

Being a Music Leader for Cymaz

Alex Wilkins, Cymaz Music Leader

First Impressions

My very first experience of working for Cymaz took place in an AP, which I now know stands for Alternative Provision, and is a place that provides education for children who, for whatever reason, can't go to school in a mainstream setting. I was there to observe Advanced Music Leader Giles Wooley, running a 90 minute session with primary school pupils. My background is in teaching music in mainstream secondary schools and this was my first time in a AP.

The difference between the two were apparent immediately: a young child was smoking in the car park when we arrived; when we got into the classroom, a child was sitting on a teacher's lap, being cuddled. This particular AP catered for children of both primary and secondary school ages. Within a short time of being in the classroom, while I helped Giles to set up the equipment for the session, I couldn't help noticing the sound of someone banging aggressively on a nearby window or door. This was audible at regular intervals throughout the morning and neither the children or the staff seemed particularly phased by it. They must've been used to it, but I couldn't help wondering whether it made people feel slightly anxious, as it did me!

Creating a Production for Radio

The first half of the session involved some singing, followed by script writing for the radio play, which had a Christmas theme. Giles kept this completely child-led. Often, the script writing would get bogged down in small details and side-tracked, but Giles would bring it back into focus. I also noticed how inclusive this was. There was one child who preferred to make noises than to communicate verbally. Rather than attracting negative attention, as it might do in a mainstream school, these noises were incorporated into the play. The child in question clearly enjoyed and felt encouraged by this, as did his classmates, and it seemed to me a very positive experience.

Despite the fact that the children were all engaged in the script writing activity, you could tell by the occasional glances over the shoulder at the shiny iPads and the electronic drum kit, that they were keen to get onto the music making part of the morning. I did wonder if it wouldn't be better to spend the whole time making music, rather than have to sit and come up with the story. But the more I thought about this, I realised that this project would have as its outcome a finished product: a radio play featuring a script that they'd written and then voice-acted, as well as their own music. It would be a tangible thing where the children could hear the results of their work. What a powerful and confidence-building thing that can be for a young person who may not be given opportunities like these very often.

Making and Sharing

Once the script writing session was over, it was time to start making music. The majority of the group all sat around a table with iPads which were connected to something called a Jam Hub. This was my first experience of Jam Hubs, which are basically devices that allow the connection of six different musical instruments (in this case, the iPads). You wear headphones and you have your own section with six volume knobs that basically control what you can hear at any one time. So if you want to only hear yourself, you can. If you want to hear the person sat on section 2, fine: you just turn up that knob. A bit like everybody having their own personal mixing desk. The children hadn't been communicating with each other all that much before but I was struck by how energised they all suddenly seemed, and how keen they were to show each other their work. The music software on the iPads was really accessible and what they were doing sounded great. Using the Jam Hub meant that the children had complete control of the sound they were being exposed to. You can imagine how useful this control would be for a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Opening Doors

The following months would see me carry out my own projects, both in APs and in mainstream secondary schools. I have enjoyed my time in these places even though it can be incredibly challenging. Cymaz work with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations but it is fair to say that most of the young people I was working with find themselves in challenging circumstances. How do you reach a young person whose life experience up until now has been so difficult? We all know teenagers can be hard to motivate at the best of times, but when you're trapped in a negative cycle of misbehaviour, punishment and threat of exclusion from school -perhaps coupled with a difficult home life- it must be very challenging to find a way to have positive experiences at school: to achieve and receive praise. This is why I think music technology can play such a valuable part: unlike a conventional musical instrument, it is easy to produce a sound that is satisfying. A person with the right life experience can begin to learn something, say for example the guitar, play a note and think "That sounds bad, I will learn to make it sound good with practice". However, a young person without that life experience, and with low self esteem, will play that bad note and think "I can't do this. I'm not the type of person who can do this. This is for other people, I am not naturally good at this." Using technology can help get past this stumbling block. You can quickly make music you can feel satisfied with.

At Cymaz our work is to try to reach these young people and to create opportunities for these kinds of life-affirming experiences, through music. It's about helping this person to create something they can feel proud of creating. It's also about opening doors. If we can ignite a little spark of interest in music, for any young person, perhaps we can present to them an opportunity for something they themselves can explore and develop going forward.