't allow people to be there if they're not going to join in in a positive way.”



Having more information about students

There was one young man in the group who Catherine remembers “was a difficult character, always wanting things to be his own way. All these young people have short attention spans, but with the music they usually learn good social skills, like listening and taking turns. This young man hadn't managed that, and he couldn't concentrate for any amount of time – but he's actually a good musician.”

He left the Centre, went to college to take his GCSEs, then returned in September and came back into the music sessions and choir. “He continued to behave in the same way, so I told him it wasn't acceptable and he shouted at me. I was finding a song that they'd chosen hard to learn, and he was rude to me about that too, and ended up leaving the music sessions. He wrote me a letter to apologise, and then I found out that he has Aspergers. Had I known that earlier, it may have changed how I'd handled the situation.”

“I do think there are times we need to know more,” she says. “There has been a lot of self-harming going on, and we only knew about it because the teaching assistant who was dealing with it was working with us. Because of the nature of the music, and what it may bring up for them, it would be helpful to know more.”

Again, having time built in may help: “... time to ask those questions, or to find out what school policy allows to be divulged. At break time, I talk to the staff socially and ask about the young people, but perhaps it needs to be a bit more formally built in. Or if there was an agreement with the schools that teachers need to have a dialogue with us about some of the young people.”

Building time for mentoring



Building in time, and formalising the relationship is also true of the trainee–project lead relationship. The three trainees have all had mentors independent of the project, but Catherine says: “It’s part of my role to coach and guide our trainees. It would be helpful if that was more formalised, I’d feel more responsible for their development and we’d make sure to build the time to talk either side of the session.”

However, building in that time has become increasingly difficult. “When we started the project we were given time at the start and end for reflection. But our hours have been cut and we’re now only actually paid for two hours, although we’re there for three hours.”

Making the work sustainable

The project has moved from major subsidy in year one (from Youth Music’s Musical Inclusion grant as well as in-kind support from Make Music Swindon, the county’s music education hub), to roughly 50 per cent subsidy in year two. From year three, the project will be funded largely by the Centre, with a much smaller scale subsidy from the local hub. Paul Rowe, SMS Delivery Manager, says: “This is in keeping with developing a healthy and sustainable legacy model. In order to keep this affordable by the Centre, we will probably need to make a slight reduction in the number of tutor delivery hours over the year – as has happened, already. But the reduction in teacher–pupil contact time will be small and we’re confident that the project will continue to thrive and deliver effective musical outcomes into the future.”

What’s worked: views from Chris Mawdsley, school teacher

Offering a short-term project initially helped mitigate risks “The free eight-week taster was ideal. There was enough anecdotal evidence to show that the pupils would engage with music – when we get referrals, the schools and pupils tell us what they’re interested in – we knew we had some musicians, and others who were interested in music. But we’re strapped for cash like everyone else, and so someone coming in with such a credible idea, laying out a very good plan, and then saying it’s free in the short-term was great. Paul was very professional, gave us options,

said if it doesn’t work like this, we’ll meet and we can change it. It covered every base and answered all our questions before we even had to ask them.”

It’s not always essential to have education-related outcomes “We thought carefully about what impact we were expecting. We’re under the same pressures as other schools to get GCSE results, but we look beyond that: we’re also there to support them holistically. We wanted them to join in, and have ownership of something that was theirs, and was relaxing and enjoyable for them. We have pupils here who find mainstream education a real challenge, and are behind academically, so putting those sorts of objectives in would have been counter-productive.”

Offering students choice and control helps with engagement and behaviour “It’s fantastically tailored around what young people want. SMS staff aren’t imposing themselves, because students are making decisions on what music they learn. They don’t really have any choice or control in other aspects of the school. We see music as a choice, so students are right on-side all the time.”

The music leaders’ ability to adapt has impressed staff “It’s important to remember we have a transient set of pupils: we may have someone for six weeks or three years, and the music service have always fitted in with whoever we’ve got. I hope that’s something they’ve learned from us: the ability to roll with what happens. We have days when none of our children turn up – we have to be flexible.”

The combination of more experienced leader with a young person works well “Catherine is very good and almost teacheresque in her approach, but that’s her role as choir leader. She very skillfully made sure that pupils feel comfortable: never embarrassed, never forced to sing on their own. She’s built a group identity, and the children feel safe as part of the group. Then they’ve had young people helping, who students can relate to. I’ve been impressed by the professionalism of the trainees and they’ve been very respectful of us as teaching staff.”

It’s important to leave music leaders to get on with their work, not to watch over them “It’s a very relaxed atmosphere, different to lessons. They’re very much separate entities, so unless there’s a problem, we don’t attend their sessions. There wouldn’t be the same atmosphere, the same trust, if we were watching over them and the students.”

What hasn’t worked well – what would you do differently? “The only times it hasn’t worked so well are down to us: when we’ve had changes in pupils or timetables – then it takes a bit of time to get things back in place, but they’ve always reacted very well. But hand on heart I can’t think of anything I’d particularly change.”

Outcomes

- What was originally an eight-week, free programme has developed into a two-and-a-half-year programme to which the school contributes more than 50 per cent and it is hoped, will soon be able to contribute close to full costs

- Around 23 students have benefited from the programme (42 per cent of the school's intake). Currently, there are 16, 10 of whom are choir members.
- Students' attendance improves on the day of the music sessions. Chris Mawdsley, teacher, says: "We've seen a marked higher attendance on Friday than the rest of the week and we know that's to do with the music."
- Behaviour is good in the sessions to the extent that pupils sometimes manage each other's behaviour: "The bonus is that the children all respect each other when they're singing," says Chris. "This feeling of togetherness has been skillfully managed. We've had pupils managing each other's behaviour, so they'll say, shush, we need to get on, and behaviour is generally good within music sessions. We've been surprised sometimes that pupils having challenging times in other lessons are as good as gold in music – that's because they have choice and control in music."
- Students' confidence and self-esteem has improved: "Young people have showed increased confidence, improved decision-making, and a willingness to express what they want," says Chris. "They have a trust in the adults they're working with. We've had pupils who are vulnerable and anxious performing in front of gatherings of people and that's a massive achievement for them."
- Some of the Year 11s, who've taken part since the start of the project, are applying to go to Swindon Music Academy, a post-16 college.



About Musical Inclusion

Musical Inclusion is a central part of the strategy of [Make Music Swindon](#), the county's music education hub. It involves ensuring that all children and young people who want to can make music.

This particular project was supported by funding from Youth Music through its Musical Inclusion programme, administered through a partnership between three music education hubs – Swindon, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire (SWAG). SWAG was one of 26 Musical Inclusion projects across England, tasked with ensuring that children in challenging circumstances were able to access music-making opportunities through music education hubs.

The work involved delivery of music activities with a range of partners, strategic working to ensure integration of musically inclusive practice in work with children and young people, and workforce development to ensure quality of provision.

Find out more

Musical Inclusion:

<http://network.youthmusic.org.uk/learning/musical-inclusion>

Swindon Music Service:

www.swindonmusicservice.org

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