



What Happens When the Musicians Leave?

Case Study of a Jessie's Fund Project to Develop Teachers' Skills and Confidence

Tom Northey

Abstract

This article describes a project delivered by Jessie's Fund, a UK charity which supports children through music therapy and creative music work. The project took place between January and July 2012 and involved staff and pupils from a special school in the north of England. The article describes briefly how music is delivered in special schools across the UK and explains some of the challenges Jessie's Fund has faced in having a lasting impact on how schools cover the music curriculum for children with complex needs. In 2012 Jessie's Fund partnered with a special school in the north of England to design a new approach which focused intensively on the development needs of staff. Jessie's Fund musicians visited pairs of staff over a period of six months to build their skills and confidence in leading music sessions with their pupils. The project was considerably more effective than some previous 'musician-led' activities and had a significant, whole-school impact. This article

describes the work that took place, the responses from the staff involved and how Jessie's Fund intends to use this learning for future projects.

Keywords: music; children; special needs; complex needs; special school; consultation; staff training

Tom Northey is the Soundtracks Project Manager at Jessie's Fund, a UK registered charity helping children with additional and complex needs through the use of music. Jessie's Fund works with children in hospices, special schools and in other settings nationwide, giving them access to music-making and to music therapy.

Email: tom@jessiesfund.org.uk

Background to the project

Jessie's Fund¹ is a UK registered charity which helps seriously ill and disabled children by giving them the opportunity to communicate, express themselves and develop through creative music-making and music therapy.

Established as a charity in 1995, Jessie's Fund initially (though not exclusively) concentrated on helping children in children's hospices, providing musical instruments, devising appropriate training courses and workshops for staff, and establishing posts for music therapists. As a result, creative music is now an integral part of life for most of the

children's hospices, where prior to our input there had been none.

In recent years, Jessie's Fund has also developed a programme of support for children and staff in special schools across the UK. Our 'Soundtracks' programme involves creative music-making and staff training, with the goal of increasing the range and quality of musical opportunities for children with disabilities.

Jessie's Fund was established in memory of Jessica George, a bright and musical nine-year-old, who in December 1993 suddenly became ill and was diagnosed with a rare and inoperable brain tumour. Her prognosis was very poor, but there was some hope offered by complementary treatment available in New York. Jessie's Fund was established to meet the cost of this treatment and

¹ See www.jessiesfund.org.uk

was named by Jessie herself, but she died in May 1994, before the treatment could be undertaken.

Jessie came from a family of musicians and when she died they decided that Jessie's Fund should become a pro-active charity dedicated to helping sick children through the creative and therapeutic use of music.



Photograph 1: A Jessie's Fund music session

Music in special schools in the United Kingdom

Since 2008, Jessie's Fund has worked intensively in over 60 special schools across the UK. The charity has also supported teachers from many more schools through training courses and conferences. While Jessie's Fund has never attempted to carry out any formal survey of music provision, the work in schools has provided the charity with a useful overview and significant anecdotal feedback. In brief, the picture that emerges of music provision in UK special schools is extremely varied.

Some schools for children with special needs have a rich offer, including classroom based music-making, music therapy, music as a 'cue' to the timetable, visiting musicians, extra-curricular music clubs/choirs, and even individual instrumental lessons for pupils. Other schools have some of these activities; unfortunately, many schools have a very limited offer.

Jessie's Fund works with schools to try to enhance their provision. Teachers who engage with the charity necessarily have a strong belief in the importance of music in their pupils' development. However, in many cases they feel they lack the skills, ideas, confidence or resources to make the most of music in their schools. Support from senior management is also a key factor.

It is worth noting that most special schools in England follow the National Curriculum² in delivering music. Teachers face a number of challenges in interpreting this for a special school setting and in assessing progress, particularly for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. These challenges formed part of the initial impetus for the 'Sounds of Intent' research project, established jointly by the Institute of Education, Roehampton University and the Royal National Institute for the Blind in 2002. With its launch as an online resource in 2012, 'Sounds of Intent' now offers schools a comprehensive framework to plan and assess musical development for children with learning difficulties³.

Jessie's Fund 'Soundtracks' programme

Since 2008, Jessie's Fund's core offer to special schools has been in the form of 'Soundtracks': a mini-residency, led by professional musicians with extensive experience of working with children with disabilities. The musicians work in a school for a period of five days, often split over a couple of weeks so as to maintain momentum without being overly disruptive to the school timetable. These mini-residencies have the overall goal of showcasing a number of musical ideas and approaches which the school can then take on and develop after the initial input. Every Soundtracks project also includes two twilight training sessions for staff, with the aim of sharing with staff a few simple techniques for leading music.

This model has proved highly popular with special schools for the quality of the musical experiences it offers to the children involved.

"The Soundtracks project gave the opportunity for some of our most vulnerable pupils to participate in a musical journey that no pupil in the school had previously experienced. Pupils with little speech or verbal communication, behaviour problems, and physical disabilities were given the opportunity to explore music through many different media, including instruments, music technology, and body exploration and vocalisations" (Teacher, Queens Park School, Lincoln).

Teachers also appreciate the projects as a source of inspiration and ideas. For many music teachers or music coordinators, getting the support of the rest of the staff can be a challenge: everyone is dealing with multiple priorities and curriculum pressures.

² See www.education.gov.uk/schools

³ For further information, see Welch, Ockelford, Carter, Zimmermann and Himonides (2009), and www.soi.org.uk.

External musicians, delivering an inspirational project, can help to raise the profile of music and remind everyone of its potential to impact across a range of developmental areas for disabled children. Jessie's Fund has frequently observed how important this musical 'boost' can be when it comes at the right time, leading to a new and sustained focus on music in a school.

Nevertheless, Jessie's Fund has become increasingly aware of the limitations of the five-day Soundtracks model. There will always be a limit to what staff can learn in such a short space of time, and in making the most of the visiting musicians' specialist skills, teachers can sometimes feel even more apprehensive about leading activities themselves. Thus the learning does not become embedded and both the school and charity are left asking themselves *'What happens when the musicians leave?'*

The case study: A new approach to working with staff in a special school

In autumn 2011, Jessie's Fund began a dialogue with the Head Teacher of a special school in the north of England. Previously, Jessie's Fund had delivered a 5-day Soundtracks project at the school and knew how committed the music teacher had been at the time. Now that the music teacher had become Head Teacher, there seemed a very real opportunity to develop the relationship.

The school is an all age special school for children and young people between 3 and 19 years old, all of whom have severe or profound learning difficulties. Currently there are 72 pupils on roll.

Music and the arts at the school are central to the curriculum and to the wider school environment. The school has twice achieved 'Artsmark' gold award and its arts provision has been recognised as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. As both music teacher and school leader, the Head Teacher was committed to providing rich musical experiences across the school. All pupils accessed weekly class music lessons led by a subject specialist music teacher. A music therapist visited twice a week, and some pupils also attended lessons with a peripatetic string tutor. In addition, there were regular visits by external musicians who led creative projects with the children.

Nevertheless, the Head Teacher was clear about the on-going challenges. The demands on staff time meant that it was difficult for every class and group to have input from the music teacher. There was also significant potential for other class teachers to lead music sessions themselves, to enrich their pupils' experience of music. A number of staff did in fact play instruments, but did not feel confident

enough, or equipped with the right techniques to deliver music activities.

The Head Teacher was also aware of the wide range of needs amongst the pupils, and the challenges this presented for delivering inclusive music lessons. For some of the children with more profound needs, small-group or even one-to-one activities were more appropriate. However, there was no-one within the school with the skills or confidence to instigate this kind of work.

From the outset, the Head Teacher was clear that any collaboration with Jessie's Fund would need to address staff development first and foremost, to leave a legacy of increased capacity within the school. This meant planning a programme of musical input which focussed on teachers' skills and confidence, with the goal of embedding new approaches. Jessie's Fund worked closely with the Head Teacher to design a training-based programme to achieve these goals.

The project structure

After careful consideration Jessie's Fund identified two experienced musicians (Hannah McCabe and Eve Harrison) to lead the project. Following an introductory session in January 2012 to meet the staff, the musicians visited the school for two-day blocks throughout the spring term. After an extended break, they returned for three further one-day visits in the summer. In total the project involved 9 days of work in the school.

Jessie's Fund had agreed to work intensively with four staff pairs, to help spread the learning across the school. In most cases these pairs included a teacher and teaching assistant, although in some cases two teaching assistants worked together. Getting the right mix of staff was important in ensuring the training benefited those people who actually had the capacity to implement the new approaches and ideas as part of their role. The Head Teacher selected the staff pairs, based on her own knowledge of their skills and, most importantly, their attitude towards music.

The project was designed so that each of the staff pairs could follow their own developmental journey based on their needs and interests, with the support of Jessie's Fund musicians. Each visit included some modelling of ideas by the musicians, discussion and planning with the staff, and finally the opportunity for staff to lead activities with their pupils. Constructive feedback was provided by Jessie's Fund musicians, along with clear worksheets as a reminder of the techniques which had been covered. These built up to become a 'toolkit' which was presented to staff at the end of the project.

In between visits, staff were encouraged to use the techniques they had learnt, developing new musical activities which they could show to the musicians on their next visit. The ambition was to have a final 'showcase' day in summer 2012 which would be entirely led by school staff.

The Jessie's Fund musicians

Jessie's Fund engaged musicians Hannah McCabe and Eve Harrison to jointly lead the project. Both Hannah and Eve regularly deliver projects for Jessie's Fund

Hannah McCabe is a freelance clarinettist and an award-winning solo and chamber performer. She works extensively with children throughout the UK leading outreach projects for music organisations such as Manchester Camerata, Opera North and Jessie's Fund.

Eve Harrison is a composer whose music has won various awards and scholarships and has been performed by ensembles such as the BBC Singers, Contemporary Music for Amateurs (COMA), University of York Opera Society, Edinburgh Schools Concert Band and the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) Symphony Orchestra. She delivers music and composition workshops for a number of music organisations and is Tutor in Composition at Yorkshire Young Musicians, as well as a guest composition tutor for the Junior School at the RNCM.



Photograph 2: Teacher leading a music session, with support from Jessie's Fund

The outcomes of the project

The project culminated in a day of open workshops and informal performances at the school, led entirely by school staff and observed by the Head, Jessie's Fund musicians and project manager, and other school classes. The high quality of the musical performances by the children, and the confidence of the staff leading them, was recognised by everyone involved.

Staff were asked to keep reflective journals during the project, and to complete written feedback at the end.

"The sharing on the last day was just stunning. What particularly impressed me was how delighted the staff were with what each other had achieved, as individuals, and with their children. One staff member who does not see himself as a guitarist, let alone a singer, did both in front of his peers. One of our very reflective teachers commented to others how empowering the session was for one of our girls with profound difficulties, who actually led the musical response of all others in the room" (Head Teacher).

The most remarkable element had been the journey of the staff involved. At the beginning of the project all four staff pairs were apprehensive about delivering music effectively with their groups. Some staff felt unable to lead any music, whereas others were unsure about where to take their lessons next. There was also some anxiety about what the Jessie's Fund project would involve.

"I was a little nervous to start off with as I was not sure what Soundtracks was or how it was going to help me develop my skills.... I was very nervous and worried about having to talk/sing in front of a group and new people" (Teaching Assistant).

"I was used to a more structured and boring form of delivery and was excited by the way the [Jessie's Fund] staff delivered to our pupils" (Teacher).

During the project the staff pairs learnt a range of new music techniques. Perhaps most importantly they gained from the Jessie's Fund musicians the confidence to build simplicity, repetition and flexibility into all of their music activities, moving towards a more pupil-centred approach.

"I learnt that it was not just 'OK', but beneficial to repeat music and take longer over an activity, allowing time to take the lead from the pupils. I

was also shown ways to improvise/adapt, and make up pieces of music to make them more age appropriate for our group. This also meant we were able to theme our music around a topic – in this case, numeracy” (Teacher).

“It was nice to have the freedom to ‘roll with it’ and take the project down different avenues directed by the pupils or the way they did or didn’t respond” (Teacher).

“After a few sessions we learnt that H. liked listening to singing, and for us to keep the lesson running smoothly. B. liked a strong rhythm being played and R. was happy to keep a beat on a drum or tambourine with assistance from staff. Soundtracks has helped us develop in trying new musical techniques with pupils and getting them to express an interest in certain aspects” (Teaching Assistant).

“It was too easy in the earlier sessions to think that working on one rhythm or sound would seem, shall we say, a little boring and too repetitive. I learnt, as time went on that this was ok. It wasn’t for me to change the dynamics, just because I felt uncomfortable. Letting our pupil take the lead gave her a voice and a way to communicate. This in turn gave all of us a sense of freedom, with no boundaries” (Teaching Assistant).

In feedback following the project, all the staff involved were clear about the impact of the training on their own skills and confidence, and had plans to build some of the approaches into their future planning.

“It has been a real privilege to take part in this project. I hope to continue with these activities and use these approaches with other children in my class in the future. It will be interesting to develop these ideas and build on them. Here’s some great results!” (Teaching Assistant).

“As a music leader I feel that I have gained in confidence to lead a small group, using the techniques we used during the project. I also feel confident to talk to other staff about what we achieved during the project, on an individual basis, or as a whole school team. Not everything we tried during the project was successful, even with the professional input of Eve and Hannah [the musicians], so this has given me the confidence to try new ideas and not be too disappointed if they don’t come to fruition” (Teacher).

“We thoroughly enjoyed the project and felt that it has given us confidence to deliver music to our pupils and present it in a more free form. We are already building the techniques into our teaching. We have found a number of songs suitable for us and have worked on the music to accompany this. We are looking to use these

across the curriculum for these pupils. We have taken ideas from the group sharing event we had at the end of the project” (Teacher).

Impact on the pupils

While the focus of this project was on staff, children also benefitted from the activities. Staff were encouraged from the outset to reflect both on their own learning and the impact of the work on individual children and groups. This heightened awareness of how children were interacting through music was one of the most useful skills to learn. In their written feedback, staff recorded several instances in which the pupils demonstrated a level of engagement well beyond expectations.

“Pupil A (with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder) using the microphone to sing a song he knew, speaking clearly for the first time to us...then singing the whole of the ‘*ha ku ta me*’ song after only hearing it once!” (Teacher)

“Pupil B (with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) learning to control herself to conduct the other pupils musically, showing awareness of volume and tone” (Teacher)

“I was surprised how interested and gentle the child I worked with was with the guitar. I was very aware of her good sense of rhythm for drumming but had not thought of offering the guitar to play. She strummed and plucked the strings gently whilst I changed the chord patterns and sang. She also showed a definite preference for a nylon string guitar to a steel string one” (Teacher)

“The ‘Intensive Interaction’ activities using the drum were particularly pleasing. Being familiar with the concept helped, but I had never thought of doing it through the medium of music. This was particularly good when working with a child who makes very few sounds with her voice. It also was very positive when a child with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties ‘led’ a group of adults in a percussion session by controlling the pace and intensity of the music” (Teaching Assistant)

It was clear from staff feedback following the project that these new skills and approaches had been fully taken up by the staff involved, and that they now felt confident to lead both one-to-one and group music sessions themselves, without the support of Jessie’s Fund musicians. The teachers were beginning to use music more widely across the curriculum, and as a tool to support the pupils’ broader development.

Longer-term impact

Jessie's Fund was keen to hear the Head Teacher's perceptions of the impact of the training project across the school, and whether the new skills and ideas were still evident six months after the project.

"In the immediate weeks after the project, all pairs continued doing small group/larger group work [...] Six months after the project, two of the pairs have continued and extended their work, so music-making is available to their class whenever they want to do some. One pair split up, as one of them moved class. However, [that teacher] has picked up the work within his new class. The other pair do a certain amount, although achieving one-to-one staffing for truly student-directed work is hard.

It's also released a more general feeling, that it's OK to have a stab at music, use singing to cue your class, make up songs, just get some instruments out and have a go [...] The staff have also asked if we can have regular singing in assembly – something I have wanted to do for ages, but it was so good the drive came from them!

Overall, it was an excellent project. The staff's own evaluations show how much they got from it. At our recent end of term talent competition, there was so much music making and singing (all rehearsed by class staff), it was wonderful" (Head Teacher).

Conclusions

This project was one of Jessie's Fund's most successful in terms of equipping special school staff with the confidence to lead music activities themselves, thus having a sustained benefit for pupils long after the professional musicians had left. Through an internal project evaluation, Jessie's Fund identified a number of key factors which contributed to the project's success.

1) The school leadership. The Head Teacher was not only highly supportive, but helped to define the project goals from the outset. Her experience as a music teacher was invaluable. However, also significant was her commitment to spreading music leading skills more broadly across the staff team, in order to meet the needs of the pupils.

2) The staff involved in the training. Identifying those staff with the enthusiasm and willingness to learn was key to the project's success. Prior musical knowledge was not essential, and indeed for some the challenge was to put aside their preconceptions of what music-making should look and sound like. This project was 'opt-in', and the strong commitment from the four staff pairs

was no doubt due to a wider school culture in which all staff feel valued, challenged positively, and supported to develop. It was also important to have both teachers and teaching assistants involved. They brought a wider range of perspectives and their distinct roles meant that the learning became embedded in a number of different contexts throughout the school.

3) Clarity around the project aims. From the outset both partners described the collaboration as a 'training project', rather than a 'music project'. This ensured that staff were clear that their own development was the focus, and there was no sense of teachers observing passively while the musicians led the work.

4) The structure of the project. Each visit to the school included discussion time with staff and musicians, away from the pupils. This was challenging to timetable, but vital for effective planning and reflection. Each visit also included the chance for the musicians to model an activity and then to observe the staff leading it, followed by a feedback session. The space between the visits gave staff an opportunity to try out activities on their own, sometimes discussing/sharing them with colleagues, and then reporting back. The project took place over seven months – a realistic time in which to build the relationship between staff and musicians and for embedding new ideas.

5) The musicians. It was vital to identify a pair of musicians with the skills to work effectively with a diverse team of school staff. The project required excellent communication skills, flexibility and a willingness to develop a deep understanding of the school environment. A broad set of musical and workshop-leading skills was essential, as it became clear that the staff pairs would need to follow four quite distinct journeys. The feedback from the musicians was that this project required significantly more 'thinking time' than projects which were more focused on achieving a musical outcome with the children.

There were aspects of the project which could have been improved. Communication of the project aims could have been better, with more time for the staff involved to have input to the planning process. The process of staff reflection could also have been improved. Reflective journals were discussed but never formally included in the project. These could have helped with both embedding learning and evaluation of the project outcomes.

Jessie's Fund hopes to build much of this learning into future projects. There will always be a place for time-limited, inspirational projects, which give large numbers of children new opportunities to experience and take part in music. The Soundtracks programme will continue to prioritise children's

music-making, providing life-enhancing experiences for pupils with disabilities and boosting schools' musical aspirations. However, Jessie's Fund will also offer a complementary strand of training as a 'next step' for schools. Using the experiences described above, the charity will help teachers to develop the skills and confidence to place music at the heart of school life, as part of a rich and varied curriculum which helps children achieve their potential.

References

Welch, G., Ockelford, A., Carter, F.C., Zimmermann, S.A., & Himonides, E. (2009). 'Sounds of intent': Mapping musical behaviour and development in children and young people with complex needs. *Psychology of Music*, 37(3), 348-370.

Suggested citation:

Northey, T. (2013). What happens when the musicians leave? Case study of a Jessie's Fund project to develop teachers' skills and confidence. *Approaches: Music Therapy & Special Music Education*, 43-49. Retrieved from <http://approaches.primarymusic.gr>