



Early Years Settings:

The challenges of the diversity and changing environment

Our previous large-scale early years project i am here!! (2012-2014) had predominantly worked with nurseries attached to primary schools. The wide range of settings that were involved with the project WE ARE HERE!! presented some very interesting differences and insights into the great diversity of offers in the education and care of under-five's. Overall it is a very fragmented professional environment and this is coupled with a level of instability as a result of providers and the agencies who support them working in tight financial constraints due to underfunding. The settings that participated in the project included:

- Children's Centres (which underwent a restructure at a local authority level during the project)
- Private nurseries that are part of a larger chain or group of nurseries
- Private nurseries that operated as stand alone providers
- One that is attached to the hospital, serving the hospital workforce and local community
- Nurseries that are part of the local authority schools system

Within this diversity of organisational structures the settings also utilise a wide range of educational practice, including a group of outdoor forest nurseries, and two that specialise in providing bi-lingual early years education (English and Spanish). Most are based on current approaches to child-centred learning, though implemented in a variety of styles. There were a number of ways in which these wider issues within the sector impacted on the project, mostly around staffing and team development, long-term strategic planning for improving outcomes for children and families. Observation of other local authority areas would indicate that these issues are not specific to Hammersmith and Fulham, but are reflective of the general picture of the early years education sector. These are some of the factors that had to be accommodated within the structure and development of the project:

- Some settings are under such intense financial and/ or staffing pressure that their leadership did not have the capacity to consider engaging with a project that would put additional demands on their staff and what they considered to be their core activities.

In some cases this was great reluctance as the nursery could see the potential benefit of the project and we were able to defer their involvement to a later training course. We learnt that offering training courses more than once during an academic year allowed much needed flexibility.

- Restructuring of local Children's Centres and related services and the intense and varied demands on the teams at Children's Centres has a very tendency to generally undermine the confidence of practitioners and affect their ability to implement the songs and activities themselves. There are very particular challenges to the delivery of music activities for parents/ carers and children at drop in sessions, not least because the attendance is by its nature very fluid, and parents/ carers often see the sessions as a time when they can relax and sit back whilst the practitioners do the work. This leaves the children's centre staff feeling uncomfortable and isolated in trying to motivate the adults who are present to sing and be active.

At a strategic level the quality and strength of the partnership with the local authority services and relationships with the senior leadership was essential to there being no significant impact on the project from the restructure of services. At the level of delivery by practitioners discussing and

recognising the challenges they face in their centres is a useful first step, followed by including some specific strategies in the training that can be used to get parents/ carers active and joining in.

- The range of settings types and educational practice meant that in spite of the discussion and preparation with the Early Years Advisory Service in advance of the project we found that the systems used to track progress were in almost all cases different, which made it very difficult to generate any comparative data on the progression of children in speech and language and PSED across a series of settings. This was very different to what we had encountered with the nursery settings we had worked with on the previous project, which, as mentioned above, were all attached to schools. Those three nurseries were in three different local authority areas, yet were nevertheless using tracking systems that were easy to correlate with each other.

Within the context of WE ARE HERE!! we adapted our evaluation methods to the data that was available, but this issue is something that we will want to address differently in future in order to design evaluation methods that can gather a greater depth of data on the impact of the programme we have devised on children's speech and language and PSED.



About WE ARE HERE!!

WE ARE HERE!! was created to provide an outstanding opportunity for 850 children aged 2 to 5 in highly deprived and marginalised communities in the south of Hammersmith & Fulham to secure the development of their speech and language skills through a musical programme specifically designed to address deficits in this critical area of early years development and improve their long-term personal, social and educational outcomes.

We planned to achieve this by the delivery of a specially devised programme based on the highly effective i am here!! model created by Musiko Musika in 2012-14 which is an evidence-based approach to the use of music to achieve significant improvements to speech and language skills in early years. In partnership with the borough's Early Years Advisory Team and the Lyric Hammersmith, Musiko Musika set out to work with local providers and families to deliver a comprehensive project comprising in-depth training, development and support for 72 early years practitioners; the development and delivery of workshops for two cohorts of local children (2 year old funded and 3-5 year olds); parental engagement projects leading to a festival day at the Lyric; and a package of resources created in consultation with speech and language specialists and the local community.

About Musiko Musika

Musiko Musika is an artist-led music education and cultural charity, jointly directed by the musicians Mauricio Venegas-Astorga and Rachel Pantin who founded the organisation in 1998.

Our vision is that the wonderful and remarkable diversity of the world's cultures available in London, England and the world is creatively thriving and celebrated, and is valued and accessible to all as performers, creators, learners and audiences.

Musiko Musika has established itself as a unique and highly respected organisation using world music and the diversity of pedagogical approaches within those different cultures as a tool to connect with children, young people, families and the community and engage them with music as a powerful agent for social change, as a means of increasing our understanding of each other and giving creative and cultural expression to our lives. Our work is cited as an example of exemplary practice in music education and for the creative and social values of our approach to cultural diversity, encouraging and enabling participants to bring the sounds, songs and stories of their own cultural backgrounds into their music-making with us.

We are an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation, and are proud to have Baroness Christine Crawley, Baroness Gabrielle Bertin, Martin Morales and Richard Harvey as our very supportive patrons. We joined the Lyric Hammersmith's group of partner organisations in 2015, other partnership work includes EFDSS and Middlesex University, the publishers Victorina Press and the international production music company West One Music Group. As well as projects based at the Lyric our work takes place in Hammersmith and Fulham, and in schools and communities in other areas of London. Our NPO funded programme includes touring projects and collaborations in other regions of England. International work in Chile is also a regular part of our activity.

Project funders & partners:

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