

With a bang!

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

For thousands of years humans have used percussion to make music and communicate, and its 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 tappers; 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 junk to her class for them to bang, crash and make music with. Having always worked with young children, and having young children of her own, she knows the benefits that can be gained from banging an old saucepan with a wooden spoon. At its simplest level, it's the pure pleasure of expressing oneself through sound. When two children start to make banging noises, then it's no exaggeration to say that this is a form of communication.

When Ms Jenkins assembles a group of four-year-olds with an assortment of metal and plastic containers and a selection of beaters it does get loud – very loud! So, on the afternoon that I visited her class the children went outside into the wooden bandstand, where a set of metal cooking pots were already hanging up. Ms Jenkins added to this an aluminium dustbin full of brushes, plastic tubes, spoons, plastic buckets and pots, and then left me with the children to form my own impressions.

At first, it seemed as if the children were intent on making as much noise as they possibly could. There didn't appear to be any point to what was going on, beyond them having a lot



Children at Foxdell Infants School create their own performance with simple 'instruments'

of fun banging and crashing. But Ms Jenkins had warned me that each session needs to involve the children, and particularly the boys, going through a 'crash bang wallop' sound barrier. During this time the children are testing out the 'instruments' and working out what sound they like to make. It's also a time where the children discuss who is going to hit what with what, with whom and when.

ON WITH THE SHOW

As I watched from the sidelines, and tried to take some photographs, it became clear that the children were doing much more than whacking plastic on metal. They were talking to each other, comparing and negotiating: 'You try this. That's funny. Can I have a go after you? Can you do that?'

Other children were watching what was going on. They may have been an audience, or perhaps they were

observing so they could copy the very unusual sounds that you can make with a hollow plastic tube on a dustbin, or when you rub a large scrubbing brush backwards and forwards on the wooden floor.

Then two children, Naheed and Maisha, arrived. They were not going to experiment, but had clearly come with a plan in mind. They told me that they like to 'play drums' and sat down to show me the routines that they had been working on over the past few days. These two reminded me of experienced percussionists as they arranged their favourite pots, pans and buckets around them. And there was a real structure and rhythm to what they were showing me in their improvised performances.

What took us completely by surprise was that all afternoon a rainstorm had been building up, but the children were so involved in making

music that we didn't realise it had started to pour with rain and we were stuck outside. But, like true musicians, the band played on. I had to force them to pack up and dash inside.

Ms Jenkins explained afterwards that this type of collective music-making doesn't usually happen on its own. The children had needed several adult-guided sessions where they explored the instruments and learned the boundaries, including exactly how high to lift a piece of rigid plastic pipe when someone is walking past!

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 sophisticated 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 these 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 shyest 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 Rugeley, Staffordshire, to work with children and staff in their foundation and reception classes to create an African storytelling day (pictured below). There, 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 her djembe drum, while the children made music with nothing more than upturned plastic washing-up bowls and sticks.

And what is really exciting about making 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

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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 – make 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 simple

of songs welcomes different groups of people (whisperers, growlers, squeakers, shouters...) and animals (cows, tigers, mice, snakes, fish...) making it perfect for the nursery's youngest to join in. Also on this CD, hear the beat of African drums in 'Ke la la', clap your hands and join in the actions in 'Let's go', enjoy the tongue-twister 'Boom chikka boom' and sing along to 'Alice the Camel', which has no humps – so, it might be a horse?



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join in Mr Clickety's silly game (with 'clicking' and accordion accompaniment) and relish the strong beat and repetition of the African song 'Ayungawa'.



The third CD, **Hush My Baby**, is aimed at under-threes and contains 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, hammer dulcimer, whistle, glockenspiel, balafoon, fiddle, harp, mandolin, drums and keyboard.