

New City Primary School Orchestra

Summary

Between September 2004 and March 2005 New City Primary School worked with the Guildhall School of Music and Drama's Connect programme and Newham Academy of Music to develop the school's orchestra.

School context

New City Primary School in Newham, has approximately 544 pupils aged 3-11 years. It is a very effective school, very well managed and well led and in some aspects relating to the pupils' attitude to school, their behaviour, personal development and relationships, it is exemplary (Ofsted 2003). The school takes an holistic approach to education with a very committed, mature staff, generally creative in their practice. Over 40 clubs take place at the school, often during holiday periods.

New City is a very musical school; there are four choirs including one that comprises parents, family members, staff and local residents; several recorder groups; and for many years there has been a school orchestra.

The project

The school aspired to develop its orchestra to promote team working amongst pupils by increasing opportunities to play in ensembles, and to broaden the curriculum and experiment with creative techniques and methods such as improvisation. Another objective included engaging more boys in music making. By working with the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD) Connect programme and Newham Academy of Music, the school hoped to develop teachers' understanding and confidence in creative music education.

Connect is a creative music project for young people, which has been running in the London Boroughs of Lewisham and Newham since January 2002. It provides opportunities for young people to make music in various settings, for example workshops, ensembles and singing groups. Similarly, Newham Academy of Music encourages, supports and enables young people to develop their talents and interests in music, including that of other cultures. It offers music tuition on a range of instruments.

The Orchestra project took place between September 2004 and March 2005. It involved approximately 20 pupils who met every Monday after school. The additional expertise provided to the school enabled the orchestra to become more creative and inclusive. Unusually, the orchestra does not demand a minimum level of ability in its players; it encourages pupils of any age playing an instrument to participate. It also includes 10-15 singers and a number of pupils who are learning tabla outside school. The orchestra has performed in venues outside of the school and has tackled a range of works. In autumn 2004, a new work based on Petrushka was devised by the orchestra, with the pupils agreeing the narrative, writing the tunes and the lyrics. The orchestra has also performed a programme entitled Music Through the Decades, which included soundscapes created by the children

Reflections

For the children who participated in the orchestra, the project had a number of positive benefits. A group of year 6 pupils all considered working with others of differing abilities, both inside and outside the school, to be one of the best things about the project, along with the sense of cooperation and the ensuing fun. They look forward to Mondays and rehearsals, as well as practicing and outings.

The young people interviewed, Leah, Carol, Warren and Domonic, commented on how they have overcome their nervousness to gain confidence and pride in performing, and they recognise that it has helped their concentration. They appreciate the different abilities of others in the orchestra and enjoy working together; helping and being helped; taking on new challenges, for example playing solos, trying new instruments, listening to different music and writing new pieces. Several have encouraged siblings to become involved so that they can play together.

Simon Gray, a mature GSMD BMus student who has been working with the orchestra for six months, commented that the pupils appeared to love performing. In terms of the skills developed through the project, he highlighted the composure and presence they have acquired in coming to understand the informal 'contract' between orchestra and audience.

They display concentration and focus, listening to other players and following the conductor; they show patience with those needing help and, as a group, demonstrate respect and sense of community.

Several year 6 pupils commented on their involvement with the Connect programme and its holiday project which took them to GSMD, where they enjoyed being stretched musically through meeting and playing with young people from other schools.

Members of the teaching staff believe the orchestra has provided role models for some children who come from less aspiring or supportive homes. Headteacher Jackie Withnall cited a number of children with limited musical ability who demonstrated considerable commitment and determination to attend rehearsals, to learn and improve. Simon remarked on the diligent attendance amongst the boys in the orchestra. The experience gained through the orchestra has been affirming and developed their confidence in other subject areas and in other aspects of their lives.

The orchestra is mainly the responsibility of New City's music co-ordinator, Jane Ridout, who feels she has learned a great deal through the project and the collaboration with Simon and GSMD. Simon has respected Jane's longstanding experience and teaching skills and witnessed her increasing confidence, while exploring more innovative approaches to music education. As a voice student keen to develop his range of skills, he too has gained from the project through developing expertise in engaging with people at this level, in gaining confidence and his enjoyment of the work. He would welcome more opportunities to work with young people on similar projects as his career progresses.

Jane feels confident that the skills she has acquired through the project will enable her to continue the orchestra's development, with ongoing support from Newham Academy of Music. Connect also has a long term aim to establish a 'virtual network' of best practice in creative music making, involving professional musicians, young people, higher education music students and teachers, which might also be a resource for the school.

The Orchestra project has achieved benefits at a number of levels. The young people's comments demonstrate recognition of their own personal growth, endorsed by staff involved in the project. Whether or not they continue to play an instrument, make music in groups, or attend orchestral concerts, they will almost certainly listen to music with a greater degree of critical appreciation having been members of the orchestra.

There is also development of collective values such as commitment, mutual support and respect engendering a sense of community amongst the young people participating in the project.

The enhanced support provided to New City's orchestra has generated considerable pride within the school and its community and provided new opportunities for the school and pupils through performances as part of the City of London Festival, and in its relationships with organisations such as GSMD and Newham Academy of Music.