

MERYC Report

Have you ever felt so mentally stimulated by the challenge of differing positionalities, the formation of new friendships and rapidly gained knowledge, that your brain feels like it's expanded past the reasonable size it should be to fit inside your skull? I have now, after attending the EUNET MERYC 2019 conference 'Counterpoints of the Senses' in Gent. This feeling was much more pleasant and motivational than this depiction may be leading you to imagine..... However, it is a truthful description of the physical impact and sheer wonder I felt when the 5 days were finished. As I tried to make sense of the extraordinary breadth of content and my experiences networking with the early childhood music researchers and professionals who presented and attended.

The event was held at De Krook library, an inviting and architecturally innovative space which perfectly embodied the conference's dynamic blend of research and practice. MERYC are passionate about fostering supportive collaboration between educators and researchers, which was clearly demonstrated by the superb fusion of skilled presenters and attendees. Although our differing perspectives set us apart, we were joined together by our desire to share, listen and learn from one another's experiences, and by our passion for music education with young children. The sessions ran in parallel, with up to three presentations/workshops happening at once. This meant I was continually faced with the challenge of choosing which abstract compelled me most to attend. I was not disappointed by my choices and ended up filling my notebook with page after page of reflections which I have continued to dissect weeks after returning home. I have selected some of the material which I found most personally impactful to share in this report.

I attended two presentations discussing the inspiring work conducted in Great Yarmouth, England, as part of the 2 year action research project SALTMusic (2018). The project aimed to support the speech and language development of young children between 24-36 months and their families, by bringing a group of music practitioners and speech and language therapists together. They created a community of practice and a space where adults were silent. Instead of talking, they tuned in to the varied and engaging interaction modes which the children used to communicate, making space to allow something to happen. Jessica Pitt's (Royal College of Music) captivating presentation of the project challenged the societal understanding of number of words signifying language by discussing how the musical interactions in the immersive space conveyed a sense of belonging which did not require words. She also recognised that these intra-active pedagogical practices can be trans-acted in many contexts such as working with elderly people or in professional development work.

Charlotte Arculus (Manchester Metropolitan University) delivered a passionate talk reflecting on her experiences in the project from a philosophical perspective and questioned the potential of music as

emergent knowledge? Arculus showed a video from a session during the project, where a young boy who has been identified as having communication difficulties 'ventures from home on a thread of a tune' and composes a musical piece where the others in the room feel compelled to join in with his song. Her presentation compelled me to shed some tears, and left me feeling motivated and inspired to 'encounter the world with children, learn what they can do from children & learn what music can do from listening'.

I attended some magical workshops during the conference with practitioners who were more than happy to share their high quality inclusive practice with us. With the support and guidance of Vincent Lamers from Amsterdam, a group of us entered 'De Multi-Modale Muziekbubbel' (Lamers, V., Hermans, C., & Bremmer, M.). Vincent demonstrated activities from the multi-modal music sessions he conducts in special education schools, where he employs three music didactics; embodiment of senses, materiality and narrativity, to translate music to children on their body. This allows them to have more embodied musical experiences. The work is built on the pedagogies of predictability, trust and safety. This creates an environment where participants feel comfortable with the physical contact that is required to embody and 'touch the music'. I felt completely relaxed during this workshop and like SALTmusic, this method is suitable for all types of people as there is no age limit for playfulness, human connection and musical embodiment. I particularly enjoyed the umbrella activity, where Vincent moved a rainbow coloured umbrella above our heads to a song from Circe De Soleil. This created a breeze on our faces and a kaleidoscope of colour which whooshed past my eyes, and is something I have now included in my own practice with young children.

There were so many more 'wow' moments during the conference, and I feel I have been 'changed' by my attendance. Not only by the knowledge and multiply perspectives I encountered which left a mark on my own, but also by the friendships I made. The various social events organised across the week, coffee breaks and lunches offered opportunities to listen/partake in deep, meaningful conversations with like-minded colleagues from across the globe. I feel very thankful to MERYC for allowing me to attend, and fortunate to know such passionate and groundbreaking researchers and practitioners. I am excited to continue to challenge, question, share, celebrate and connect with you all again in the future.

