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Practitioner approaches to verbal communication with parents and children in Early Years Music Groups

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To cite this article: Greenhalgh, Z. (2013) *Practitioner approaches to verbal communication with parents and children in Early Years Music Groups*. MA Education: Early Childhood Music. Birmingham City University. Available at: <http://www.crec.co.uk/research-paper-archive/> [Accessed date]

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Keywords: communication with parents, early years music groups, early years practitioner training, learning through music, working with families

**Practitioner approaches to verbal communication
with parents and children in
Early Years Music Groups**

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MA Education: Early Childhood Music

Year 2 Research Project

CREC / Birmingham City University

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This study explored and documented the ways in which early childhood music practitioners communicate with parents and their children; how they speak, to whom, what they say (instructions, information, praise) and the amount of session time filled with their speech. Six contrasting early years music practitioners "talk" was audio recorded during one of their music sessions followed by a short structured interview. The Early Years parent/child music groups were found to be disparate with practitioners from a range of backgrounds using many different approaches. Links were identified between practitioner's communication style, the purpose of the class and parental expectation. Expectations and objectives were surprisingly different and not all concerned music.

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1. Introduction

Within the Early Years sector the crucial role of parents as first educators is widely recognised and consequently, the need to build successful relationships between practitioners and families with young children is seen as a priority. Practitioners who have mainstream early years training or qualifications will be well versed in this ethos of good communication, mutual respect and information sharing. Within the unregulated early childhood music sector where many leaders have limited or no mainstream early years training, relationships with families may be more diverse and priorities more complicated particularly where leaders are self-employed and need their work to be economically viable.

In this study I am exploring and documenting the ways in which early childhood music practitioners communicate with parents and their children; how they speak (tone of voice, speed, manner of address), to whom (adults or children) as well as what they say (instructions, information, praise). The aim was to observe and audio record a wide range of parent/child music groups to investigate the different communication strategies used by the early years music group leaders.

1.1 Context

Early Years Music Groups

In the United Kingdom a range of organisations provide music sessions for parents and pre-school children in a variety of settings. These sessions are usually 30-45 minutes in length.

There are a number of national and regional franchises providing large numbers of classes all over the country. These sessions are typically held on a weekly basis during school term time and parents commit to attend and pay for a number of weeks in advance. These

groups follow a structured format involving group singing and instrument playing led by the practitioner. In buying into a franchise practitioners are expected to follow the company schemes of work that give all classes uniformity and a corporate identity.

There are a number of independent local providers, many from a teaching or musical background who hold sessions within local areas. Some may run classes in only one setting such as a church or village hall, while others may operate in a number of venues across a locality. The format of these sessions is usually along the same lines as the franchise but the content is designed by the practitioner themselves. Parents attending these sessions are typically middleclass (Young, 2006, p. 10).

In recent years there has also been a growth in sessions held within Public Libraries and Children's Centres. Although billed as music sessions, the learning in all these groups is more often *through* music rather than *about* music with developmental progress, language and literacy and parent-child interaction high on the agenda reflecting contemporary political and educational priorities.

There is a sector which is more musically motivated. In addition to those led by independent musicians, in some areas groups are provided by professional orchestras, opera companies, arts venues and the like as part of their education programme. Many Local Authority Music Services also offer parent/child early years music sessions.

Parents

For the purposes of this study adults who accompany children to the music sessions are referred to as parent(s). In reality they may be a child-minder, family friend, grand-parent or other family relation.

1.2 Research Design

The aim of this study was to explore and document the ways in which early childhood music practitioners communicate with parents and their children during music sessions. I set out to explore the following questions:-

How do music leaders communicate with the parents/carers and children during their sessions?

What kind of talk is used and who is it directed at?

What are the frequencies of different kinds of talk?

How do the leaders view of the role of talk within their sessions?

2. Literature review

Literature that is pertinent to this study has proved very hard to find. Using an ever widening selection of key words I identified nearly forty texts that appeared to have some relevance. Closer examination however, revealed only a handful that was of any value. Very little was specifically about parent/child music groups and those that were often used music as the vehicle for some other purpose. Searching “Working with parents” appeared to be much more successful but on closer examination this literature fell into two broad groups neither of which truly addressed the issue. The first was indeed concerned with working with parents, but from a school perspective – teachers communicating with parents about their child in school. This I considered to be too different to be relevant as the teacher is not working with parent and child dyads and the relationships between the protagonists are therefore not comparable to those within early childhood music groups. The second area of

literature was indeed about working with parents in early childhood, but only those within mainstream provision in settings such as Children's Centres.

In present times the role of the parent in their children's learning is an accepted part of national policy (Wheeler, Connor, Goodwin, & National Children's Bureau, 2009). The Children's Plan in 2007 stressed the importance of such parental involvement for children's future achievement and the need to work to reach and include more parents in their children's education. The Early Years sector is now very familiar with the concept of "Parents as first educators" which must also be pertinent to the realm of music groups where parent and child attend together. A number of organisations provide training and resources for professionals working in this field (PEEP; Pen Green Centre).

Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL), a government commissioned review of literature, research and good practice, developed one such training programme for teachers and early years practitioners (2005-2007). PEAL has informed and influenced the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework which requires practitioners to build trusting relationships with parents as well as with children. The authors are clear in their assertions of the vital importance of parent partnerships. They see this change in working practice as a paradigm shift which signals the replacement of the distinction between home and school as separate learning environments with the notion that children are continuously learning irrespective of whom they are with and where they are. (Wheeler, Connor, Goodwin, & National Children's Bureau, 2009, p. p2)

In the context of my research study it is notable that there is no mention in the literature of the parent/child early childhood group sector that exists in the United Kingdom. This prolific sector is not mentioned in PEAL and neither it seems is there any reference to independent practitioners (Wheeler, Connor, Goodwin, & National Children's Bureau, 2009, p. 4) In the current climate of Public/Private partnerships this seems a glaring omission. Historically this sector is perhaps associated with a middle class client base and therefore of little

interest to local authority children's services departments where work with families perceived to be in need of parenting skills or support is prioritised. In more recent times however, music practitioners are sometimes "bought in" by children's centres and early years settings within areas of deprivation and multi-ethnic communities.

Knopf and Swick (2008) are more concerned with the role of the practitioner and their attitudes and dispositions in relation to the parent partnership and offer a review of strategies that teachers may wish to employ. Amongst these ideas they write of the importance of regular reflective evaluation by teachers of their attitudes to working with families and the efficacy of their communication and interaction with families to ensure family friendly practises. (Knopf & Swick, *How Parents Feel About Their Child's Teacher/School*;, 2008a, p. 426) Ward (2009) considers the necessity for early years practitioners to develop considerable communication skills; to communicate with parents as equals, in a supportive but not interfering manner. The ability to adjust to a variety of people and contexts is also seen as desirable. (Ward, 2009, p. 27) (Knopf & Swick, 2008)

Unsurprisingly like other writers, they also highlight the importance of a positive first teacher-parent contact for a successful on-going relationship, particularly in terms of building trust (Wheeler, Connor, Goodwin, & National Children's Bureau, 2009, p. 53) (Knopf & Swick, 2007, p. 295) (Early Years Foundation Stage, 2007, p. 02). Parents like to be included and to contribute and encouraging this will foster a stronger relationship. Practitioners will encourage further parental involvement by sharing children's achievements and explaining background developmental progress, and through demonstrating their interest in the child as an individual. Moran et al (2004) add that the group needs to be interactive and enjoyable to maintain successful parent participation, an assertion that early years music practitioners would readily identify with. Parent satisfaction is also identified as important for group commitment in a music therapy programme for marginalised parents and their children aged 0-5 years (Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, & Bradley, 2008, p227). Using a non-didactic approach this programme valued

the role of verbal communication to encourage parents employing modelling, repetition, feedback and praise. Particularly relevant to my study, the authors identify giving simple instructions, positive reinforcement, modelling and praise as important components in communication with parents (Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, & Bradley, 2008, p230).

A didactic approach which implies some form of deficiency on the part of the parent is deemed to be unhelpful as is an approach that demeans parents by devaluing their role as first educator (Moran, Ghate, & van der Merwe, 2004, p. 98). In the parenting support context of Moran et al, this refers to interaction that is unequal and assumes the parents lack knowledge or skills. This is not quite the same in a music group context where the practitioner is viewed as the “expert”, but could perhaps be applied to situations where practitioners address parents in a child directed manner rather than a more equal and respectful adult to adult style. Although not aimed at parent/child music groups, these points have some relevance to my study. A trusting relationship between parents and children and the practitioner will facilitate effective communications, increase loyalty and regular attendance and create a firm foundation upon which to enjoy learning.

The One-to-one final report which focusses on music provision for the under 2 and their parents, corroborates these themes. This study also identifies the importance of trust between musicians and parents, recognising that it is a time consuming process that is not easy to facilitate within short, fixed time session (Young, 2006, p. 23). Difficulties relating to differences in expectations are included here too which highlight the importance of communication between the leader and the parents.

Swick takes a slightly different approach in examining the parent’s perspective; what do parents want from early childhood professionals (Swick, 2004, pp. 218-219)? The priorities of parents are identified and include notions of caring, respectful relationships, involvement, being valued and included, and sensitivity to individual family needs. These I would argue

are universally relevant on some level to any professional/parent situation and that verbal communication is an essential element. Swick also looks at how practitioners can encourage and empower parents, a rare mention of the practitioner side of the relationship which is the crux of my study. Once again however, the locus is fixed on engaging families in need with family support services. The strategies detailed here are in the same vein as those previously discussed but some are thought provoking. Do music practitioners for example, encourage parent involvement? Most practitioners would aim to encourage parental involvement in session activities in terms of participating with their child, but beyond this it is not so certain. In some groups, the practitioner is very much the “expert”, leading musical activities in a more didactic style for parents and children to copy and participate in together. In the generally more structured private sector music groups in particular, the traffic may be predominately one way, from practitioner to child/parent. This is indeed one of the findings from One-to-one final report (Young, 2006, p. 24).

In a study of early childhood music groups, Koops found that parents did not want to be more involved in the planning or delivery of the classes (Koops, 2011, p. 12). Lack of confidence in musical knowledge seems to be one reason for this and the perception of the teacher as an expert who instructs parents and children alike as equals, co-learners and co-players (Koops, 2011, p. 10). One parent in this study did express a wish to be told the underpinning reasoning behind activities and to have children’s responses explained. Koops work involved a very small sample of five similar families all of whom attended the same group and were well known to the researcher. As a result, I deem the findings of this study to be limited and only tenuously relevant to my study.

In exploring the relationships between parents and educational professionals, Vincent (2000) identifies the roles that parents may assume. These include parent as consumer, partner (supporter/learner), independent and citizen (Vincent, 2000, p. p2). Vincent is writing predominantly about schools rather than pre-school, but this is an interesting approach to parent/ practitioner relationships. In the private early years music sector where

parents pay for classes, the parent must be viewed to some degree as consumers. Indeed, in this context, the consumer rights of the parent are far more potent than those in the school context described by Vincent. The parent role of “supporter/learner” is also relevant and describes well practitioner expectations of parents within music sessions, to assist and encourage their child’s interest and participation during the sessions and to sing the songs and repeat activities when at home, that is to learn or model learning along with their child.

Working in partnership with parents is indeed relevant in general terms to this study, but I have found little in this literature that refers specifically to my research questions. Instead, there are two aspects that dominate, neither of which I find particularly relevant. Firstly there is a perceived implicit suggestion that the discourse around working with parents is predominantly relevant to those parents who do not readily engage in family services or activities and previously coined “hard to reach”, rather than a universal *modus operandi* with all parents. The second is the emphasis on parents and settings/schools rather than on the role of the practitioner, how the parents can be involved with only passing mention of the qualities, techniques and training that the practitioners need to successfully communicate with parents and enhance the level of their participation in their children’s learning.

As previously stated, in my search for relevant literature there appears to be very little that is specifically relevant to my area of research. There is a whole area of writing that looks at working with parents but this almost completely fails to investigate the necessary interpersonal skills of practitioners and how they can be learned. In the early years music sector, many practitioners have no formal or accredited training and may have little knowledge of the approaches and practises used by mainstream early years settings and practitioners. Working independently, these music practitioners are outside mainstream provision and it would seem, invisible. Given that the literature surrounding parent/teacher relationships focuses on either childcare settings or parenting support it is perhaps not surprising that the often middle-class preschool educational sector is ignored.

3. Research Design and Methodology

Given the dearth of available studies on parent/child music sessions it seemed appropriate to conduct a study that would provide information from as wide a sample as possible. Exploring a wide range of provision would map out the different approaches to early years music groups and identify questions for further more in depth research. Working with a large sample however is far more time consuming with more observational visits to be organised and made and considerably more data to analyse.

3.1 Participants

A selection of practitioners were contacted in an attempt to observe leaders from different professional and educational backgrounds, the assumption being that those working within the local authority would be more likely to have an education background such as teacher or early childhood training whereas arts organisations may be more likely to employ leaders from a musical background who are likely to have had little or no exposure to mainstream early years approaches. The independent leaders and franchisees could be from either of these backgrounds, although many in this final group may have received “on the job” training via their employer. I also anticipated that the nature of the group will also affect the approach to the parents who attend. Independent and franchise groups may operate in a more commercial manner as they have rent to pay, costs to cover and a living wage to generate. Attracting and maintaining families will be a priority and their approach to parents in particular is likely to be more commercially based. Groups run by arts organisations and local authorities may have a different dominant remit such as encouraging families to use arts venues or access local authority centres and family support services.

3.2 Methods

The aim of this study was to explore and document the ways in which early childhood music practitioners communicate with parents and their children during music sessions based on the following questions:-

How do music early years music practitioners communicate with the parents/carers and children during their sessions?

What kind of talk is used and who is it directed at?

What are the frequencies of different kinds of talk?

How do the practitioners view of the role of talk within their sessions?

In order to address these questions data was collected via an audio recording of the practitioner during a music session. The collection of the recording was accompanied by observations recorded in hand written, descriptive field notes, and a follow-up short fixed-schedule interview. Information about the physical environment, number of adults/children/families attending was also documented.

Six sessions were observed from across the range of session types; three provided by music/arts organisations (a professional opera company outreach activity, P2 and two community music organisations P3,P5), one in a public library setting (P6) and two different early years music class franchise sessions (P1,P4), resulting in around 4 hours of audio recording and 17 pages of field notes and interview data for analysis. One of the arts organisation groups I observed (P5) turned out to be quite different in nature to the others in that it was a completely unstructured session with the practitioner moving between parents and their offspring and engaging them on an individual basis. In analysing the recording it was obvious that this structure encouraged a different relationship between the practitioner and parents which was reflected in the use of different style of communication from the other five. This observation was therefore treated as an outlier and not included as part of the main sample.

3.3 Observations

The purpose of the observations was to record the practitioners' verbal communication. It seemed impractical to attempt to observe and write down all that the leader said during the sessions and so the decision was made to audio record each one. In order to "flesh out" the recorded speech and place it into the context in which it occurred I made basic field notes to describe what was happening. I had originally considered making a video recording of each session. This would have provided a wealth of rich data about the practitioners' communication with the parents both verbal and non-verbal, and how it was received. There was the possibility however, that collecting too much rich data would divert attention away from my focus on speech and complicate the process of analysis. Video recording would also have necessitated greater ethical considerations with regard to parental consent.

After several practise runs with my own groups I found the most reliable recording method was to use a clip microphone attached to a small voice recorder that would fit into the pocket of the practitioner. I also used the voice recorder app on a tablet computer as a backup just in case the voice recorder failed to work.

3.4 Reliability and ethics

In accordance with the University ethical requirements each practitioner was invited verbally and in writing to participate and signed a consent form, and parents attending the sessions were asked to sign to give their consent. The presence of an observer must inevitably have some impact on the behaviour of children, adults and practitioner. The practitioners in particular are likely to have felt under pressure and this may have resulted in an emphasis on elements of their talk to conform to their notions of the ideal style, thus accentuating the nature of their communication approach.

3.5 Structured interview

The observation was followed by a ten minute structured interview to provide an understanding of practitioner's backgrounds and the underlying philosophy of their sessions. The questions were intended to be the same for each participant and I recorded the answers in writing at the time of the interview. The practitioners were asked to provide information about their background, experience and training. Perceptions of their role and relationship with the parents they work with to identify were also requested along with the identification of the aims of the observed session.

- What kind of groups do you run for 0-5 year old children and their parents? How many groups, where are they held, average group size
- What is your own personal background and training for working in early years music and how long have you been doing it?
- What are your main aims in doing music with children and parents?
- What do you see as your role in a session?
- How do you view your relationship with the parents who come to your sessions?
- How important is verbal communication with parents within the session?

4. Procedures

Data was collected in two forms; audio recording and structured interview.

4.1 Audio recording

This data was collected in order to discern what kind of talk practitioners used, who they spoke to and the frequencies of different kinds of talk. Identification of coding categories for this data took some time. Some were straight forward (such as the purpose of the speech, who were they talking to), whilst other aspects were less clear but after much consideration, discussion and exploration of research literature and methodology (Robson 2011) (Nicholson et al 2008) (Roberts-Holmes 2005) these were identified.

The audio data was collected in order to discern what kind of talk practitioners used, who they spoke to and the frequencies of different kinds of talk. Identification of coding categories for this data took some time. Exploration of research literature and methodology (Robson 2011; Nicholson et al 2008; Roberts-Holmes 2005) provided some examples from which to start. Ideas from other literature such as the ORIM framework (Evangelou & Sylva, 2007) and identified positive parenting strategies (Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, & Bradley, 2008) were considered. These were applied to the recording data in a process of trial and error and adapted until fit for purpose; relevant, objective and manageable as possible.

The categories were:-

- A. Recipient: who it was directed at
 - a. General (to all)
 - b. Child(ren)
 - c. Adult(s)
 - d. Individual adult

B. Function: the purpose of the talk with examples

- a. Information – greetings and venue information. Where the toilets are, no group next week
- b. Instruction – “hold your baby on your knee...” “Now we’re going to...”
- c. Explanation – “this is very good for feeling the pulse...fine motor skills”
- d. Praise – including positive feedback
- e. Question – “shall we sing...?” “I wonder what colour will the boat be?”
- f. Comment/ other – any other verbal communication

C. Voice tone:

- a. Conversational
- b. Child-directed/infant directed speech
- c. Direct/order
- d. Exaggerated
- e. Excitable

D. Musical description: (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music 1958)

As this study is centred on music groups it seemed appropriate to look at some the data using musical terms. Each group was assigned three musical terms from the list to offer an overall flavour of the leaders approach and the prevailing atmosphere. The terms chosen were independently corroborated from the recording by a musically trained colleague.

- a. Agitato; excited and fast
- b. Animato; animated
- c. Appassionato; passionately
- d. Cantabile; singing style
- e. Capriccio; caprice, free, light hearted
- f. Comodo: comfortably, moderately
- g. Con forza

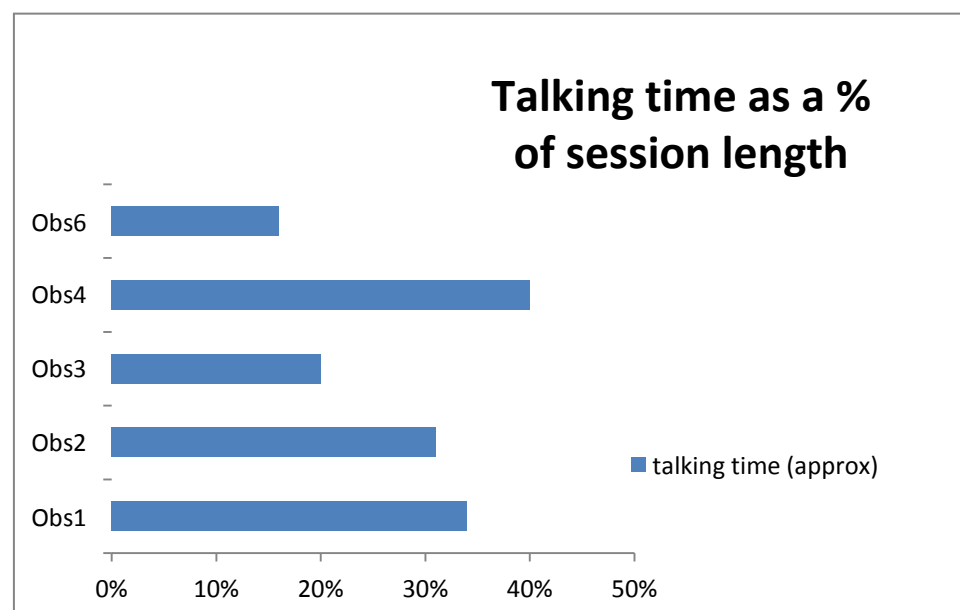
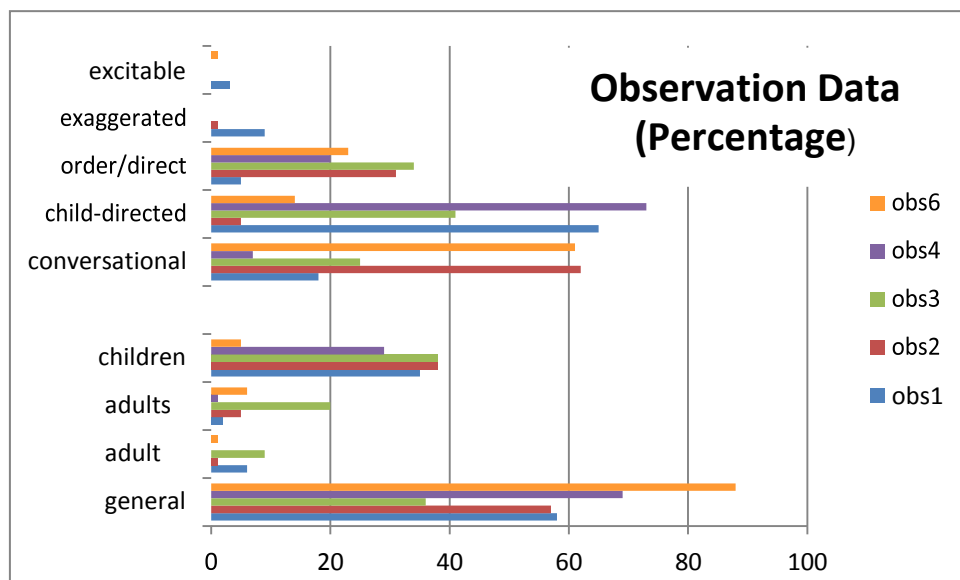
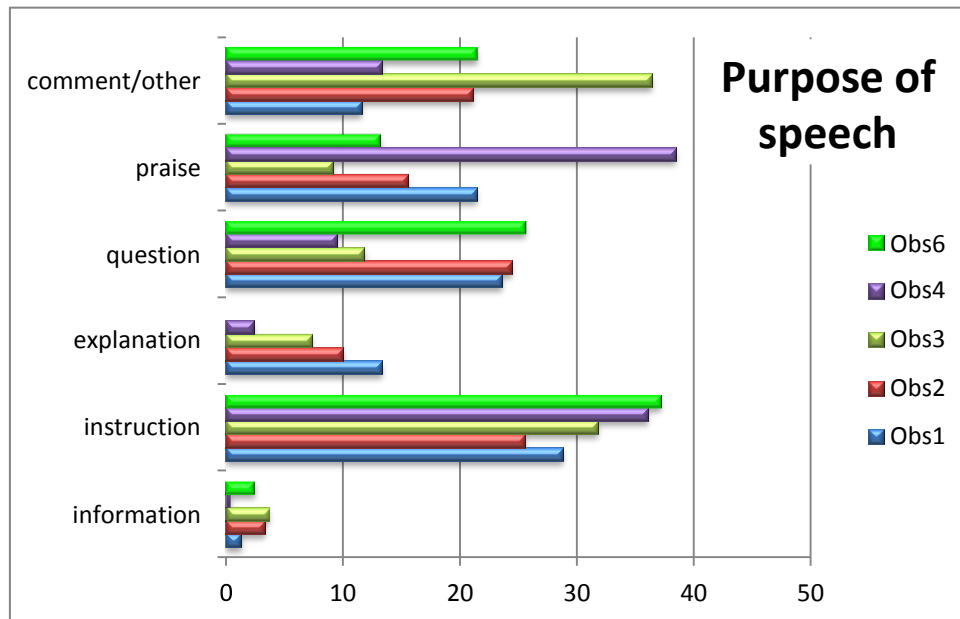
- h. Deciso; decisively/firmly
- i. Dolce; sweetly
- j. Dolente; sadly
- k. Espressivo; expressively
- l. Giocoso; gay, merry
- m. Grave; solemn, slow
- n. Ritmico; rhythmically
- o. Strepitoso; noisy, boisterous
- p. Suave; gentle, smooth
- q. Tranquillo; calm, tranquill

E. Talking time as a percentage of the session length

In addition to the content of the leaders talk, the amount of time they spent talking was timed using a stop watch while listening to the recordings. This is recorded as a percentage of the whole session and whilst it has to be acknowledged as an approximate figure, it is none the less interesting.

The analysis was recorded using an Excel worksheet to enable manipulation of the data and the production of the associated illustrative charts and graphs.

Findings



5.1 Data Analysis - Observations

All five recordings were analysed to record the purpose of the speech used by the practitioners, who they talked to and the tone of voice they used. In order to standardise classification and increase reliability, this was undertaken in one sitting. Some categories were straightforward to identify, but the differing styles of the practitioners “delivery” sometimes made the choice between “child-directed” and “conversational” much harder to establish. Who the talk was directed at was also often not clear as practitioners tended to speak to the group as a whole either as children, laypersons lacking knowledge or in a more everyday conversational manner. After analysing each recording, three musical terms were identified to describe the practitioner’s communication style during the session.

a. Observation 1 (P1)

Talking time: 34% Associated musical terms: Energico, animato, strepitoso

This group, part of an international early years music franchise, was held in the party room of a soft-play centre on a weekday morning. There were around 30 families attending with children aged from 6 months to 4 years of age. With such a large number of families present, this was a busy session. The practitioner spoke with parents before and after the session often discussing aspects of their attendance or progress in line with the notion of the parent role as “supporter/learner” discussed earlier in this report (Vincent, 2000). The tenor of these interactions was professional with parents being addressed in relation to their role rather than as individuals (“He’s doing very well mummy”). The session itself lasted 43 minutes during which there was a mixture of activities including songs, rhymes, listening to music, instrument playing, a ride in a washing basket “boat” and a story. Children were with their parents and siblings for the activities either sitting on the floor or moving around the

room. Nearly all the activities were supported by pre-recorded songs, music or sounds which the practitioner had stored on a digital music device.

Most of the practitioners talk was aimed at the group as a whole (54%) or at the children (35%) with very little directed specifically towards the adults in the room. This leader has a speech and drama background and the session reflected this with an animated and energetic vocal style and excellent projection. The practitioner's tone of voice was often identified as child-directed in nature (65%) due its pitch fluctuations and exaggerated nature. Praise was offer on a regular basis (21%) mostly using the repeated phrases "Well done" or "Good job" although there were a small number of occasions where more specific praise was given in the form of positive feedback such as "Good listening Freddy".

b. Observation 2 (P2)

Talking time: 31% Associated musical terms: Cantabile, comodo, capriccio

This group took place in a theatre setting and was led by a trained singer, an employee of the resident professional music organisation. There were 9 families attending the mid-week session which was aimed at children less than 3 years of age. A large square area of mats marked the area where the activities occurred with families sitting together in a circle or dancing around together. All the activities involved unaccompanied singing except one when the group danced to 1930s style dance band music.

This leader's verbal communication was very conversational in tone (62%) irrespective of the age of the recipient. Whilst the practitioner was undoubtedly in control of the proceedings, there was a comfortable, friendly atmosphere in the group where parents and children felt able to interact with her. The overriding impression was of a clam and inclusive session. Praise (16%) was offered either as a general comment or given individually in the form of positive reinforcement. On one occasion the praise was directed specifically at the parents to compliment them on their increased confidence and achievement in singing.

c. Observation 3 (P3)

Talking time: 20% Associated musical terms: comodo, grazioso, dolce

Held in a major live music venue, this group led by an independent practitioner was the only one of the sample held at the weekend. It was very busy with 20 families attending, many with mother *and* father and some with grandparents resulting in many more adults in the room than babies and children. The practitioner had a helper who mingled with the families modelling the activities and there were also two students from the nearby music college, a cellist and a guitarist, playing along on their instruments.

This group gave the impression of a relaxed, friendly and good natured hour spent listening to live music and sometimes singing along. Most of the activities were played and sung live by the practitioner on an electric guitar and using a microphone on a stand which resulted in a sense of separation between her and the families, a performer-audience relationship. There were times when recorded music was also used however, enabling the leader to mingle with the group and interact on a more intimate and individual level. The data reflects this with a split between talk for the children (38%) and the adults (29%) and the group in general (33%). Interactions with the children were on an individual basis with the practitioner adopting a child-directed tone of voice (41%). Instructions, information and explanations were directed either at the adults or at the group as a whole using a direct (34%) or conversational (25%) adult manner. Most of the verbal communication from the practitioner was adult directed.

d. Observation 4 (P4)

Talking time: 40% Associated musical terms: animato, energico, deciso

A newly refurbished community library attached to a church hall was the weekday setting for this session provided by a major early childhood music franchise and led by an employee of the franchise holder. There were six preschool children (aged 3-4 years)

attending with their parent. Carpet “spots” were laid out in a circle on the floor for the children to sit on. Activities included songs with actions some of which were very energetic, the playing of instruments, games with a ball, a parachute and streamers, a section on shapes and a music theory section. All the music was pre-recorded to which the practitioner sometimes sang along or talked over to give instructions or offer praise to the children.

Very few interactions from this leader were aimed at the accompanying adults (1%), the lowest of all the observed groups, This is perhaps not surprising given that this session was specifically aimed at 3 to 4 year old children who are preparing for school entry and old enough to converse independently. The approach though-out the session was didactic with the leader adopting a traditional educational role which is illustrated in the data by the proportion of session time given to verbal communication (40%), the majority of which was child-directed in tone (73%), the highest percentage of all the groups observed. This approach would perhaps also explain the low incidence of questioning (9%). This practitioner gave the most praise of all the groups (38%), 17% higher than the second highest count.

e. Observation 6: (P6)

Talking time: 16% Associated musical terms: cantabile, giocoso, capriccio

Hosted by a Local Authority Library this session for children under 2 years of age was led by the early years librarian. Bookcases were pushed back in the children’s library to make room for the 15 families that attended. The library was open during the session with people coming and going in the adjacent adult library section. The families sat in a circle on the floor to sing the songs and rhymes with their associated actions and games. Puppets, a few soft toys, some lycra and a parachute were the only props used and there was no use of recorded music or musical instruments.

Of all the groups, this was the most consensual in nature with a practitioner whose style was to promote relaxation and enjoyment. There was frequent interaction between all those present and much gentle laughter. The atmosphere was happy, calm and unhurried. Songs were well modelled and repeated several times with verbal communication kept to a minimum, the lowest percentage of talking time of all the groups (16%). Talk was used mainly to steer the session through instructions (37%) and posing questions to invite participation (26%). None of this practitioner's talk was identified as explanations.

5.2 Data analysis - Structured interview

The structured interview generated data about the practitioner's background, experience and training. In addition to their perception of their role in relation to the parents and how they communicate with them, the questions facilitated some understanding of the practitioner's aims and objectives, and their focus in providing music groups.

a. Background and training

Of the five practitioners, two had higher education classical music qualifications, one as a singer, the other an instrumentalist, and one came from a community music background and had received training via a regional arts organisation. The remaining two leaders, one had studied performing arts and the other had studied speech and drama at college. None of the practitioners had any Early Years education qualifications or training. Experience ranged from 2 to 5 years.

b. What are your main aims in doing music with children?

Enjoyment came high on the list of responses to this question with all practitioners identifying this as one of their aims either in relation to "having fun" or shared enjoyment within the parent and child relationship. Learning *through* music was listed by three leaders (P1,P4,P6), particularly in relation to speech and language learning. One practitioner (P6) a librarian, took this further by aiming to "promote a love of language and literacy through

song and rhyme”. Only two of the five (P2,P4) included any mention of music learning despite all the groups being named and described as “Pre-school Music” groups. One of these was an outreach project for a professional arts company where music enjoyment and participation was the first aim stated. The other was a franchise group where “music” and “learning theory” were subservient to more general education learning themes such as providing structure, direction and listening.

c. What do you see as your role within music session?

Two practitioners described their role as “facilitator” (P1,P2) and two as “leader” (P4,P6). Three (P1,P3,P4) saw themselves as a role model for parents to follow with two of these (P1,P4) giving the impression that they saw themselves as the “expert” from whom the “inexpert” parent/child dyad learns through imitation. The third (P3) however had a more relaxed stance in taking the viewpoint that participation in the activities by the families was optional. Early childhood music groups are typically highly structured with the practitioner very much in control with generally little notion of truly equal partnership with parents. In the discarded, unstructured group (P5) however, the approach was more identifiable as an “invisible pedagogy” (Bernstein, 2003). Here, the practitioner described her role as an “enabler” who provided a stimulating environment within which the babies and parents were free to interact as they wish.

d. How do you view your relationship with the parents who come to your session?

Four of the five practitioners (P2,P3,P4,P6) described this relationship with parents using positive language that suggests they enjoy meeting and interacting with parents. There was recognition (P2, P3,) that parents may not be confident singing and that a friendly relaxed atmosphere was important to foster sufficient confidence to join in the activities. In one large group which ran on a Saturday and was attended by many whole families (20 families), the leader (P3) said that the parents wanted to chat during the session which was disruptive. Rather than stop the parents from talking she decided to use a microphone and

electric guitar. She felt that parents and fathers in particular, may lack confidence in singing with their child and that using the electric guitar may “take the pressure off” and result in them feeling more comfortable and able to enjoy the session and maybe join in. This leader (P3) also stressed the need to connect with the adults as adults so that not all talk is child directed.

The remaining leader (P1) talked of the importance of parents as “best educators” and the need to encourage the parents “to work” with their children at home. To facilitate this, this leader sends a weekly email to all her parents with “tips to try at home” and the “science behind it” which “adds credibility to what we are doing”.

e. How important is verbal communication with parents within the session?

Beyond a general acknowledgment of the role of verbal communication from an organisational or structural perspective the answers to this question were interesting. Attitudes fell into two broad camps. One view saw verbal communication as the conveyer of instructional information from the practitioner to the parent about the activities forming the connection between leader and parents. Two of the leaders however expressed an alternative viewpoint stating that too much verbal communication is not desirable or indeed helpful. The first (P2) said it could “hold up” proceedings if used too much and disliked lengthy explanations about why activities were done and how children might respond preferring instead to use a more succinct observational approach and “draw attention to what is good though observing the children”. The second practitioner (P6) also disliked too much verbal communication commenting that “if I speak too much it goes in a different direction [and] everyone gets restless” concluding “sing as much as possible and everyone has fun”.

It is interesting that these two practitioners are the only ones in the sample who have degree level music qualifications in addition to considerable instrumental expertise. It is also intriguing that this last practitioner (P6) did not include music per se in their stated

aims and objectives, but only as a vehicle to promote a love of language and literacy. These two practitioners both have highly developed musical knowledge and skill and would doubtless confidently describe themselves as musicians. Coming from this position perhaps such musical familiarity and self-assurance means that these practitioners do not feel the need to assert their position overtly through verbal communication as they are able to “control” the group through other means.

5 Discussion

How do music leaders communicate with the parents and children during their sessions?

Each of the five practitioners in this study has developed their own style of leadership based on their individual dispositions, values and objectives and consequently employed differing communication approaches. That their aims and objectives are so varied is perhaps surprising given that they are all advertised as Music Classes. In fact it was surprising to discover that music is not the central feature in most of these groups, but acts as a medium for other learning relating to broader educational aims such as language learning and confidence in communication. Only one practitioner (P2) stated music learning to be an objective.

Three of the practitioners filled more than 30% of the session length with talking (P4,P1,P2). At first I thought this may have been a result of the use of pre-recorded music which enabled the leader to speak while the music was playing. The two most talkative practitioners (P4,P1), the franchise groups, did indeed use recorded music, but the third (P2) from the professional arts company, did not and yet still spoke for 31% of the time. From examining the rest of the data a different explanation seems possible. These groups were more biased towards mainstream educational goals, wanting to encourage children’s learning and development and the parents’ role in supporting this. The two groups that

spoke least (P3,P6) both put the enjoyment of the parents and children at the heart of their sessions rather than any specific learning. As long as the families enjoyed the experience of attending, they were content.

What kind of talk is used and who is it directed at?

Again the nature of practitioner's talk varied between individuals, although certain types of talk are inevitable. General information for example has to be imparted for the organisation of the group. Likewise instructions, the function of speech with the most similar frequency across the groups, are needed to maintain direction and a common purpose. Beyond these comparisons however, the way verbal communication was used was much more individual. Praise was the next most common function of speech. Some practitioners offered praise frequently using phrases such as "Well done" repeatedly often as a reflexive comment to signify the end of an activity rather than as a specific comment on the quality or a feature of the children's participation. In one group in particular (P4), this could explain the exponential use of praise (38% of all talk). The two franchise groups whose remits were arguably outcome orientated as the most biased towards mainstream education, praise was used the most sometimes through positive reinforcement, but more frequently through repeated use of their own preferred phrase. By contrast, in two of the groups (P3,P6) the practitioners were more concerned with process, that families attending should have an enjoyable and relaxed positive experience with music and language, there was very low incidence of praise (9%,13%).

Who the practitioners directed their speech to seemed to be largely a matter of style. There was a tendency in all five groups to talk to the group generally as a whole, but the tone of voice used varied from one practitioner to another. Some leader's approach was conversational with overtones of equality between the speaker and the recipient irrespective of age (p2,P6). In others the tone was more fixed in style conveying a view of the recipients as a conglomerate whole with a single uniform identity. In one group (P3)

this talk was delivered in an adult to adult fashion which is not unreasonable in a group where there were a large number of adults and the majority of the children were pre-verbal. A different vocal approach was utilised in the pre-school group for 3 and 4 year old children (P4) where 73% of the leader's speech was categorised as child-directed in tone with only 1% of the talk in this session was directed towards the parents in this group.

It is interesting to consider how parental expectation or the practitioner's perception of parental expectation may shape the approach and verbal communication style used by music group leaders. All the groups in this sample require parents to pay for their child's attendance and so providers will feel the necessity to ensure that their services are deemed to be value for money and to achieve some form of positive outcome. This pressure to "perform" and gain lasting commitment from parents will be greater for those practitioners who operate as a business and have to generate enough income to cover running costs. Practitioner income for those who provide music sessions in association with other organisations is not dependant on attendance and family commitment in the same way and these groups tend to operate on an ad-hoc, drop-in basis. Perhaps these practitioners, free from concerns of maintaining sustainability, have the luxury working "in the moment" with the families, enabling a different approach.

From this small sample it would appear that the franchise groups, which present a bias towards a mainstream early years education model and are delivered by practitioners with minimal music background or training, are more didactic in style. Both these leaders relied heavily on recorded music and sang little themselves preferring to talk over the music to prompt, direct or comment on the actions of those attending. It is the very nature of traditional early years parent/child music groups to have a formal structure with someone in charge, but the degree of autocracy is variable. The library group (P6) was the least didactic of the sample and the only one where parents were encouraged to contribute by choosing a favourite song for the group to sing together. Within this group expectations

were based on notions of enjoyment and sociability rather than educational learning resulting in a less didactic and more interactive leadership style.

6 Implications

This study highlights a large gap in available research knowledge. Literature relating to early childhood parent/child music groups and the practitioners who lead them is virtually non-existent with a serious lack of studies relating to all aspects of these groups. Thousands of early childhood music groups are held and paid for by parents on a weekly basis in the United Kingdom with public and community sector organisations continually joining the ranks of the already well-established private and franchise providers. The working life of early years music group practitioners is professionally lonely with little or no contact between peers and no professional or occupational body to provide support, information, professional development or sector cohesion. Neither is there any form of licencing or quality mark for this type of provision, or any recognised or recommended qualifications or training for those who lead them. Although they are all ostensibly “music groups”, there is no requirement for the leader to be musically trained or knowledgeable or indeed any guarantee that the aims and objects concern music at all. Likewise, these are all groups for babies and young children yet knowledge of Early Years policy, approaches, pedagogy or early years work experience is not a requirement. The sector as a whole is a mishmash of unmapped and unregulated provision with a wide variety of outcomes, purpose and quality.

A “brave new world” where all is regulated, licenced, inspected and certificated is not I would suggest, helpful or desirable either! More research on this sector would help to understand the scope and variety of provision and highlight ways to connect and support its practitioners.

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13:26]

Appendix

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Thursday, 17 October 2013

Dear Music Leader

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project conducted by myself as a post-graduate student at Centre of Research in Early Childhood (CREC) /Birmingham City University. The project aims to observe the nature of music leader/ parent relationships within a range of music groups for parents and their children (0-5 years). Please be assured that this is an information gathering project not a critical study.

Taking part in this research will involve:

- the observation and audio recording of one of your sessions
- a 10 minute interview with you as session leader preferably straight after the session. (Should this not be possible, the interview can be conducted by prearranged telephone appointment at your convenience.)

Families who attend the observed session will be asked for their permission prior to the start of the observed session and confirm this by signing a consent sheet.

Every effort will be made to maintain the anonymity of all individuals and organisations involved. The audio recordings and any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications and presentations

Participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

If you have any questions please contact me on [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely,

Zoe Greenhalgh

Data: Frequency of talk by group

Frequency of talk by group

	"Good job" "Well done"						Strepitoso														
	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	
Obs1																					
information	3	0	0	0	3	3	2	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	3	3	2	0	0	0	0
instruction	58	0	0	9	67	6	47	4	4	5	6	4	4	67	6	47	4	4	4	5	0
explanation	25	0	3	3	31	3	17	5	6	0	3	3	3	31	3	17	5	6	0	0	0
question	23	7	0	25	55	9	37	1	4	2	9	0	25	55	9	37	1	4	2	0	0
praise	20	0	0	30	50	5	39	0	5	0	5	0	30	50	5	39	0	5	0	0	0
comment/ other	6	6	1	14	27	15	9	1	1	1	15	1	14	27	15	9	1	1	1	1	1
Totals	135	13	4	81	233	41	151	11	20	8	233	41	151	11	20	8	11	20	9	3	0
Percentage %	58	6	2	35	18	18	65	5	9	3	18	65	5	9	3	65	5	9	3	0	0

	comodo						leggiere						capriccio								
	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	
Obs2																					
information	3	0	2	1	6	6	0	0	0	0	3	0	2	6	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
instruction	42	0	1	3	46	10	0	37	0	0	42	0	1	46	10	0	37	0	0	0	
explanation	13	0	3	2	18	11	0	6	0	0	13	0	3	18	11	0	6	0	0	0	
question	10	1	0	33	44	26	4	12	0	0	10	1	0	44	26	4	12	0	0	0	
praise	17	0	1	10	28	26	1	0	1	0	17	0	1	28	26	1	0	1	0	0	
comment/ other	17	0	2	19	38	33	4	1	0	0	17	0	2	38	33	4	1	0	0	0	
Totals	102	1	9	68	180	112	9	56	1	0	102	1	9	68	112	9	56	1	0	0	
Percentage %	57	1	5	38	62	62	5	31	1	0	57	1	5	38	62	5	31	1	0	0	

	comodo						grazioso						dolce								
	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	
Obs3																					
information	3	0	1	0	4	2	0	2	0	0	3	0	0	4	2	0	2	0	0	0	
instruction	16	0	14	5	35	3	8	24	0	0	16	0	14	35	3	8	24	0	0	0	
explanation	4	0	4	0	8	1	1	6	0	0	4	0	4	8	1	1	6	0	0	0	
question	4	2	1	6	13	1	7	5	0	0	4	2	1	13	1	7	5	0	0	0	
praise	0	0	0	10	10	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	10	10	0	10	0	0	0	0	
comment/ other	9	8	2	21	40	20	19	0	0	0	9	8	2	40	20	19	0	0	0	0	
Totals	36	10	22	42	110	27	45	37	0	0	36	10	22	42	110	27	45	37	0	0	
Percentage %	33	9	20	38	25	25	41	34	0	0	33	9	20	38	25	41	34	0	0	0	

	comodo						leggiere						capriccio								
	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	general	adult	adults	children	total	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable	
Obs4																					
information	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	
instruction	78	1	3	10	92	5	53	35	0	0	78	1	3	92	5	53	35	0	0	0	
explanation	4	0	0	2	6	0	5	1	0	0	4	0	0	6	0	5	1	0	0	0	
question	15	0	0	9	24	3	15	6	0	0	15	0	0	24	3	15	6	0	0	0	
praise	64	0	0	34	98	1	92	3	0	0	64	0	0	98	1	92	3	0	0	0	
comment/ other	14	0	0	20	34	7	22	5	0	0	14	0	0	34	7	22	5	0	0	0	
Totals	176	1	3	75	255	17	187	50	0	0	176	1	3	75	17	187	50	0	0	0	
Percentage %	69	0	1	29	7	7	73	20	0	0	69	0	1	29	7	73	20	0	0	0	

Obs6	general	adult	adults	children	<i>total</i>	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable
information	3	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	0
instruction	43	0	2	0	45	17	2	25	0	0
explanation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
question	30	0	0	1	31	18	11	2	0	0
praise	15	0	0	1	16	12	3	0	0	1
comment/ other	16	1	5	4	26	24	1	1	0	0
Totals	107	1	7	6	121	74	17	28	0	1
Percentage %	88	1	6	5		61	14	23	0	1
<i>friendly, calm, smiley, fun, well paced, relaxed</i>										
<i>giocoso comodo capriccio</i>										

%	general	adult	adults	children		conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable
obs1	58	6	2	35		18	65	5	9	3
obs2	57	1	5	38		62	5	31	1	0
obs3	36	9	20	38		25	41	34	0	0
obs4	69	0	1	29		7	73	20	0	0
obs6	88	1	6	5		61	14	23	0	1

Tone of voice and recipient (%)

group	age range	average size	attendance	leader background	training	years exp	What are your main aims in doing music with children and parents?	What do you see as your role in the session	How do you view your relationship with the parents who come to your sessions?	How important is verbal communication within the session?	other information
obs1	6mths-4 yrs	30	30	drama, customer services, communication.	Speech & Drama: York Academy.		Promote language through music.	facilitator	parents' best educators. They work with the children.	verbal instructions during the class	difficult to keep boys until pre-school
				Baby signing	RCM Speech & Drama exams Grade 7		Making learning fun	role model so parents will communicate with the children	needs lots of encouragement for mums especially with boys over 2 when testosterone kicks in.	positive encouragement, speaking to mums after to encourage	Email parents every week with tips to try at home, science behind it. Adds credibility to what we're doing.
				Franchise		4	Music good...families to engage with each other, increased parent/child communication				
obs2	under 3	12-15	9	trained singer	? Conservatoire trained		Musically - enjoy, join in as can.	facilitate their enjoyment so that all get something out of it no matter what age	make them relaxed so children can enjoy. Confident to sing - never more vulnerable when singing. Relaxed atmosphere	can hold up if do too much (talking)	
				previously worked at westminster abbey training choristers, then for Opera company education department		10	enjoying mum's company, love hearing mum sing (bye bye TV)		Draw attention to what is good sparingly through observing the children		
				Early years		3	Employers aim; create future audiences				
obs3	under 4	25	20 families	played instruments as a child - school music ensembles drums post 16 Run "Music Tots", Rochdale	music GCSE studied fine art @ 18 1 year sound engineer course Musicleader programme, North Trafford College.		want to make them comfortable and enjoy. Parents might not want to join in, may not be confident singing especially dads	Introduce songs & activities to join in with if want to. use a mike so others can chat (want a head set)	friendly - chat & talk about children, own & theirs. Important to talk to adults as adults, not all speech directed at the children or at child level. Good to connect with adults and not just children.	communication with parents, vital. Casual better, joking. Adult to adult not as children	play electric guitar to take the pressure off dads. More likely to join in & want to do it at home. Dads need to feel comfortable - may not want to sing. Guitar something dads may identify with
				SEN @ Manchester Music Service "Day job"	Creative Industries Development Services/ GMAZ 2002		some groups are "twee". Like it to be more relaxed.				
obs4	preschool	6	6	music & dance at school performing arts at college	on the job training from franchisee (boss) - 10weeks		enjoyment (main)	encourage parents to help children	fantastic, really friendly, get on with each other	very clear expectations all round	interview while "boss" was there packing up.
				leads 6 groups a week, diffent ages, not all with parents. younger groups bigger		2	structure direction listening music theory with preschool	leader clear instructions let them use instruments - get used to them	modelling - common aims re behaviour can speak to them all	keep "up-beat" and make sure	rhythm in theory section incorrectly modelled no explanation to parents of what is being done
obs5	0-2	25	22	works in museums/art gallery	visual arts training			enabler - provide environment	friendly. Valuing them as individuals not just parents	very important. To welcome the all individually.	
				family/ education projects and activities						to be able to read them and accept that some may like contact, but others may not.	
obs6	0-2	20+	15	EY librarian working with 0-7yr old children in libraries, children's centres and schools	Music degree EY qualifications	no	promote a love of language and literacy through song and rhyme.	leader to keep session on track, make sure there is a structure and sort problems	Nice. I love meeting parents, babies, children. The thing I like most - lightens my day. Positive!	I guess very important everyone knows what is going on - not sure if it is all verbal.	
				commissioned to train staff in EY settings, CC, trainee teachers etc re songs and rhymes	Kodály training courses		to create a joyous event, experience between families - a family experience that is fun	make everyone happy & pick up on signals		asking questions. Don't think about what I say. if I speak too much it goes in a different direction - restless	
				Musician - viola player		5	everyone can learn together. Enhancing their life. In library setting music = vehicle			sing as much as possible & everyone has fun	

Structured Interview – collated responses

Function	general	adult	adults	children	conversational	child-directed	order/direct	exaggerated	excitable
information									
instruction									
explanation									
question									
praise									
comment /other									

Observation data collection sheet