Infant school children are communicating, negotiating, planning and performing in sophisticated ways with their own junkyard orchestra, as Michael Jones reports

Thousands of years humans have used percussion to make music and communicate; the appeal is undiminished.

While we now have the technology to make sophisticated instruments, it is still the basic forms of percussion that excite us most.

On YouTube, you can find examples of street percussion from around the world. Rowan Atkinson playing an invisible drum kit; pencil tapsers, spoon players; body percussionists; a teenager playing a cardboard box.

What is exciting about these clips are the marvellous sounds being produced with so little. Young children are also experiencing some great percussion.

Lucy Jenkins, foundation class teacher at Foxdell Infants in Luton, has spent the past year introducing percussion to the children. 

Ms Jenkins also encouraged the children to make up a sequence of sounds and see if they could copy each other and remember a particularly interesting sequence from one session to the next. In other words, she was encouraging group music-making and composition – very sophisticated behaviour to expect from four-year-olds with wooden spoons, saucepans and a dustbin.

AN EXPERT VIEW

I shared what had happened with Sarah Westwood, an experienced percussionist, performer and director of pioneering rhythm and drumming training group Drumvoice. She wasn’t at all surprised that children were able to respond in such a creative way. 

‘If we give children the opportunity to experiment with rhythm, we will often find that they are able to communicate with each other in powerful ways,’ she says. ‘It is important to let children explore making music together, and the children at Foxdell are fortunate to be having those positive experiences so early in their lives.’

In her work with children, she has found they can show high levels of excitement which can be channelled positively through drumming.

‘The children are also willing to cooperate with me and other children to produce short performances, such as to accompany a story or song.’

She finds her call-and-response activities, where she calls out beats on her drum and the children respond, can be hugely enjoyable. Everyone can join in, whether they consider themselves to be ‘musical’ or not.

‘It’s really a question of enthusiasm and enjoyment; she adds. ‘Drumming is a very accessible means of involving children in music-making. It engages even the most shy of children and focuses the high energy of the most exuberant. Drumming is far from being just clatter and noise. Drumming together, using free exploration, or in structured sessions, can lead to highly sophisticated musical learning.’

Ms Westwood and I visited Churchfield Primary School in Rugby, Warwickshire, to work with children and staff in their foundation and reception classes to create an African-style storytelling day (pictured below).

I developed a story with groups of children, while Ms Westwood used her ‘Ready Steady Drum!’ workshop to prepare them to provide musical accompaniment to the story. She used a drum, while the children made music with nothing more than upturned plastic washing-up bowls and sticks.

And what is really exciting about music with junk is that there are no boundaries and rules about what you can do: if you whack something too hard, then it won’t cost anything to replace!

Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer

Music resources

PLAY IT CDS

www.playit.org.uk

The problem with so much music aimed at the very young is that it can all sound the same. Not so the three CDs from Playit. Here you’ll find variety in vocals, accompaniment and styles of music, and what is so appealing about the songs is that they’re often full of humour and all perfect for joining in and making accompanying noises: create your own actions, tap your feet, get up and dance. Even the most reluctant child – and adult– should find this emphasis on fun participation irresistible. For a flavour of what is on offer, you can listen online to short excerpts to a few of the songs. Each CD (£10 plus £1.50 p&p) comes with complete lyrics and suggestions on how to use and vary the songs.

Let’s Go! contains 28 songs and 45 minutes of music. Among them is ‘Hello everyone!’ recorded live and involving some very young nursery children. This simplest of songs welcomes different groups of people (whispers, growlers, squeakers, shouters...) and animals (tigers, mice, cranes, fish...), making it perfect for the nursery’s youngest to join in. Also on this CD, hear the beat of African drums ‘What will you do with your hands and join in the actions in ‘Let’s go!’ enjoy the tongue-twister ‘Boom chika boom! and sing along to ‘Alice the Camel’, which has no horns – as it might be a horse?

With Music Fun! (with 24 songs and 40 minutes of music) suitable for stories with the Italian lullaby ‘Nina Nana’; hands up, shake, while singing to ‘Grandma, Grandma’; join in Mr Clickety’s silly game (with ‘clicking’ and accordion accompaniment) and relish the strong beat and repetition of the African song ‘We musi.’

The third CD, Hush My Baby, is aimed at under-twenties-months, with 38 songs that provide a mix of traditional and new, lively and gentle songs suitable for groups and one-to-one, and songs to use with puppets or props. The accompaniment across the three CDs includes guitar, accordion, harp, dulcimer, whistles, glockenspiel, tambourine, flute, harp, mandolin, drums and keyboard.

MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about percussion workshops visit www.drumvoice.co.uk

Music

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

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