

# At New Fosseway School, Simon is showing how music can speak to children in a way other forms of communication cannot do

Simon Leach is a therapist with the charity MusicSpace, based in Bristol. Amongst others, MusicSpace works with children who have profound learning difficulties with the aim of improving their communication and social skills through musical interaction.



## Expressing emotion through music

Simon became interested in the potential healing power of music largely as a result of playing and performing with other like-minded musicians. His fascination with how musical improvisation can create a close bond between the participants led him to realise that this could be channelled in a way which could benefit people with communication difficulties. "Music affects everyone on different levels but very frequently in a positive way," he says. "For me, the experience of taking an active part in producing music is amazing, and it is like nothing else in creating a bond between the people involved. That is why I decided to train as a music therapist, so I could help people express their emotions through a medium other than speech alone."

## A new insight into each child's needs

Working with children at New Fosseway School, Simon's first objective is to get a feeling for their individual needs so that he can tailor each session accordingly. "There may be a child who wants to make as much noise as possible on a drum, and I'll respond in kind so they begin to feel a connection with me. Or they might take a guitar, tambourine or ukulele and quietly shake the instrument, or pluck the strings, and I echo that in my playing; either way, they are expressing themselves in a way they are unable to do verbally and it gives me an insight into their emotional needs."

## Making a breakthrough

Many of the children with whom Simon works are either on the autistic spectrum or have profound psychological problems, but he has found that most find music a means of expressing their feelings and connecting with others. "When I see a smile or gain eye contact with a pupil for the first time, I know I am starting to get through to them," he says. "That is an indication that they are moving towards more effective social interaction and better communication skills."

## The value of interaction

Simon believes that music therapy has at least two specific potential benefits: the promotion of interpersonal communication and a means of helping people express their emotions. "As an example, a child with autism may experience an emotional 'high' from which he finds it hard to recover; this can be reproduced in musical terms by playing loud, exciting tunes which gradually decrease into calmer, more gentle melodies. This experience can help him learn how to independently calm himself down in other situations. I have seen children who had innate anxieties been brought back to a point where they are able to relax and feel comfortable in social situations, largely by the influence of musical interaction with another person."

## Engagement

In the same way as other types of mental health therapy, Simon's work can often have an incidental effect on a student's overall behaviour and wellbeing. "If a child can be positively influenced by any intervention it will help them to engage better in other classroom situations. This is another aspect of New Fosseway that I admire, because anything that can be done will be done, wherever possible."

## A positive impact on quality of life

Although therapy of any kind cannot guarantee a long-term positive outcome for the conditions affecting Simon's pupils, he is convinced that his input alongside that of other practitioners at New Fosseway School has a huge impact on their quality of life. "What I like about working with New Fosseway is that the teachers are completely dedicated to the children in their care. They do everything they can to ensure that every child has the best chance of participating fully in school life and, potentially, of gaining some measure of later independence. I am made to feel part of a team which has only the best interests of every one of these children at heart."

Simon is one of many professional contributors to New Fosseway School who bring in their expertise and passion in order to make a real difference to the children who most need their help.

