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## Exploring the potential of music education to facilitate children's cross-community activities in Belfast

Oscar Odena, School of Education, University of Brighton, UK

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### **Introduction: context of the enquiry**

This paper discusses a qualitative exploration of the views of fourteen practitioners on cross-community music education activities in Northern Ireland. The original enquiry, which was funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation (Odena, 2009), included children's focus groups, interviews with adults, and a review of children's musical development and the uses of music as a tool for inclusion. This paper focuses on the adults' interviews.

Despite the rhetoric of normality and reconciliation following the peace process, most neighbourhoods and schools in Northern Ireland remain segregated. Over nine out of ten schools can be classified as Protestant or Catholic due to the homogeneity of staff and students. Tensions between the two main communities continue to this day, as a result of the violent conflict euphemistically called 'the troubles', which picked in the last three decades of the twentieth century. From 1966 to the late 1990s, over 3,700 people were killed within a population of 1.6 million, due to direct fighting between - and often within - Republican and Loyalist groupings, the British army and the local police (McKittrick et al., 2007).

The background of the study comprises, on the one hand, a segregated society with two main communities with music traditions that have been politically stereotyped - the flute band tradition as 'Protestant' and the Irish folk tradition as 'Catholic'. While on the other hand, music is currently being used in some projects, such as in youth orchestras and school

programs involving students from the two main communities, as a tool to facilitate cross-community activities. As such, music could be seen to be contributing to the reduction of tensions.

Indeed, the improved political environment has potential for developing new cross-community music projects. However, there is a lack of information on the keys for success in collaborative music education activities across the divide. In addition, crucially, on how to adapt the projects for young children, as initiatives for younger children have been proven to maximise the results of interventions across communities in conflict. Therefore, in an attempt to address the above, the study's exploratory research question was: *how can we develop music skills while bringing children from Protestant and Catholic communities together successfully?*

### **Methodology and results**

Following a literature review, fourteen practitioners with extended experience with cross-community activities were interviewed, employing a 'maximum variation' purposive sampling approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The sample included educators from teacher training colleges and the school of music, a workshop leader, a recently retired inspector, and teachers from secondary, primary and nursery schools located in and around Belfast. In-depth interviews of up to 65 minutes were carried out and transcribed verbatim. Difficulties regarding 'insiders' researching mixed groups in Northern Ireland were avoided due to the researcher's 'outsider' Spanish status (Carlisle, 2007). The following are some examples of interview questions:

What is your own background, starting as a young music student?

Could you explain what education activities do you provide? (Age level, students' background, etc.)

In the past, did you feel that the two main school-communities were using music as a sign of identity? (How? Has it diminished?)

Could you provide some advice for successful music education activities where children from both communities participate?

When preparing activities do you try to include music from both traditions or do you try to avoid anything to do with them?

The full interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, with the assistance of the specialist software NVivo (for further information on using software for qualitative data analysis see Odena, 2007 and Odena & Welch, 2009). Thirteen categories emerged from the analysis of data. Four categories appeared to be the most relevant for the research question and are briefly considered in the following four sections: *Stereotypes and alienation*, *Socio-economic factors*, *Project advice* and *Music education potential*.

#### *Stereotypes and alienation*

There was a general consensus amongst interviewees for welcoming change, but segregation and prejudices, particularly in neighbourhoods still experiencing internal conflict, were described as high. In these neighbourhoods, different musical traditions were perceived as exclusive of each community. Three participants expressed this divide as follows:

*The historical background of brass bands is in the British military system... (it) tends to attract more Protestants; similarly Irish traditional music is part of the folk culture of the Catholics.*

*Flute bands petrify me because to me they signify the Twelfth of July and marching...for many it's a very appropriate way of being part of the community, but it still frightens me because it's an alien culture.*

*Like any stereotype, once you start to dig into it, you see that that's not the case, but music has been used as a weapon to sort of define communities...it's like gang mentality.*

#### *Socio-economic factors*

Participants acknowledged that their views were influenced by their upbringing. They felt 'fortunate' to have had 'a middle-class background' and 'professional parents', and also to have mixed with young people across the divide with similar upbringings. The normalisation and slow disappearance of segregation in more affluent areas brought with it a wealth of (*de facto* cross-community) music and music education activities, but cultural alienation remained in poorer areas:

*It works on the professional level and the leafy green suburbs...and to a certain extent in grammar schools.*

### *Project advice*

Singing and composing were regarded as ideal to engage all children. Preferred activities were specifically 'practical activities' that children could easily relate to:

*That's when they get interested...when they're getting involved in actually doing rather than listening or just watching.*

When working in cross-community settings there was a consensus amongst interviewees to ignore any type of music that could be related to one of the two main communities. Exceptions to this only seemed to occur in particular schools in affluent areas and in Integrated schools (less than 1 in 10, see Integrated Education Fund, 2010). Non-competitive activities were favoured, such as 'Music Makers', an innovative series of music workshops offered to over fifty Primary schools in and around Belfast every year (which consequently brought together children from each community who would not normally meet).

Obstacles for cross-community music projects included the schoolteachers' insecurities, the 'extra work' involved, the insufficient funding for transport, and the reluctance of some parents in more polarised neighbourhoods. Some school Principals were curiously perceived as obstacles too:

*A number of Principals do not understand the value of Music; [they] see it as getting in the way of teaching English, Maths and Science.*

### *Music education potential*

Certain schools were described as having a good music reputation, attracting parents regardless of their denomination (arguably from more affluent areas). Nevertheless, the potential to develop music skills while bringing children from both communities together regardless of their area was acknowledged by the participants' many positive experiences in their own education and work with children:

*[Music] is a superb tool for encouraging children to work together...they throw themselves into it wholeheartedly and are quite prepared to work with other people in doing that.*

*They can inspire people like no other group of people can.*

### **Concluding thoughts**

Pettigrew's (1998) three stages of contact between communities in conflict provide a useful framework for analysing and understanding the interviewees' experiences. The three stages are:

- (1) Initial contact: characterised by higher anxiety and activities with an emphasis on personal identity and inter-personal interaction (in an effort to 'de-categorise' the individual);
- (2) Contact well established: optimal situation with less anxiety in which the old categorization of belonging to a particular group is highlighted, resulting in weakened prejudices that are generalised beyond the activity;
- (3) Final stage: after extended contact, individuals begin to think of themselves as part of a redefined new larger group that comprises all communities (development of the idea of a new community, or a 're-categorisation' of the old ones).

The data analysis suggests that the majority of the activities described by participants would fall within the first stage. Practical implications for the development of new projects would include the provision of appropriate funding and development for teachers, the need for schools to get involved in project design, and a focus on deprived areas (in affluent areas schools seem to come together when they wish to do so). Focussing on children appeared to maximise project impact: interviewees remembered the first time they came across youngsters from across the divide in musical activities, which helped to dilute their own stereotypes. Finally, projects would need to offer something that enticed children (fun), parents (quality) and schools (status), focussing first on quality musical experiences and leaving 'respect' to develop naturally (for an extended discussion see the full article, Odena, 2010).

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