

Opening up music making for young people with complex and multiple needs

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Getting Things Changed

‘We want the music to speak for itself’



About the research

In 2012, the performance of the British Paraorchestra – the world’s first professional ensemble of disabled musicians – at the Closing Ceremony of the Paralympic Games was significant in raising awareness of the capabilities of disabled musicians. However, research findings have highlighted the lack of opportunities for young disabled people to play and perform in ensembles. One response has been the development of [Open Orchestras](#). Key to this is the recently designed assistive musical instrument, The Clarion, along with accessible repertoire, training and an evaluation framework.

This research project aimed to find out more about the practices and the communication which occur during *Open Orchestras* sessions, and to

inform and support the development of these new ways of music-making. To do this we explored *Open Orchestras* in two special school settings, in the South West of England in Summer 2017, for students who have profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). In each setting the young people focused on two pieces which they later performed to their school communities, parents and friends. Within each school, 6 consecutive music sessions and a performance were videoed. Interviews were also carried out with students who could communicate verbally, as well as other key stakeholders.

This research analyses the detail of how *Open Orchestras* work in special school settings.

Policy implications

- The Music Education Council, music education hubs and other national bodies leading on music education should include video extracts from this research to demonstrate how to support new approaches to inclusive music-making.
- *Open Orchestras* should be a central part of the school curriculum in special schools, fulfilling the goal of music-making for all, as well as providing the basis for a broad range of communication and skills development.
- *Open Orchestras* should be used to promote inclusive work between mainstream and special schools.
- The Department for Education should guarantee funding for the technology used in *Open Orchestras*, as well as the support packages and training for music educators and teaching assistants.
- Music education hubs and local council arts and culture departments should consider how to value and highlight musical progression routes and career opportunities for young disabled musicians, with the *National Open Youth Orchestra* as an ultimate goal for individual learners.

Key findings

- Traditional music making can be exclusive, but *Open Orchestras* has demonstrated how to effect change by reshaping instruments and repertoire around the needs and identities of young disabled people.
- *Open Orchestras* offers opportunities for young disabled people to take part in music-making not just as therapy, but as musicians.
- Video material showed how young people with profound or complex learning disabilities were communicating via music; they were also developing a broad range of accredited skills, related to independence, collaboration with peers, communication, confidence and leadership.
- Successful *Open Orchestras* work in schools was led by a key member of the regular school staff with musical skills and interest. A range of ways to start and stop playing music were identified in relation to group music making in these settings. These include routine ways of creating cues to start: hand gestures, and bodily positioning.
- Young musicians were supported by teaching assistants, who helped students to know what to do and supported their own decisions. However they also had to make sure the instruments were working. It was sometimes hard to do both things together.

Further information:

This research was part of a large grant, 'Tackling Disabling Practices: co-production and change', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ES/M008339/1, led by Val Williams. For more information about the project:

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/gettingthingschanged/about-the-project/>

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Further information about Open Orchestras and the Clarion are available from

<http://openupmusic.org/>

Published papers

Gall, M. (2017) Special Educational Needs / Disability: Innovations and Innovative Practices in Music Education and Music Teacher Education. In R. Girdzijauskiene & M. Stakelum (eds.), European Perspective on Music Education: Creativity and Innovation (pp.165-181). Innsbruck: Helbling.

Williams, V. et al., 2018 Understanding disabling barriers: a fruitful partnership between Disability Studies and Social Practices? *Disability & Society*, 33:2, 157-174.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1401527>



Open Orchestras is intensely individual. It's personalised around the individual young person: what they can do, what they want to do, who they are. But, at the same time, it works on a wider practice level, in which you're really trying to change a whole sector, by bringing together different practices ... and really changing people's perceptions.

(Doug Bott, co-founder of OpenUp Music)



 OpenUpMusic

