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Mental Health and Social Inc

The role of music in social projects: an introduction to its wellbeing benefits.

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Invited paper (01/2023) for Editor Review for the journal *Mental Health and Social Inclusion,* Emerald Publishing

The role of music in social projects: an introduction to its wellbeing benefits.

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to the role of music in social projects.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper introduces the reader to the field of social music projects and why it is important.

Findings – On-going conflicts, inequalities, and the use of orchestras and choirs for other-than-musical purposes, have all contributed to an increasing interest and adoption of music practices in social projects to support people's inclusion and wellbeing, from both service providers and service users.

Research limitations/implications – This paper will look at research into music for social inclusion, with particular attention on benefits related to wellbeing and methodological innovations in this field.

Practical implications – The research examples will also consider the implications of various social music projects for the support of wellbeing of diverse groups of people.

Social implications – Different approaches and points of view will be considered in relation to their impact on inclusion and wellbeing.

Originality/value – Over the past seventeen years the author has developed an interest in the use of music and musical creativity for social purposes. The author has recently edited a book, published by Routledge, on music and social inclusion and feels it is an important topic for the Journal of Mental Health and Social Inclusion.

Keywords Social cohesion, wellbeing, social music projects, complex settings, sound ethnography.

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

How do we develop social inclusion through musical activities? What is the power of music in enhancing individual inclusion and group cohesion in complex settings such as post-conflict environments? How can we investigate social music projects? The number of publications over the last two decades on the social impacts of musical engagement evidence the topic's relevance. Journals that published Special Issues on this topic in Portuguese, Spanish, and English include *Revista da ABEM* (Del-Ben, 2004, 2005), *Eufonía* (2008) and *Musicae Scientiae* (Bartleet and Pairon, 2021). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the reliance on digital technology combined with the impact of music on wellbeing was considered in Special Issues in *Frontiers in Psychology* (Hansen et al., 2022) and *Journal of Music, Health, and Wellbeing* (Williams *et al.*, 2021). The increase in publications, nevertheless, does not seem to provide a clearer understanding of how such impact may develop or of its value across settings. Since 2019, I have led a network of academics and practitioners called The Arts of Inclusion, aimed at building expertise to assess the role of performing arts practices for inclusion in complex settings (www.tai.international). This field, and the network membership, include

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researchers with backgrounds in Education, Music, Psychology, Human Geography, and Political Sciences, with an interest in social music project development in formal and informal settings. Initially with members from the UK and Latin America, the network has grown ever since, recently with more music specialists with interdisciplinary expertise. Their investigations focus on, to name a few, the role of music practices for ex-combatants in Colombia, choirs for homeless people in Brazil, hip-hop contests with at-risk youth in Mexico, and collaborative song writing with refugees in the UK. Their work has implications for the support of diverse beneficiary groups in cross-community and post-conflict environments. These implications are considered in a book I edited (Odena, 2023) with contributions from 14 countries, of which ten are from the Global South. This paper develops some of its key ideas, drawing on two chapters I co-authored.

Although there are studies on the role of music in social projects, available reports tend to focus on self-reported outputs and reach, or 'counting heads'. This reinforces the view that music is a 'magic' tool that works across contexts, without critically interrogating how, why, and when, and leaving the process of musical engagement as if existing in a separate realm. This view is still prevalent among the general public and is often reinforced in publications that focus at best on the romantic aspects of social arts projects and at worst ignore how the musical processes worked. In the following sections I aim to (a) provide an introduction to the role of music in social projects with particular attention on inclusion and wellbeing benefits, and (b) argue for a qualitative research turn to fully understand the impact of musical engagement in such projects. After briefly categorising the different ways music is used as a tool for inclusion, I will focus on a study of a project for children in social vulnerability in Brazil and a study of a programme for displaced families in Colombia. The paper closes with some implications for research and practice.

Using music as a tool for inclusion in different contexts

Musical activities have been successfully used as a tool for inclusion in a number of school and community contexts across the globe, where there was a need for increasing inclusion. Elsewhere I reviewed how such activities have been employed in at least three different ways: (a) to support wellbeing and group cohesion, (b) to promote intercultural education, and (c) to facilitate inclusive learning (Odena, 2018). Before I continue, I should note that the concept of 'inclusion' is contested; its use in contexts that are inherently unequal is open to criticism, particularly when linked with social projects. For example, Baker (2023) critiques the linking of music with inclusion, looking at lessons from a world famous music and social inclusion programme, the Venezuelan youth orchestra scheme *El Sistema*. Baker argues that the notions of inclusion used in social music projects are based on a deficit model that assumes a superior value of the culture of the centre, which is supposed to benefit those in the periphery. A path beyond social inclusion he proposes – anti-oppression – would require the leaders of such projects to de-centre themselves; they would need to learn from the expertise of 'marginalised groups, mobilise in collective action under the leadership of people from such groups, and thereby take action on systems of inequality' (Baker, 2023, p. 257). I would argue this criticism applies in the first two ways above, namely (a) supporting the inclusion of two or more groups in activities aimed at developing wellbeing and/or group cohesion, and (b) the inclusion of musical examples from a variety of cultures to promote intercultural education. Nevertheless, when considering (c) using music to facilitate inclusive learning, that is, to engage students of different

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abilities, the above criticism may not apply to the same extent. For example, working with children with additional needs would cross into the related area of music therapy. There is a variety of music therapy research and practice approaches. They range from clinical applications of background music for anxiety reduction, to the use of musical improvisation to develop communication skills with children on the autistic spectrum (e.g. King, 2004). The music therapy literature, nevertheless, falls beyond the scope of this paper and reviews of it can be found elsewhere (e.g. Bunt, 2012). In the next two sections I focus on two examples that fall within the first way, i.e. the use of musical activities to support wellbeing and group cohesion.

The impact of music education in social projects: an example from Brazil

This example interrogates some impacts of music education in a social project in the Brazilian state of Santa Catarina. The project provides musical activities for children and adolescents in a situation of social vulnerability. Analysis of data focussed on personal, musical and social benefits as experienced by participants. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on other-than-musical benefits linked to participants' well-being. With over 211 million people Brazil is the sixth most populous country in the world. It currently ranks 128th out of 163 countries in the Global Peace Index (Institute of Economics and Peace, 2021), and with a World Bank's Gini coefficient of inequality reaching its highest on record in 2021, it is the most unequal country in Latin America (Tornaghi, 2021). Since the turn of the century, public and civic organizations concerned with inequality and violence levels, particularly in underprivileged communities, have used the arts to try to have a positive social impact in such communities. Brazilian researchers have considered the power of transformation in the everyday life of participants of social projects involving music education, and the socio-emotional issues related to developing such projects (e.g. Hikiji, 2006; Machado et al., 2021). They reported such projects impact people's wellbeing and sense of inclusion, while pointing to the need for further research.

This example focusses on *Barrio da Juventude*, a project developed in Criciúma, a city colonised from 1880 onwards by Italian migrants. Later, Germans, Polish, and Portuguese also settled in the city. Today it has around 219,000 inhabitants, and the main economic activities are linked to the production of coal, and tile and ceramic flooring (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2021). One of the purposes of *Barrio da Juventude* is to have 'an inclusive policy aimed at social responsibility and guided by the defence, protection and promotion of the rights of children' (www.bairrodajuventude.org.br). The project was established in 1949 by Rogationist Catholic Priests and offers cultural, sports, and vocational training in addition to musical activities. The administration of the project relies on donors, supporters, and sponsors.

The analysis of data brought together a set of elements related to the benefits of music education in social projects, using North and Hargreaves' (2008) Model of potential outcomes of music education as a reference. This model draws on psychological studies of the functions of music and contains three types of outcomes or dimensions, namely musical-artistic, personal, and social-cultural. The musical-artistic dimension encompasses music skills in general. The personal dimension relates to 'cognition, learning and scholastic gains' and also emotional development. And the social-cultural dimension involves 'social skills and cultural development', including 'interpersonal skills, teamwork, and co-

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operation' (North and Hargreaves, 2008, p. 358). This model was used to conduct the data analysis, interrogating the statements from students, coordinators, teachers, and parents. Interviews focused on the project processes and perceived benefits.

At the time of the research, around 1,500 children and young people were attending its activities. About 500 of these participated in musical workshops for guitar, string, orchestra, brass group, and choir. Transport was provided for them, and the project had buses that travel daily to 82 city districts. Music, nevertheless, is part of Barrio da Juventude's comprehensive education project, which includes a range of activities; participants choose the areas they wish to develop. The institution has several instruments that can be taken home by students for practice. They choose the musical activities themselves, and must spend at least one semester in the chosen activity. After that time, the student can switch to another musical experience. Methodologically, the activities are developed in small groups, on different days of the week, and eventually rehearsals are conducted with larger groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic several activities were modified, with classes being stopped for some time, and then summarised with a lot of sanitary care to protect students and staff. Several musical activities continue to be conducted regularly in small groups, and it has been possible to restart classes at the present time (many children would not be able to follow remote teaching, because they do not have suitable equipment or Internet access in their homes).

The comments of the interviewees highlighted several benefits from the children and young people's experiences in different music workshops. There are interesting findings linked to the personal dimension of North and Hargreaves' model, highlighted in many statements by participants. One of the coordinators pointed out the development of 'commitment to activities and the responsibility assumed by children'. The teachers emphasised positive aspects resulting from project participation, including increased discipline, concentration, personal organisation, and autonomy, among others. In the same personal dimension, the interviewees' considered music as 'a tool for general development', and for 'more pleasurable school learning, and expansion of cognitive abilities'. It is not difficult to see how all these map out to an increased sense of wellbeing by participants. Several testimonies that highlighted the social-cultural outcomes would fall within the third dimension of the model. The development of 'a posture in front of the group' was emphasised by the teachers, who considered their small workshop methodology a key factor for this development. The interaction in small and large groups was reported to favour experiences that reflected on the daily lives of young participants. For example, respect for differences, commitment to group activities, and responsibilities inherent to individual work in favour of the collective were aspects pointed out by interviewees. A sense of citizenship and wellbeing was also reiterated in the project, preparing children and young people to be autonomous and critical in society. It should be observed that such extracurricular voluntary activities do not reach all children across contexts. In other words, part of the population will not participate in social projects involving music e.g. only around 500 out of 1,500 participants in *Barrio da Juventude* self-selected to attend music activities. In future studies it would be good to further consider (a) the participants' perceived musical skills prior to joining a social music project, and (b) the perceptions of children who discontinue participation, to better understand its processes. The later fieldwork, although complex to conduct, would allow current scholarship to consider a range of

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viewpoints including various levels of success and failure, which could illustrate more accurately the processes and outputs of social projects.

Using sound ethnography to study a social music programme in Colombia

The second example outlines the development of a research approach including sound ethnography for investigating a state-funded community music programme in Colombia, Music for Reconciliation. I use the term 'programme' instead of project because the activities have been delivered systematically for a number of years across many cities in Colombia. After briefly outlining the on-going Colombian conflict and literature, a methodological pilot with ten participants is discussed. Findings show the contributions of sound postcards as part of life histories for capturing experiences of internally displaced people. Their evocative capacity enriched the interviewees' narratives, illustrating diverse sonorous landscapes throughout their lives that evidenced changes generated by violence and programme participation. This example offers suggestions for readers across disciplines, interested in the uses of music for other-than-musical purposes.

For more than 60 years, Colombia has been suffering an armed conflict with an increasing number of agents and interests; together these have led to a scenario of violence in which civil society has been most affected. In the last thirty years, 90% of victims have been mostly children, youth and women from peasant, Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013; Abad, 2019). There are various actors involved in the conflict, including those with political interests (guerrilla groups) and those with economic interests (paramilitaries and drug-traffickers). All these actors seek territorial control by means of armed violence and have been perpetrators of grave human rights violations. This situation has led to the phenomenon of forced displacement of civilians towards safer areas. The *Basta Ya* report, prepared by the National Historical Memory Commission, recorded a total of 5,712,506 internally displaced people due to threats or violence (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013). The Colombian State has passed various laws to protect this population. However, law implementation has been limited and internally displaced people tend to become a vulnerable sector (Ibáñez and Moya, 2010). It is in this context that a number of social music programmes were introduced in the 1990s at the government's initiative, and are run by the Batuta National Foundation, also known as Batuta. The programmes aim to support children and young people who live in poverty or who have been victims of the conflict. Their underpinnings are based on the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela (*El Sistema*), where musical and social objectives are combined (Creech *et al*., 2014). The foundation, which works with public and private funding, has developed a solid administrative and academic structure and by 2019, they were running 44 symphony orchestras, 187 choirs and 644 music initiation ensembles countrywide. Following the global COVID-19 pandemic, Batuta developed a hybrid strategy combining online tools and radio programs with printed materials and USB flash drives and in 2020 managed to reach 28,561 participants, 52% of whom had been victims of the armed conflict (Fundación Nacional Batuta, 2021). This example is aimed at discussing the development of an appropriate research approach for researching Batuta's Music for Reconciliation. This programme is financed in its entirety through public resources disbursed as a result of Law 1448 of 2011, known as Victims' and Land Restitution Law, which defines the measure of assistance and reparation for the victims of the conflict. The programme applies an integral model of musical-psychosocial attention both to individuals and to groups and includes the

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participation of children, young people, parents/guardians and adults. The programme's foundations, the psychosocial approach and the focus on children and parents/guardians affected by conflict is new to this kind of programme compared with *El Sistema*. Next, I outline the programme aims and activities, before reflecting on the relevance of the methods to collect the data required and discussing their usefulness for similar social research.

Music for Reconciliation is aimed at reconstructing the 'social fabric' of the participant's life by recreating the internal dynamic of a community. This would include the community members' relationships, re-organising their roles and renewing their commitment towards community-building, both for pleasure and for developing alternative ways of resolving collective problems. I refer to 'social fabric' of the person's life as a metaphor of how well community members or 'threads' interact with each other, thus weaving the threads together; the more positively the members interact with each other the stronger the fabric is. Collective musical spaces offer a safe way of dealing with the process of psychosocial support that people need during and after conflict. Research has shown how collective musical programmes allow for the emergence of an environment favourable to developing community skills, which are important in peacebuilding (Urbain, 2008). Various experiences discussed in the literature show that these settings facilitate the preservation of human qualities in both individual and collective victim populations and allow hope to prevail (e.g. Pruitt, 2011; Siapno, 2013). Additionally, these spaces encourage the ability to respond to disaster, help avoid emotional paralysis, and enable victims to have some control over their own lives even in the midst of violence. In the aftermath of conflict, collective music programs can mitigate psychological trauma from violence and, through reconfiguring both personal and group identity, reconstruct social ties (Robertson, 2010). The literature also explains that community arts can be an efficient tool in bringing communities affected by the conflict closer together, creating within them a bridge between the present, past, and future (Kaiser, 2006). In this sense DeNora (2000) outlines that collective musical spaces favour evocation, that is, the memory of peaceful past experiences, from which emanates the possibility of a peaceful future.

The study of the Music for Reconciliation programme comprised music centres across four cities. For the sake of space in this example I will focus on the pilot, which was conducted in Bogotá. One of the two study objectives was to identify the contributions of the programme in rebuilding the social fabric in the lives of victims affected by the conflict. The approach chosen focussed on life histories (Goodson and Gill, 2011) to which we added and adapted sound postcards from anthropology (Alonso Cambrón, 2005, 2011). To generate comparable data, half of the interviewees belonged to the programme, and the other half had similar conflict experiences but did not belong to the programme. A focus group with children in the programme, participant observation and field notes were also used in the pilot, all of them understood through an interpretive paradigm (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). We selected life histories as the principal methodology, given the need to identify changes in the social fabric of the interviewees' lives. This required coming to an appreciation of the everyday routines of participants, their communal spaces, and the institutions on which they had counted all their lives for their development, and finding out if participating in the programme had facilitated the reconstruction of the social fabric. Life history methodology, understood as a pedagogical space where mutual

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exchanges can take place, generates a dynamic that can be transformative for interviewees (Goodson and Gill, 2011).

Four life histories were collected for the pilot investigation; one child and an adult relative who participated in the programme and one child and an adult relative who did not. Coincidentally, the relatives with availability to be interviewed were always the mothers. The fieldwork was conducted in a music centre where the programme had been in progress for three years. Psychosocial support professionals in the centre suggested the families to be interviewed, and the daily work of the fieldwork leader was coordinated with them. Access was assisted by the previous involvement in music programmes by the fieldwork leader, as a facilitator and as a researcher (e.g. Rodríguez, 2013). The Music for Reconciliation programme offered group singing led by trained music educators to children twice a week, in a safe venue in which children could meet other internally displaced people. Psychosocial support for parents was available monthly or bi-monthly, as required by users, and activities that included all the children and their relatives were offered at the end of the year. Our fieldwork took place during term time. We had three interviews, one each week, each interview lasting one hour or more (a total of 12 interviews, three for each of the four life histories). Interviews took place at three different moments, with the aim of identifying and focussing on the participants' circumstances during each of the following life phases; before the violent events, during the violent events, and at the current time.

Our adoption of the 'sound postcard' method was also informed by praxis. Originally developed by geographers and anthropologists, the technique rests on the idea that sound events are inseparable from the conditions in which they occur. Changes in normality can be recorded through memory and serve to introduce and evoke the contextual conditions of each moment in the lives of interviewees. We decided to ask two questions to participants: (1) *If you had to send one sound to someone you know who has never been to the place of research, what sound or sounds would you choose that would be representative of the space in question?* And (2) *If you had the intention to send a postcard to someone you know, who has never been to your neighbourhood but, instead of choosing an image, had to choose a sound, what sound or sounds would you choose?* Mothers and children were invited to create sound postcards at various times during the interviews. We chose to use sound postcards to facilitate obtaining relevant memories and to allow the creation of sound histories of the subject's life to the present. In this way, the transformations in the lives of the interviewees would be revealed through changes in their sound environments.

The postcards enabled changes in the context of each stage of the narrator's life to be recorded by way of a description of its particular sound environment. In this sense, changes in the 'density' of the social fabric of the interviewee's life could be identified, for example with questions about the most important annual collective celebrations such as New Year. An initial sound postcard, corresponding to life in the countryside (prior to displacement) may illustrate, through its sounds, a community and family space where people gathered to celebrate around a meal, drinks and to the sound of fireworks; the same celebration in the wake of forced displacement became a very private moment in which only the nuclear family took part, with neither the participation of friends, nor music. Equally, the sound

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postcard served to illustrate the reconstruction of the social fabric of the family which, in some cases, occurred after some years in the new place of residence. In addition, the sound postcard was used to investigate the relationship of interviewees with the music centre, as exemplified in this extract from an interview focussing on after displacement: (*Researcher*) 'And if you take a photo with sounds from the first period with Batuta, what does it sound like when you arrived?' (*Beneficiary*) 'The laughter, the music, the Pink Panther, my teacher Ms Cony. The concerts, singing that'.

The focus group allowed for greater exploration of the relationship with territory, with neighbours, the groups to which the participants belonged, and the way in which the musical programme had influenced those processes. The focus group conversation permitted a deeper exploration of the elements related to reconstructing the social fabric of the participants' lives that complemented the other techniques applied. Interviews with programme participants differed from non-participants just around the questions about the activities in the music centre. However, we used the same interview parts, which allowed us to have information on the social fabric of the person's life in general. Overall, life histories and postcards in both interviews and focus group enabled the gathering of detailed descriptions of the children's Batuta-related experiences. We found combining sound postcards with life histories particularly useful, as it enriched the chronological narrative description, allowing other types of data to appear by recalling sounds, which in turn, released the tension for the participants. As some authors argue (DeNora, 2000; Odena, 2001), sound contains evocative potential, which helped to recreate distinct phases in the interviewees' lives, even those parts they scarcely recalled and were engulfed in conflict-related memories. By way of sound postcards, we sought to achieve a more agreeable way of narrating life histories, especially for children who had experienced the impacts of violence. However, it was necessary to apply clear ethical parameters, since the methodology could reinforce negative memories in the narrators, which was neither desirable nor justifiable under any circumstances. Therefore, we aimed not to evoke painful memories in the interviewees. Sound is indeed a source of information but, going beyond this, used in sound postcards as part of the life history methodology, it became an evocative vehicle. Sound provided new elements for the narrators to interpret their own experiences, strengthening a transformative dynamic produced through the conversations.

Conclusion

The first example interrogated the music activities of a project for children in social vulnerability, focussing on personal, musical and social aspects as experienced by participants. It was clear from the perspective of beneficiaries and their parents/guardians that the activities had a positive impact on the participants' wellbeing, self-worth and, ultimately, citizenship. I suggest further longitudinal research is needed on the prevalence of these benefits and their potential impact on mental health compared with non-participants. This is needed because participation in most social music projects is voluntary, and self-perception of music skills may influence the decision to join.

In the second example, I discussed innovations in social research including combining sound ethnography with life history. This methodology evidenced how the sounds around the interviewees

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changed, highlighting transformations in the density of the social fabric of their lives, how armed conflict weakened it, and how it was strengthened by programme participation. The two examples considered how social musical programmes can impact upon the promotion of emotional wellbeing, the development of bonds between people, and on social cohesion. Looking forward, I propose that sound postcards ought to be used as a way of complementing or enriching traditional qualitative methods, in search of new types of sensory data – in this case, hearing –, which enable participants to better elicit and reflect on their experiences. The evocative capacity of sound postcards could be used by researchers and practitioners based in health and social science disciplines with an interest in the uses of music for wellbeing and mental health. Finally, given the different interpretations of 'inclusion' across fields, I suggest that any project addressing inclusion would need to agree a shared interpretation amongst all actors involved.

Acknowledgments

The two examples draw on chapters 7 and 15 from *Music and Social Inclusion*, see Further Reading below. The work of the network 2019-2023 was supported with grants by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council AH/S003851/1, Royal Society of Edinburgh 62292, and Scottish Funding Council UofG308355/313763 (Odena, PI). Rodríguez's work in Colombia was supported with a grant from the International Peace Research Association Foundation. In compliance with UKRI requirements a pre-print version of the paper will be available in the University of Glasgow repository after publication.

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