



# Sustain the note – Developing an understanding of sustainability through music

## At the beginning...

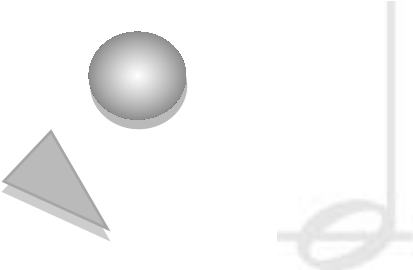
“What have music and sustainability got in common, and how on earth do I ‘fit’ education for sustainable development into my planning?”

This was the first of many questions I asked myself when our school, Beech Hill County Primary, won the WWF Curriculum Management Award.

As a music teacher in a large two form entry school, I had enough problems fitting all I wanted to do into only forty minutes a week without adding to my workload. On the other hand, I had the advantage of teaching all year groups and was able to plan for progression as the children’s understanding developed.

My initial idea, then, was to make my workload less of a load – more sustainable for me – so I decided to mould the materials I was already using into a sustainability theme by giving them a tweak here and there, rather than starting from scratch with the ‘S’ word!






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## What are the links between music and education for sustainability?

Music needs people to work together at all levels if a good result is to be achieved – whether singing a nursery rhyme or playing in a 90 piece orchestra. This is the building block for all good music and fits in nicely with education for sustainability, so that is where I began.



### Skills

- co-operative working
- critical thinking
- problem solving
- creativity – finding a variety of ways to achieve the desired results
- making informed choices
- feeding back ideas – communication on lots of different levels

### Values and attitudes

- encouraging self awareness and how each of us affects others
- exploring own feelings, fears and hopes, and feeding back into a more global thought
- I can do it, we can do it – participation at own level, secure in the knowledge that all contributions are valuable
- encouraging a desire to change and allowing these desires to make a real difference




### Key Stage 1 (Ages 5–7)

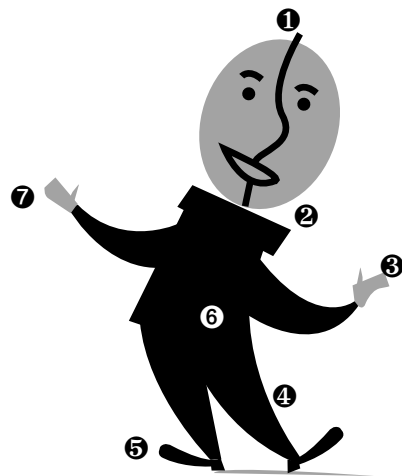
#### Billy Beat

I use 'Billy Beat' to encourage Reception children to explore sounds they can make with their bodies, eg when I point to Billy's hands, the children make a sound using their hands.

To encourage the skills and values I had identified as relevant to sustainability, once Billy had been used several times, I altered his mouth. At the start of the lesson it was noticed...

#### Education for sustainability aims

- to promote greater empathy for the feelings of others
  - to begin to think about how each individual can affect the emotions of others.
- 



- 1 head pat
- 2 mouth sing
- 3 finger flick
- 4 knees knock
- 5 feet stamp
- 6 tummy tap
- 7 hands rub

“Billy looks a bit sad today, Miss.”

“What a shame. Has he got tummy ache?”

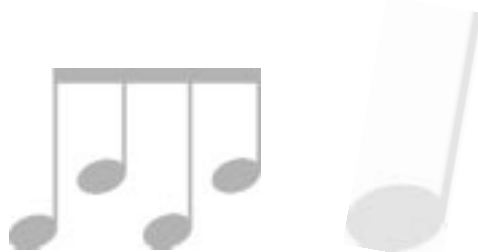
(Reception music is straight after lunch!)

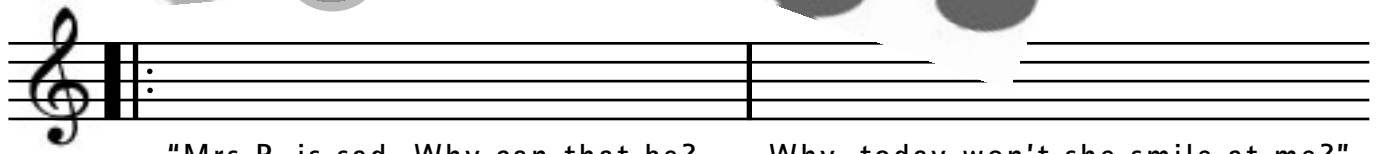


This began further discussion about what may have made Billy sad, giving an outlet to children less able to talk about their own feelings and experiences. All the experiences related to the children – some even said “I feel sad when...” rather than “Billy might be sad because...”.

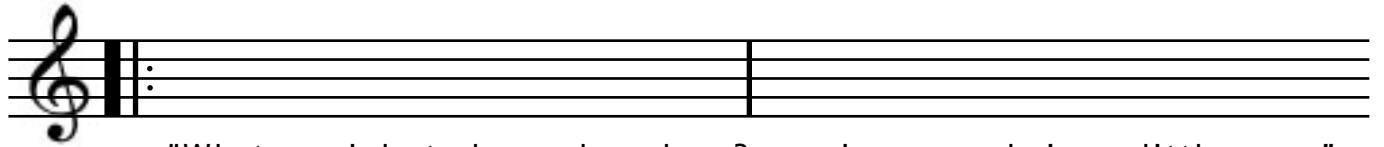
I then asked the children what we might do to help Billy stop being sad (it had been agreed that being sad made us “feel muddy inside”). Being a music lesson, the obvious solution to the children was to sing! Fortunately this had the desired effect on Billy.

In later weeks the children were asked to think about other people – how they felt if Mum or Dad or a friend was sad, and how they might help. We considered what they might do if their teacher was sad. To help with ideas for this tricky problem, we played chanting games with simple words slotted into a repeated formula.



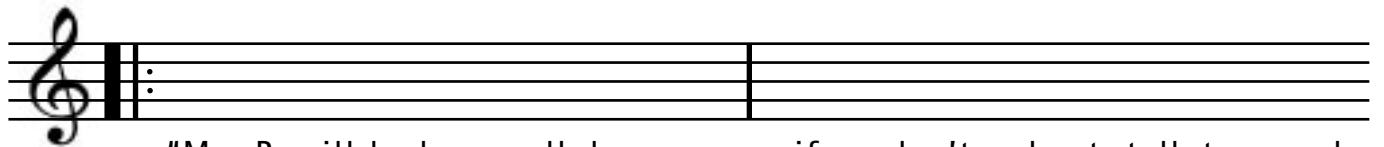


"Mrs P. is sad. Why can that be? Why, today won't she smile at me?"



"What can I do to happy her along? I can... and sing a little song."

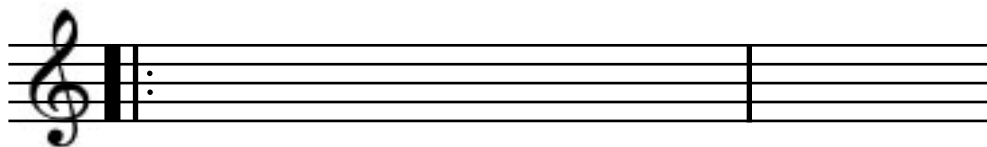
I found it helpful to use pictures of the class teacher involved here (Mrs P. )and to discuss possible solutions first so the rhythm could be followed by everyone.



"Mrs P. will be happy all day now if we don't... shout, talk too much



go to the toilet without asking, get paint all over the tables,



leave tidying up for everyone else to do..."

### Musical rainstorm

#### Education for sustainability aims

- to promote co-operation and team work
- to explore the kinds of behaviour that facilitate team work
- to recognise the importance of the contribution of each individual.

I use this activity for Year 1 but even Year 6 can benefit from this simple performance piece.

Everyone sits in a circle, and the teacher explains the following rules: each child must follow the person on his/her right and no one else: when they move, s/he moves; when they start to do something, s/he copies. The teacher starts by tapping a finger lightly onto his/her palm. Gradually, the tapping will spread around the circle. Once it has reached full circle, the teacher changes to a light clap: again this will spread round the circle. The teacher changes the movement again to a slap on the floor and finally adds foot stomping. One by one, the teacher stops the feet, changes the slap to a clap, the clap to a tap and then stops the tap until there is silence.

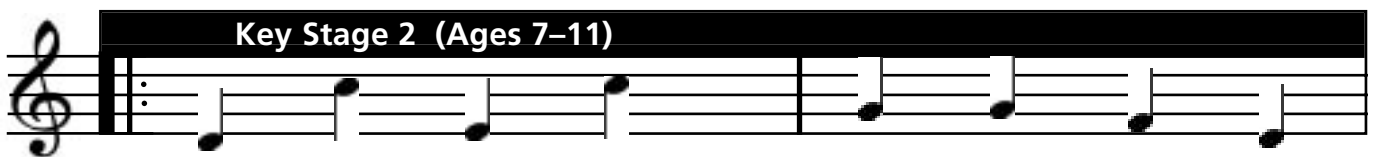
Musically you have created the effect of a rainstorm, and the children find the crescendo and diminuendo very satisfying. It will take a lot of tries to get this right. This is your key for discussion.

Discussion can become quite personal and needs to be carefully orchestrated. Even at a very young age, children grasp concepts of working together, co-operation and team work through this activity, and afterwards are more tolerant and aware of others when working in a group.

"Why did it not work that time?"

"Some people wanted to change too quickly."

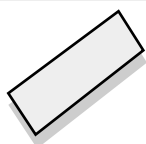
"John wasn't looking at me when I changed."




### Painting to music

#### Education for sustainability aims

- to encourage children to explore their emotions in a non-threatening way
- to encourage children to devise their own solutions to their problems (great for critical thinking)
- sustainable organisation in practice for the teacher – small teacher input, enormous output by children, including a big display.

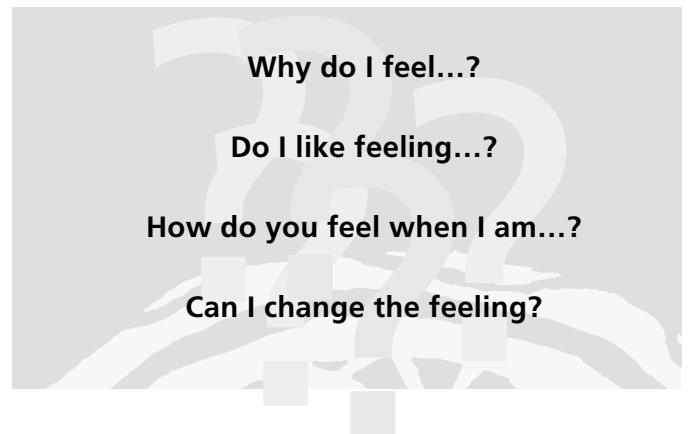




Choose two contrasting pieces of music, preferably ones you like. Think about the emotions the music creates in you. Alternatively choose two emotions and find music to match.

Play the music to the children – a short extract of about 1 minute is usually enough to start with. Discuss the music in terms of sound, quality, texture, instruments and finally mood or emotion. Discuss what the music made them feel like, responses may be limited depending on your music selection. Discuss the colours they feel appropriate to the music and the emotion involved. Ask each child to choose one colour and make a record of it along with some of the words and ideas discussed.

Explore the emotion through brainstorming, story writing, role play or poetry to help the children realise where their emotions and moods are coming from, and what they can do to change them if necessary. These questions may help:



Anger is red  
It smells like burnt hot dogs  
And it tastes like Manufite  
It looks like a tiger  
And feels like you got into the bath when the water was too hot  
Anger makes me uncomfortable

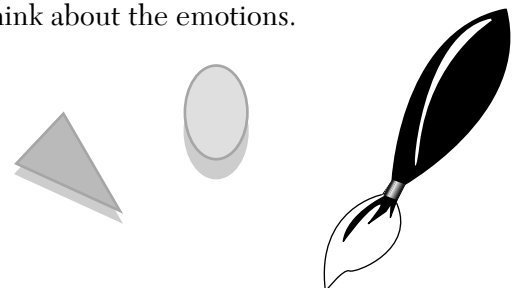
Another way to explore the emotion in the music is through painting – a great way for those children who can't express themselves well verbally or in written work.

#### You will need:

- One enormous piece of paper, as big as you can find. Your local friendly newspaper publisher will supply if you ask them nicely!
- Space. Put all your tables together in the classroom or, better still, spread the paper out on the floor in the hall or gym.

- Pots of paint, containing the colours the children have chosen.
- A clear set of rules, when to paint, how to paint and what to paint.

Practising brushstrokes in the air with 'magic paint brushes' before doing the real thing will help children to focus on the shape and pattern in the music as well as to think about the emotions.



Finally position the children around the paper, each with one pot of paint and a paint brush. With a class of thirty or more I usually do this in two halves – each child having a partner and swapping over after a few minutes. Play the music and watch the creativity flow! Ask the children to move around the paper every now and again so the colour is distributed all over the painting. As soon as the music stops the children should stop painting. Once dry, the painting can go up on the wall linked with all the brainstorming works and poetry. Not only does the finished display look good, but it also provokes ideas and questions from the children who haven't been involved, widening the experiences your children have had to as large an audience as possible.



### Beautiful world, polluted world

#### Education for sustainability aims

- to raise awareness of the impact of human activity on the environment
- to begin to explore possible solutions to environmental degradation.

This activity can be adapted to fit in with different topics and age groups.

Look at pictures of natural environments. Explore sounds to match the pictures – soft light, melodious sounds using xylophones, glockenspiels, triangles, Indian bells, maracas, rainmakers etc. Put the sounds together into a stable solid structure: drone (single note or sound repeated again and again to keep the beat), ostinato (simple repeating pattern of notes or sounds), improvisation (any number of sounds or patterns played in any order), is a good easy-to-follow structure for large or small groups. Discuss the rigid structure and compare to the structure of the environment in your chosen picture.

Now ask the children what is missing from the picture (humans). Discuss the effects people might have on the environment and how this could be interpreted into music. Explore sounds for building, traffic, pollution, etc: loud banging, clanking sounds, using drums, cymbals, cow bells, voices (pollution chants), 'found sounds' (plastic bin lids, old food containers, spoons, trays, etc – see next section). Put the sounds together in the same solid structure.





Compare the two pieces of music. Talk about the impact that people might have on environments such as those in the pictures. Use your two pieces to create one big piece – start with the beautiful world; once in full flow, slowly and quietly bring in the polluted world until finally the beautiful world is taken over. This might take some practice as the beautiful world players are tempted to play louder as the pollution tries to take over. If this happens, use it to your advantage – after all, many environments have resisted the changes imposed on them by people!

When this piece was completed, our children were disheartened by the fact that pollution had overtaken and nothing had been done about it.

Following all these questions I asked the children in their groups to come up with their own solutions – to change, or not to change their composition as they saw fit, and to try and justify their changes. As these children were only Year 3 I did not expect a great number of changes or solutions, but I was pleasantly surprised with what most groups came up with. Here are three examples and their justifications.

Group 1 – six children mixed ability, two boys and four girls  
Their music started the same – beautiful world, polluted world gradually encroaching. They finished their piece with the polluted world dying away, leaving only the beautiful world. When asked why they had chosen to perform their piece like this, they replied: “We didn’t want our music to be sad and angry at the end. We wanted to make the world beautiful again like when we clean up the valley.”

1

Group 2 – mixed/lower ability, six boys  
The beautiful world began their piece followed by the gradual introduction of the polluted world music. To end their piece the boys decided to add some words and muted the pollution sounds so that both pieces of music could be heard distinctly. When asked why, they replied: “We wanted it to be real. When we clean up somewhere we never get rid of all the muck. There is always some left...”

2

Group 3 – mixed/higher ability, six girls  
These children finished their piece by allowing the pollution to take over, but right at the end added a short extract of their beautiful world. When asked why, they replied: “Looking at those pictures in the beginning we decided that none of us ever saw a place like that except in pictures, so our music ended with a picture of what we want to see.”

3

Of all the activities I tried this year, this was one of the most overtly environmental and it elicited some interesting discussion, making the children relate their own ideas and experiences to their work. However, I felt that it needed follow up work in other lessons to provide opportunities to explore ways in which people can provide for their needs with less damage to the environment.

“It’s not fair Miss, you can’t hear us playing any more once they start off.”

“Why can’t we all play together – it would sound better?”

“Why does one have to take over?”

**'Found sounds'**

**Education for sustainability aims**

- to find ways of achieving our goals that aren't entirely dependent on money
- to explore issues of fair trade.

This project was carried out over a whole term but could be easily adapted to a single lesson. The inspiration came from a need to order some new instruments for the school.

With the Year 3 class, we talked about what was needed, how much the items cost and how much money the school had to spend. Initially the children chose the biggest, brightest and most unusual instruments in the catalogue. When I pointed out how expensive these were for our budget, the children were disappointed.

"Why do they cost so much?"

"Why can't we spend more money on the instruments?"

The cost of the instruments was what fascinated them the most. Having examined the materials our instruments were made of we decided that the actual materials were not expensive. I then asked the children in groups to examine a set of instruments (skinned, wooden, tuned) and to say what they felt to be the most important properties of the set, and the skills required to make them. After discussion, it was agreed that the tuned instruments were probably the ones which took the most skill to make. They were also the most expensive type in the catalogue.

"How do they make the bits of stuff make different notes?"

This question led to a happy exploration of rubber bands and milk bottles, then someone suggested:

"We could make some instruments ourselves without having to spend much money."

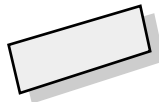
The class drew up a list of instruments they would like and explored the possibility of finding a suitable substitute. A big drum was top of the list. After a search round school we found just the thing – an old plastic dustbin, with lid, currently used to store dressing up clothes. Finding an alternative home for the clothes we tested our new instrument. It was loud and great fun, made lots of interesting sounds and could be played in lots of different ways.

Lots of other ideas followed: from elastic band guitars to metal tray cymbals; from scraping dustpan brushes to bottle top bells. The sounds they created were all the more pleasing to the children because they felt they owned the sound. Some even got a little possessive and agitated when other children were using the instrument they had found or made.

We discussed communal use and decided that if the 'found sounds' were not to be damaged, they had to be treated with respect like our other instruments, with their own places and name labels. This reassured many, and other classes were eventually allowed to use the new instruments. Tangible evidence of their money saving ideas manifested itself in a new collection of ethnic instruments, which leads on to my next project.

This time with the Year 6 pupils I looked at the music catalogues and we discussed the prices of the ethnic instruments. They were expensive and the children wanted to know why. Now came a little divine inspiration. We had just ordered some guiros via the Club biscuit 'Instruments for Schools' scheme. The instruments were a long time coming because the suppliers (villagers in Mexico) were overwhelmed by demand. After investigation, we found that the vast majority of the ethnic instruments we had in schools were made in small villages by families – a cottage industry.

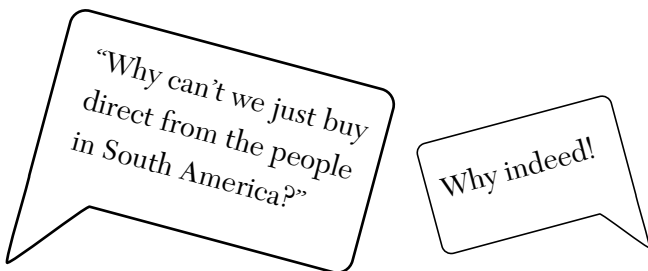




The children were interested in the price paid to the villagers who made the instruments. We wrote to companies but disappointingly did not receive any replies. I thought the children would lose interest in the project, but quite the contrary. Investigations were carried out into the cost of materials. For a wooden rainstick the children estimated the cost of materials to be around 27p – a fact they found remarkable when the cost to buy is approximately £20.

Where does the rest of the money go? Backtracking the journey of the rainstick, we went from the supplier, to the warehouse, to the merchant who shipped the product, to the buyer and finally to the manufacturer. Each person wanted a cut of the profit, and so the price rose each time.

One question which provoked the most discussion towards the end was:



One solution offered was that:



### Acknowledgements

Many of the original ideas for my music teaching are adapted from 'Sounds Practical', a music scheme produced by Wigan Education Department. For further information about this scheme, please telephone Harry Mcloughlin or Pam Harrison on 01942 255227.

### Conclusions

I believe that the children benefited a great deal from the change in the lessons and certainly many of them are more aware of some of the issues sustainability can raise – from sharing and working successfully together, to appreciating the prices of instruments, finding alternatives ('found sounds') and even discovering the human cost of many of the ethnic instruments we have in school.

Both myself and the children have learnt a great deal this year, not only about the sustainability issues but about ourselves. And what better starting block to heightening children's awareness of global issues and opening the door for exploration and critical analysis, than understanding 'self'!

### Music for painting to

#### Sad

Dvorak – "Largo" (New World Symphony)  
R.E.M. – "Everybody Hurts"

#### Angry

Holst – "Mars" (The Planet Suite)  
Prodigy – "Firestarter"

#### Happy

Queen – "Don't Stop Me Now"  
Elgar – "Pomp and Circumstance" (March No. 4)

#### Peaceful/Calm

Lou Reed – "Perfect Day"  
Satie – "Gymnopodie" (No. 1)

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