



THE
MUSIC
THERAPY
CHARITY

Disenchanted Youth

John Lumley, Carolyn Steen and Tony Wigram introduce the Music Therapy Charity's Youth at Risk Project: promoting development, well being and potentials in young people.

The Music Therapy Charity (MTC) has recently undertaken a fundamental and far-reaching strategic reorganisation of its activities. This followed a commissioned external review of its direction and purpose, and the findings of the Ammerdown Conference it hosted in March 2007.

The Ammerdown Conference brought together the leading practitioners, researchers and academics of the Music Therapy profession, to consider the future direction of the profession, and to identify how best the MTC could deliver its mission to advance the field of music therapy and support its practitioners.

The message was clear. Music therapy is now a well-respected and accredited tool within health practice in the UK. Yet its impact is failing to reach many of those who stand to gain greatest benefit: while the qualitative evidence abounds, there has been no systematic evaluation of its effectiveness in many areas. These areas include troubled young people. Without this evidence, many of these vulnerable groups in need of music therapy's powerful positive effects will remain unable to access these valuable services.

The MTC, as the prime promoter and funder of music therapy research for over 20 years, therefore decided to direct its work on the short-term, focussed clinical research projects that are most effective and valuable in demonstrating impact. It has taken *Disenchanted Youth* as its first quinquennial project. Such projects are best delivered not within academic institutions, but on the ground, in partnership with the agencies able to observe and measure change at first hand –

schools, youth-services or care homes. This work will directly help vulnerable young people to access the support they need, while also benefiting the profession, as new jobs are created within the health and education sectors.

Disenchanted Youth

The urgent need for the systematic evaluation and documentation of the impact of music therapy on troubled children and young people was highlighted at the Ammerdown Conference. The MTC subsequently commissioned a literature search of this area: the report confirmed the paucity of evaluated research in the field, both in the UK and worldwide.

Music therapy and the disadvantaged youth

Music is a uniting force for all young people regardless of background or experience. Music therapy is the specialist use of music to encourage and develop social skills, communication and self-expression, and to bring about positive change through the non-threatening world of sound and play. The focus of music therapy is the building of a trusting relationship between the therapist and child or children, through interactive musical play. Both verbal and non-verbal interactions are encouraged enabling young people to reach their full potential. Research shows improvements in children's attention, communication, confidence, self-esteem and emotional well-being, evident both in music therapy sessions, and in the home and school environment. Due to the integral role that



music plays in people's lives, engaging in music therapy is often perceived as less threatening than participating in other forms of therapy.

Music therapists are State Registered clinicians who have undertaken training to masters degree level. They work as part of a multi-disciplinary team in order to maximize the potential outcomes of their intervention.

To date music therapy has been applied predominantly to the treatment of children suffering from profound and multiple disabilities or severely disabling conditions, such as autism. Extensive anecdotal evidence suggests that music therapy also has a powerful positive impact on vulnerable children, such as those targeted in this project. However, until this evidence is gathered and documented, it is difficult for schools to argue the case for introducing these services.

The MTC Youth at Risk Project

The aims of the Youth at Risk Project are to evaluate and document the value of music therapy in helping young people at risk: typically, these are children who struggle to express difficult feelings, who are failing to achieve their potential both educationally and socially, or who have difficulties in building relationships with those around them. The project will:

- provide the highest quality of music therapy services to vulnerable children in selected partner schools, for the duration of the project
- rigorously monitor and evaluate the impact of these services
- disseminate the outcomes within the health and children's services and music therapy communities

- promote best practice in applying music therapy within schools, initially across schools in London, and subsequently more widely across the UK.

Research hypotheses, to be tested within the trial period, are that the music therapy intervention will:

- improve attitudes and behaviour in children: demonstrated by i) a reduction in exclusions ii) a reduction in reported incidents iii) measurable changes in end of term reports, when compared with a group of children not receiving therapy
- reduce anxiety, depression, anger, disruptive behaviour and perceptions of difficulties in these children, when compared with a group of children not receiving therapy
- increase self-esteem and perceptions of strengths in these children

The project is being managed by a consultant advisory group of experts who are addressing the complex issues of experiment design – including the age of the subjects, inclusion and exclusion criteria, group size, consent, controls, ethical issues, the form of music therapy, the methods of assessment and analysis, and the subsequent dissemination of the results.

Both primary and secondary schools have been invited to participate, in order to include children aged 8-13, and to span what is an important transition period for both development and education. We aim to work with two or three partner schools in 2009-10 and a further two to three schools in 2010-11. The MTC has been working closely with the Anglia Ruskin University, Coram and other sites in the development of its



school base, benefitting from their experience in the care of vulnerable children, young people and their families. The analysis of the results is in collaboration with the Institute of Education.

An experienced music therapist offers music therapy to these children on the school premises – individually, in groups and, in some cases with their families – on a regular basis. The sessions are held within the school in order to counter any resistance or apprehension that children or parents might feel if asked to attend a specialist centre. This is in contrast to accepted practice, where music therapy has typically been offered to children in special schools, without the family being present.

The form of therapy is appropriate for each age group and cultural background. Initially, there is need for flexibility in this choice: it is essential, when working with individuals that have been excluded at many levels, that the chosen method does not simply exclude them again. Forms of activity that have proved effective are: computer composition, writing songs and raps, listening to CDs of their choosing, improvisation, and teaching and creating CDs.

The impact of the music therapy intervention on behaviour, attitude and potential, will be systematically evaluated over a single school term (12 weeks) for each group of children. The children will continue to access music therapy beyond this period but rigorous monitoring is limited to 12 weeks.

On completion of the evaluation and analysis, the results will be published and made publicly available via the partners' websites. They will be disseminated to relevant stakeholder groups (most notably the children's services and child and adolescent mental health services communities, and music therapy professionals) via publication, press releases targeted at appropriate specialist press and a conference.

Conclusion

This is an ambitious attempt to explore the practical value of creative music making within the context of music therapy as a means to improve self esteem and reduce anxiety and incidents of challenging behaviour in a young, vulnerable population. The Charity is currently investing £150,000 into this project, with research trials underway in Cambridge and planned in London and the home counties. Two terms of creating activity with therapeutic aims is considered enough to have some measurable effect, and while it is recognised that some of the population may well come from backgrounds where there has been years of limited support, bad influences and a lack of positive development, the remarkable power of music will be effective. It has a universal appeal for young people, and more than almost any other medium attracts kids from all backgrounds into motivated activity. The remarkable influence and success of programmes such as *X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* show us the continuing draw music has on all ages, and particularly the young. The future in schools still relies on a strong emphasis for reading, writing and arithmetic skills, but in many schools, particularly primary, it is recognised what a significant contribution music making makes to social behaviour, learning ability and positive motivation in children. The future for the MTC Youth at Risk project is for the quantifiable results of this study to lead on to further research, and the development of music programmes to meet the need of a vulnerable population. The initial funding for the project has been provided by the MTC, but fundraising, to ensure completion of the project to its full potential, is ongoing.

John Lumley

Chair, Music Therapy Charity

Carolyn Steen

Vice Chair, Music Therapy Charity

Tony Wigram

Chair Research Committee, Music Therapy Charity