The Role of Youth Music in the Community

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Fellow of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust
2006
Contents

A little bit about me...

Music as an international language...

What I wanted to find out...

My research...

The psychological benefits of having music in your life

The physical benefits brought on by involvement in musical activities

The social benefits of being involved with youth music

LESSONS LEARNED

Suggestions

Itinerary

Contacting me and Acknowledgements
A little bit about me…

I'm a musician, singer-songwriter and youth music employee. In Bournemouth, I run “The Electric Project”, for Bournemouth Youth Service and Bournemouth Children's Fund; a peer led project offering young people free guitar tuition, recording and performance opportunities. We run regular sessions in which young people can “jam” with other musicians, learn new skills, and most importantly, enjoy themselves with music. Most recently, I have facilitated nine of our young peer teachers in delivering a series of workshops for the BBC Blast, teaching other young people musical and technical skills needed to perform a song in a showcase event.

I have also spent time running Baseline, helping young bands to develop and organising music events. One such event I organised was “Set 2 Stun” featuring 11 young Bournemouth bands playing to an audience of over 700 in a local club. The event raised money for the Mayor of Bournemouth’s Charity Appeal Fund and also supported the development of one young band in going on to perform alongside The Zutons.

I am currently co-organising the Rendezvous Festival, the first festival in Bournemouth hosted by young people for young people, aged 13-21 years, based upon the creative arts. The festival, for up to 5000 young people per day, will feature the talents of local young people in music, art, dance, and other artistic skills.

As a musician myself, I enjoy writing and performing my own songs, of an acoustic jazzy/blues nature. I like to collaborate with other artists and enjoy experimenting with a variety of musical styles. I’d love to get recognised for my music, but I will always be happy to play music just for music’s sake…
Music as an international language...

A song or piece of music can cut through any language, cultural or social barrier, relating to people of all ages, backgrounds and religions. Over the last 3 months, I have seen this more than ever.

Music goes back millions of years. Many believe that before they could talk, early humans used music as one of the first ways to communicate.

Going back a fair few million years, the most successful way for primates to survive in the jungle was to live in family units. The climate meant they were very hairy. Their hairy bodies allowed mothers to go about their daily business with their babies literally hanging onto them. Mothers would always know that their baby was safe.

Gradually the primates began to move onto the savannahs. The climate meant that they lost their hair and babies could no longer hang onto their mother whilst she worked. It became vital that the mother developed some way to go about her work whilst still being able to communicate with her babies if she put them down. Music was born; sound became a form of communication between mother and child.

When living in the jungles, early humans would have spent about half of their time grooming each other. This was an important way for them to socialise, and to strengthen bonds and friendships. The loss of hair meant grooming ceased to be part of their lives. The early humans began to use noises to communicate and socialise with one and other.

With time, primates began to stand upright, which changed the position of the larynx in the throat, allowing them to make more complicated vocal sounds. The primates had to develop a sense of time and rhythm, learning to communicate, in order to hunt effectively, and essentially, in order to survive.

Nowadays, if we look at cultures all over the world, music is often a baby's first introduction into society. Lullabies exist in homes across the world.
What I wanted to find out...

I've seen the value of including music in one's life, both through my work and in my own music, but I wanted to find out why it is so beneficial and how it impacts upon others.

Within my report, "The role of youth music in the community" I wanted to find out what benefits music can bring to an individual's life, how music can bring a community together and help them to value young people, how music is used to boost young people's self-esteem, how it increases happiness and how youth music can involve the wider community.

I wanted to learn from projects in New Zealand and Australia; what experience others have of the positive impact of music in their lives.

Since I work within the youth music sector at home, I wanted to bring back ideas for my own work; ways to empower and engage young people, and to make youth music as enjoyable as possible.

My research...

The benefits derived from musical involvement can be categorised as psychological, physical and social gains. I will talk about these benefits accordingly, though it's worth noting that in the vast majority of projects which I visited, participants benefited in all three of these ways.

The projects I have visited have shown me how the benefits of youth music are widespread throughout the community. Young people get so much from being involved, but so do proud parents, others in the community and peers of the young people involved. The benefits gained from being involved in music appear to be expansive; from well-being to interculturalism, financial stability to boosted self-esteem.

I already had a strong belief about the importance of music in young people's lives, and have come back having learnt new ideas, shared my own and gained new perspectives about the role of youth music...
The very first project I visited was in Rotorua, New Zealand. Da Bomb Shelter, co-ordinated by Steve Holmes, an enthusiastic youth worker, is a community youth centre which has hosted some fantastic youth music events. I was lucky enough to visit around the time of Youth Efx, an event for 11-17 year olds featuring the talents of local young people, from live bands and dance performances to vocal and dance battles.

What struck me more than anything was the support given by friends and peers in the audience towards performers. They were so proud of their peers, and enjoyed nothing more than telling me how many national competitions the Crucial Movement Dance Crew had won, or how exciting it was that Deadly Alliance (a fantastic local young band) were about to have their song “Maori Boy” released to the New Zealand public. The confidence gained from having your peers support you in that way seemed vast; after all, it is often the opinions of those closest to your age which matter the most.
At the Redfern Community Centre in Sydney, I met Tania Bowra, a passionate and dedicated music leader. The Redfern area suffers from high levels of unemployment, resulting in considerable social problems. The area is populated by a large number of aboriginal people, and the unemployment issues can be traced back to the unjust and unfair manner in which aboriginal people were treated in the past. It was a joy to see the dynamic music activity taking place within the Redfern Community Centre, engaging participants from the local area. Tania’s workshops allowed local people of all ages to develop a skill in a musical instrument. The self-esteem which all participants gained from simply being good at something was easy to see. Many of those involved in the workshops were developing a passion they might not otherwise had had the chance to express or explore.

This expression through music or development of an underlying passion quite simply makes people feel happy.

ArtsEdge, run by Fiona Taylor, in Perth, is promoting a program called Artists In Schools. The aim of the project is to bridge the gap between professional arts, the local community and the classroom. Schools host a visiting artist (ranging from dancers to musicians, puppeteers to animators) thus providing teachers an opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge in new approaches to teaching. Working
with professional artists, young people have a chance to be “good at something”, to be part of something important in school and to get recognised in the creative arts, all of which boost students’ confidence levels. Within ArtsEdge, there are opportunities for young people to apply for grants to develop their own arts; giving them a sense of achievement and ownership for furthering their artistic skills.

Whilst in Melbourne, I was lucky enough to meet a really positive man, Jon Hawkes, of Community Music Victoria. CMV base their work around singing with others. They train volunteers from within the local community and help them develop the skills and confidence needed to set up and run singing groups. Their sessions involving no auditions, give everyone the chance to have a go, no matter what their background, age or ability and enable them to express themselves from the moment they walk through the door. This is done by basing the singing on improvised music, in which a song is learnt line by line, with no pre learnt lyrics or sheets of paper to hold. (In a similar manner to when you hold an instrument and sing, a piece of paper acts as a security blanket or a barrier, without which it is far easier to develop confidence). When applying this principle to working with children, it is often the case that rather than telling a group what to do, you simply give them permission to have a go. As you can imagine, participants take a great deal of pleasure in singing at these workshops. It promotes happiness, leading to the release of Serotonin (an endorphin associated with pleasure) which promotes a person’s physical health and well-being...
The most obvious health benefit to young people engaged in musical activities is the fact that whilst they are taking part, they are in a safe environment. In all Youth Projects, staff and volunteers must have a Criminal Record Check, to ensure a young person’s safety. The buildings/areas which are used for youth activities are both drug and alcohol free, further protecting young people. For example, Zeal in Wellington, New Zealand, gives young people a chance to attend live gigs in an environment aimed at those under 18 years, with no alcohol, drugs or smoking permitted. Zeal allows young people to enjoy the "live band" experience, with a professional show, sound and lighting, but with the added protection of it being a youth venue.

The other potential health booster is demonstrated in Da Bomb Shelter, Rotorua’s Community Youth Centre, mentioned earlier. The centre has successfully combined a Youth Centre running musical activities, with a medical centre, run purely for young people. This is much more friendly and accessible to young people who would be visiting the centre for other activities. Young people have one place in which they can access educational, medical and fun social activities, building good relationships with staff and knowing any information they share will be held confidentially. Youth music projects have the potential to support young people’s physical needs by either having an adjacent medical centre, or referring young people to the appropriate place to go. Young people often open up to those they are in regular contact with and trust, for example youth music workers.

To me, the most prominent health benefit comes directly from making or listening to music. As mentioned before, Community Music Victoria supports singing groups which encourages participants to have a go and express themselves with no criticism. The resulting pleasure or happiness from this musical involvement is linked to health in a number of ways.
There is an ever increasing range of evidence supporting the theory that happy people are often healthy people. The release of the hormone Serotonin, which occurs when people are happy is stress busting. Serotonin is proven to be released into the brain when people sing together. This hormone is immediately instrumental in making people happy. Community Music Victoria works on the principle that the primary determinant to well-being is a sense of belonging, which is reflected in their “everyone can sing” approach. If you feel connected to those around you, you become less likely to get ill, and more likely to have a positive outlook in life. The ideas relating to the benefits of music to health are well documented; the Victorian Health Promotion Fund is the main source of funding for Community Music Victoria.
The social benefits of being involved with youth music

It is often the social benefits surrounding youth music which are the most obvious to see.

In a simple way, being involved in musical activities in a group naturally lends itself to socialising. Young people socialise with peers and adults involved in music groups. Music can bring people together and encourage them to socialize. Zeal, based in the Global Cafe in New Zealand hosts Artisan Dinners, inviting local artists to network with each other and develop artistic relationships. This is a form of developing teamwork and interpersonal skills, and is an important platform for artists in Wellington.

As well as providing networking opportunities, Zeal trains and mentors young people in the skills needed to host musical evenings, for example teaching the skills needed to be a sound engineer or event organiser. In fact, many of the projects I visited encouraged young people to take an active role within their projects, developing skills which they can go on to use within their careers or future training. This is another social aspect of youth music. Employment and financial stability in the futures of young people is very important. Using skills such as those developed within Zeal, may help young people go on to further education within schools or colleges or even use their skills in a future career.
The Soundhouse, at the Power House Museum in Sydney offers digital music skills to a wide range of young people. They run sessions specifically aimed at young people who are at risk from dropping out of school. These sessions give opportunities for expression to disengaged young people who when allowed to express themselves, often turn out to be incredibly creative. SoundHouse integrates Key Skills into these musical activities e.g. numeracy, literacy and ICT skills, as well as generic employability skills. Through music, SoundHouse is able to contribute to young people’s essential skills for employability and a financially stable future.

Music should be accessible to everyone, regardless of individual differences. The SoundHouse has developed the “Special Access Kit” enabling “students with severe physical disabilities to join in with more physically able students to make music and perform musical compositions together”. This is an exciting example of a music project aiming to be inclusive, and offer equal opportunities to everyone.

In some projects, music is used not only to enable young people to develop their passions, but also as a distraction from crime. In some areas with few activities for young people or a high level of unemployment, music can be an inspiring and positive use of time, reducing anti-social behaviour and crime that young people may have otherwise be involved in.

Music is recognised as a global form of communication, which is perhaps why it lends itself so naturally to bringing different cultures together. The Maori culture in New Zealand is wonderfully vibrant and has led to the creation of some fantastic music. Rotorua is a town with a high population of Maori people so it is no surprise that an event run by the community centre Da Bomb Shelter plays host to such beautiful and impressive music, played by some highly skilled young musicians. Their events, such as the Youth Efx, feature music from a variety of traditions, and are heard by an audience of young people from many cultures. Inter-culturalism within such projects allows
young people to celebrate diversity and traditions from different cultures. The Haka Hula Hop event they run is a festival which enables Polynesian, Kapa Haka and Hip Hop dance styles to come together in a celebration of cultures.

In many countries, young people are often portrayed in a poor light in the media. For this reason, in the eyes of some adults, businesses or councils, young people might not be seen in a positive way. Da Bomb Shelter in Rotorua uses its events to create a positive media drive about local young people and draw in support from local businesses and MP’s.

Attitudes towards young people need to change, and the fantastic work that young people do should be recognised. Young people put so much into the community, volunteering and performing their music, and projects like those in Rotorua are working towards building a bigger appreciation of young people from the wider community. Music is a wonderful tool for allowing young people to develop a social identity and to participate in projects involving their wider communities.

I wrote before about Redfern Community Centre and the fantastic work they do in engaging local people in positive activities. In an area of high unemployment, learning new skills is valuable to the community. The centre also works with other organisations to promote and celebrate diversity in Sydney. There are regular events hosted in Redfern to bring different cultures within the community together. One such event is “Rock the Block” which featured rock, Indigenous youth and reggae music. “As well as raising money for community facilities (like a women and children’s dance studio) the events have also brought thousands of people to The Block to hear community leaders speak about Indigenous issues, advance knowledge of improvements needed, and to experience the community’s cultural spirit for themselves (while enjoying great music).”
LESSONS LEARNED

Holding youth music events, where musicians can be watched by their friends often leads to other young people in the community looking up to their peers as positive role models. Young people support each other in achieving their goals and feel proud of their peers, strengthening bonds within a community.

Learning an instrument not only boosts a young person’s self esteem, but offers them a form of expression. Everyone has different skills and talents, and learning an instrument might offer a less academic young person the chance to “be good at something”

Bringing a professional artist into a school or youth setting bridges the gap between professional arts and the local community, and offers young people and teachers/youth workers new and exciting ways to develop their skills and knowledge in specialist areas.

Musical activities can be enjoyed by people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds; all participants can gain self-esteem from having a go and developing a passion they might not otherwise have had the chance to express and explore. Projects can offer opportunities to all young people who want to get involved, and tailor what they do to fit individual needs.

Young people should be safe whilst attending youth music events, free from drugs, alcohol and doing something positive with their time.

It is possible to combine running musical activities, with other services young people might require such as access to a medical centres, educational or social activities. If young people build a good relationship with a member of staff, they are likely to trust them and ask for additional support they might need.

Happy people are often healthy people. Enabling participants to have a go and express themselves results in pleasure or happiness which is linked to health in a number of ways. The release of the hormone Serotonin, which occurs when people are happy is stress busting. Serotonin is proven to be released into the brain when people sing together. This hormone is immediately instrumental in making people happy. Therefore music can have a positive effect on one’s mental health.
Music can bring people of different backgrounds together to socialize.

Music is recognised as a global form of communication which is, perhaps, why it lends itself so naturally to bringing different cultures together. Multi-cultural music events and activities allow young people to celebrate diversity and traditions from a variety of cultures.

By encouraging young people to take an active role within their projects they can develop skills which they can go on to use within their future training/education and maybe even as a career. Music projects could support the employability and financial stability in the futures of young people involved.

It's possible to integrate Key Skills into musical activities e.g. numeracy, literacy and ICT skills, as well generic employability skills, contributing to young people's essential skills for employability and becoming financially stable.

Give people the opportunity to shine, and they often will. Giving young people “permission” to explore their creativity and have a go without having to get it right opens up so many doors. Sometimes a young person who seems disengaged at school might turn out to be incredibly creative when simply allowed to express themselves freely.

In some areas with few activities for young people or a high level of unemployment or crime, musical activities can be an inspiring and positive use of time, reducing crimes that young people might otherwise be involved in.

Young people's music events can help communities to value their youths more highly, and enable them to be portrayed in a positive light by local media. Such events can be used to gain support from influential members of the community, such as MP's, businesses and councils, who could help even more in raising the perceived value of young people within the community and media.
**SUGGESTIONS**

I was moved by how much difference the projects I visited made to the lives of the young people involved. I picked up a few ideas along the way from various people, about things which can help the success of a music event or project for young people.

When hosting a music event or activity for young people, ensure young people are able to get to the venue. If you know public transport stops at 10pm, don’t finish an event and 10.30pm.

Advertise activities in a variety of settings so different groups of young people are aware of what’s going on.

Find ways to accommodate young people of different abilities so no-one feels excluded.

Invite MP’s and important figures within the local community to events where young people can be seen in a positive light. Try to encourage local media to report on the positive things young people are involved in. Young people are so valuable within a community, and it’s important to try to get that message across.

Make sure young people know that it’s alright to get something wrong, that music isn’t always about playing the right notes, but about expressing oneself.

Encourage young people to bring friends along to support them. Their peers will probably look up to them and see them as positive role models.

Make sure young people are safe; staff should be checked for Criminal Records, venues should be kept drug and alcohol free and any other appropriate precautions should be taken to protect young people, and the staff working with them.

Combine other services with musical activities and use the trust that staff build with young people to support their general well-being.

Offer young people opportunities for training and learning new skills within a project, and they might be inspired to continue in the future.
Teaching other basic “key skills” within a project is also fairly simple. For example if a young person organises a gig at his/her local youth centre, they could use ICT skills by designing a poster and send emails to promote the event, the might have to consider costs of equipment, bands and venue against tickets sales (numeracy) and they would be using communication skills by organising the bands and sound/lighting engineers at the gig.

Find out when young people are bored and have nothing to do, and plan your activities around when young people want to be taking part, giving them something positive to do with their time. Do your research; talk to young people and let them guide your activity planning.

Expose young people to a variety of musical styles, so they can make informed choices about what they like to listen to, and to help them appreciate styles they might not otherwise get a chance to hear.
* Da Bomb Shelter, based at Rotorua Community Youth Centre in Rotorua

* Zeal, based the Global Café in Wellington

* SoundHouse at the PowerHouse Museum in Sydney

* Redfern Community Centre in Sydney

* Community Music Victoria in Melbourne

* ArtsEdge in Perth
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Videos of my live gigs can be seen at

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Kind thanks to those who helped me throughout my Fellowship. The warm welcomes and support from the projects I visited were well appreciated; Steve Holmes and the Rotorua Community Youth Centre, Keryn Martin and Zeal in Wellington, Jon Hawkes and Community Music Victoria in Melbourne, Pete Mahony at the SoundHouse in Sydney, Fiona Taylor and ArtsEdge in Perth and Tania Bowra and the Redfern Community Centre in Sydney. Thank you for sharing your experiences and ideas.

My thanks also to those at the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, for giving me such a wonderful opportunity and for supporting me during the planning of my Fellowship. This has been one of the greatest experiences in my life. Thank you for making it possible.