

Great Singing, Great Signing Case Study, Doncaster (March 2018)

Signed song is a genuinely inclusive music activity, if it is done well. It is accessible to a wide range of people – Deaf, hearing impaired (DHI), learning disabled, or not. When signing is an integral part of the practice, participants feel ‘less different’ when everyone is participating, and audience members who sign can see that it is integrated into the performances, not added later.



Barry is 13, has taken part in our **Great Singing, Great Signing** project for a year, and is still attending project sessions. Great Singing, Great Signing’s aim was to start and run two new singing and signing ensembles in areas of the region where there is currently no singing and signing activity; one in Halifax and one with the Doncaster Deaf Trust. Doncaster Deaf School (run by the Trust) is an educational organisation specifically for Deaf, hearing impaired and learning disabled young people, like Barry.

The project involves weekly singing and signing sessions, with children at each school led by Paul Whitaker OBE (our lead facilitator), with Paul’s interpreter and one or two trainee practitioners. There are two sets of sessions in Doncaster; one for the younger, primary

aged children and one for the older children. Improvements in the children have been noted and remarked upon by staff at the school and our own facilitators. Natalie Davies, one of our trainees in Doncaster, says:

“It’s gone from a point of none of them really singing at all, or vocalising very much, to a point where, at the end of last term, we got a few of them actually to match the pitch that we were singing to them, which I thought would take a lot longer...”

Since the start of the project, Barry has been particularly enthusiastic to take part and Barry’s teachers have seen an improvement in both his BSL skill level and his confidence. Barry has enjoyed the sessions a huge amount, because he himself feels that his knowledge of BSL has improved and because he has had the opportunity to interact with other children, some hearing impaired and some not. Jane Goodman, the Head at Doncaster School for the Deaf, said:

“Barry has definitely responded to it. He has been enthusiastic from day one.”

Sessions for the older children are held at a nearby local authority school which also has specialist support for children who are Deaf or have a hearing impairment; children from both schools sing and sign together, and the group includes hearing, as well as Deaf, children. Doncaster School for the Deaf is keen to integrate their students into the wider community, and equally keen to introduce the hearing community to Deaf culture. With sessions taking place in the new school, Barry and the others taking part in the project are able to integrate with hearing children, where they are learning the same singing and signing skills together as a group. I asked Barry if he felt like he was part of a team during the sessions. He said:

“Yes! Because when I was part of the group... people helped me by correcting [my BSL]. And we all help each other.”

Deaf children are often excluded from music-making and this is especially true for singing. There is an (incorrect) assumption that Deaf children can’t hear anything at all; most Deaf children have some level of hearing, although this varies from one child to the next. Music activities for them need to be highly tailored, and BSL signing is essential. BSL is the primary language of the Deaf community.

Great Singing, Great Signing goes a long way to address this issue, by treating hearing and non-hearing children as equals, and by raising the quality of both singing and signing through the skills taught to all the children, teachers and facilitators taking part. It has specifically introduced our trainee facilitators to the skills they will need to teach music to Deaf and hearing impaired people – for example, visual signs and signals. Natalie, of her time on the project so far, said:

“The practice that I’m doing here is dramatically different from any delivery I’ve done in the past. Because of that communication barrier, finding different ways of explaining things is really useful.”

Some of the Deaf community prefer not to participate in music, perhaps because of their own potentially negative past experiences. The teachers organising the Doncaster based sessions have experienced difficulties in the form of attitudes to singing and music within the Deaf community. Deaf parents have expressed concerns about their children participating in musical activity, particularly in singing, for two main reasons: concern that their child may not be able to fully participate in these activities (i.e. that they expect that their child will be excluded in some way because of their Deafness) and concern for activities that might dilute Deaf culture in the long term.

Great Singing, Great Signing aims to address these concerns: music is, of course, a part of the national curriculum for all children, and we emphasise that inclusivity is one of the main objectives for both the schools involved and for us here at Yorkshire Youth and Music. Paul Whittaker is an internationally renowned Deaf musician, who values Deaf culture; he ensures that the BSL to accompany the songs used is a fully nuanced interpretation (utilising the full poetry, subtlety and range of BSL gestures and language), not just a basic, word for word translation (that has its roots in Signed Supported English (SSE) rather than utilising BSL).

The Great Singing, Great Signing project is clearly designed to reflect the values within the school itself, where integration into society and inclusion for all work alongside a level of quality and respect for both BSL and the Deaf community, and this is reflected clearly in Barry's participation and continuing progress. Part of the success of this ongoing project is also due to Yorkshire Youth and Music's director, Gail Dudson, who not only designed the project with both quality and inclusion in mind, but is also now completing an MA, with singing and signing as her primary research focus.

Because of his involvement in the project, Barry has expressed an interest in being involved in more musical activity, and as well as continuing to be part of the project, would also like to learn how to play the trumpet. We are taking steps to make this possible for him, potentially linking in with one of our other projects to support DHI young people: our Deaf and Instrumental Learning project.