





ARTICLE

Investigating the impact of volunteering with Melody Music Birmingham on the professional development and career pathways of Royal Birmingham Conservatoire students

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Abstract

This article evaluates the impact of volunteering with a music education project for children and adults with learning disabilities on the professional development and career trajectory of music students at a Conservatoire in the United Kingdom. A mixed-methods online questionnaire captured the impact of volunteering with Melody Music Birmingham. Findings suggest that volunteering was a powerful aspect of the respondents' learning, potentially influencing their career choices, perceptions and attitudes. Further training and experiences for Conservatoire students in engaging with, supporting, and delivering music-making for people with learning disabilities are recommended.

Keywords: Music education; Conservatoire; learning disability; volunteering; professional development; career

Introduction

This article focuses on the impact of volunteering at a music project for children and adults with learning disabilities on the professional development and career trajectory of music performance students at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. Whilst the impact on participants is clearly also of interest and will be pursued in subsequent studies, this article focuses exclusively on the experience of the volunteer tutors. There is a dearth of literature discussing such provision as well as, arguably, a scarcity of training in the field of music and learning disabilities. This article will introduce the project in question (Melody Music Birmingham (MMB)) and contextualise it in relation to a brief literature review exploring the Conservatoire model and the wider context of training for music tutors and teachers to work with those with learning disabilities in the United Kingdom (UK). The Methodology section will present the rationale for the mixed-methods, online survey devised for all past MMB volunteers, before the results are presented, analysed and discussed. It is proposed that this small-scale study provides tangible evidence that this project has influenced the professional development of Melody volunteers. This article goes some way to evidence that such a project model is viable, effective and necessary. We hope that this article enables other institutions to consider and recognise the value of training in this field and that there may be a wider offer across the UK Conservatoire and Higher Education sector in the future.

Context: Melody

Melody is a charitable organisation established in 1994. Based in Birmingham, UK, it aims to raise awareness of the benefits of playing a musical instrument for people with learning disabilities (Melody, 2012). The work of Melody has multiple dimensions. For musicians with learning disabilities, this includes provision of musical tuition, performance opportunities and a certification scheme. For tutors and researchers, Melody hosts a repository of research studies, alternative notation resources and signposting to wider literature and resources of relevance on their website. Melody also provides training and experience for emerging music teachers through supported volunteer roles. These roles develop the skills of music students, who will form the potential future workforce, through training, exposure and experience supporting people with learning disabilities in music. These experiences are realised through two projects under the banner of MMB.

Context: MMB

MMB is a charitable project delivered at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. Since 2008, MMB has provided weekly term-time music sessions for children and young people with learning disabilities, whilst also delivering a training volunteer programme for Conservatoire students. Participants of the MMB project have a range of disabilities, including, but not exclusively: learning disability, Down's syndrome, autism, visual impairment, sensory processing disorder, global developmental delay, acquired brain injury, severe learning disabilities and profound and multiple learning disabilities.

During the 2019–2020 academic year, the project supported seventeen participants with an age range of 5 to 28 years, on a weekly basis, in two groups. Sessions lasted approximately 1 hour in duration and were delivered for approximately 30 weeks per year. Volunteers, both undergraduate and postgraduate students, are required to commit to a minimum of one academic year as a volunteer tutor with MMB. During this time, each volunteer is paired with an individual participant. Volunteers can choose to consistently support the same participant or multiple participants during the year. Volunteers also access three formal training and planning sessions each year. Training is delivered to meet the support needs of current MMB participants. Previous training for the project has included autism awareness, supporting people with visual impairments, effective delivery, vocal projection, sensory awareness, multi-sensory music-making, Makaton signing, use of augmented and alternative communication and other visual aids.

Many volunteers remain with the MMB project for several years during their studies, and some volunteers continue with the project after graduation. At the time of writing, May 2021, the team overseeing the continuation of the project are made up of past volunteers, with between 5 and 10 years of experience on the project each. Volunteers' commitment to the project over numerous years has enabled its sustainability and growth.

Literature review

To include a theoretical context for this research study, a brief literature review is presented across three broad themes. Firstly, the Conservatoire model is briefly discussed to understand the underpinning of this distinct model of education. Secondly, the curricula of UK Conservatoires are explored to understand whether the MMB model at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire is novel or whether there are similar opportunities across the sector. Finally, research around musicians' preparation and readiness to teach music to students with learning disabilities is reviewed.

The Conservatoire model

The Conservatoire model, in existence since the fifteenth century Italian, conservatorio, is regarded as a Higher Educational pathway primarily concerned with excellence in musical

performance (Carey, 2010; Ford, 2010). In its traditional form, this model places great importance on the relationship between teacher and student. One-to-one master-apprentice relationships are established within principal-study lessons (Burt-Perkins, 2013), and perceived successes, of both the teacher and the student, are commonly dependent on performance outcomes (Ford, 2010). Whilst this model provides great opportunities for close mentorship, and specialised teaching, it may lead to passive over-dependent students, who may lack transferable skills for the professional world (Gaunt et al., 2012). Recently, there has been much debate of the justifiability and longevity of this model (Carey, 2010; Burt-Perkins, 2010; Gaunt et al., 2012; Collens, 2015) and the impact it has on the well-being of Conservatoire students. The ever-changing cultural and professional landscape requires graduates to have a broad skillset, aside from their performance abilities.

UK Conservatoire curricula

When reviewing the public-facing websites of UK Conservatoires, there is reference to study in a number of contextual areas aside from performance, including ‘outreach’, ‘community engagement’, ‘pedagogy’, ‘music, community and well-being’, ‘creative learning’, ‘music for health’, ‘music education’ and ‘music therapy’. Several courses reference a work placement, which could offer opportunity to specialise or broaden the student’s experience. Most courses also reference either a research project or a major/vocational/creative project, which could involve the student specialising in their area of interest, which could include working in music with people with disabilities. It is of interest that music and disability are not explicitly discussed on the public-facing websites of any UK Conservatoires, even Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, where MMB is situated.

Teaching music to students with learning disabilities

Musical inclusion and music and disability continue to climb the agenda for music educators within the UK and elsewhere (Fautley & Daubney, 2018; Kinsella et al., 2018). There is a body of literature discussing music-making for participants with learning disabilities; however, these sources generally take a community music or therapeutic music stance, rather than a music education perspective (Streeter, 1993; Schalkwijk, 1994; Paterson & Zimmermann, 2006; Ramey, 2011; Ott, 2011; Williams, 2013). In addressing this issue, Ockelford (2008, 2015) has developed a significant provision in the creation of the Sounds of Intent framework, which is a music education-specific resource for understanding the development of musicians with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

Considering inclusive music tuition for students with disabilities more broadly, there is a growing evidence base of research (Cross, 2005, 2007; McCord & Fitzgerald, 2006; Adamek & Darrow, 2010; Bell, 2014; Jellison & Draper, 2015; Darrow, 2015; Darrow & Adamek, 2012, 2018; Kinsella et al., 2018; Laes & Westerlund, 2018; Pickard, 2019, 2020). Despite this, music educators continue to report a lack of confidence and training when working with students with disabilities (Salvador, 2010; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014; Hammel & Hourigan, 2017).

Alongside the evolving body of research and literature, there are a number of innovative organisations across the UK working musically with children and young people with physical and learning disabilities: for example, The One Handed Musical Instrument Trust (2021), The Paraorchestra (2021), Drake Music (No date), OpenUp Music (No date) and Soundabout (2021). These organisations are leading the way for practice in the sector, supporting awareness of, and developing approaches to music-making opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Whilst beyond the scope of this article, it is critical to note that these sources vary in how they conceptualise disability and approach music education for learners with learning disabilities. Transforming professional discourses should include consideration of ‘the politics of disablement

inherent in contemporary curricular, pedagogy and assessment practice' (Penketh, 2016, p. 133), nurturing a societal understanding with far greater opportunities for all musicians.

Summary

There is evidence that opportunities offered across UK Conservatoires are expanding to contextual areas aside from performance, and arguments which question the validity and sustainability of the Conservatoire Model in the twenty-first century are emerging. However, it seems that there continues to be a deficit of opportunity and training for Conservatoire students in working musically with people with learning disabilities. Whilst there is a growing evidence base and evolving pedagogical approaches to music-making and music education for learners with learning disabilities, it is questionable whether these resources are reaching Conservatoire students, many of whom are likely to become future music educators (Mills, 2004).

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods online questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to generate data to answer the following research questions:

What are the progression routes and career trajectories pursued by MMB volunteers?

Do Conservatoire students feel that volunteering with MMB has impacted on their professional development? And if so, how?

Sample and recruitment

The questionnaire was open to all previous volunteers of the MMB project who had consented to their contact information being stored. All previous volunteers of MMB between 2008 and 2019 for whom we had contact details ($n = 31$) were contacted individually and asked to participate in the study. After initial contact, two further follow-up messages were sent to improve response rates. Sixteen completed questionnaires were received within the timeframe of data collection. This response rate of 51.6% is a realistic response rate for online questionnaires (Baruch & Holtom, 2008); however, this does limit the generalisability of the findings to those motivated to respond and not all volunteers. Those who completed the questionnaire volunteered with MMB between the years 2009 and 2019 and so represented a good spread in the lifespan of the project.

Data collection

An online questionnaire was developed to understand trends in the career progression of volunteers of the MMB project and the impact of volunteering on their personal and professional development. An online questionnaire was selected for its convenience (Sue & Ritter, 2012), and it was anticipated that the response rate would be higher for online questionnaires than paper versions (Saunders, 2012). The questionnaire consisted of eleven open and closed questions, generating both qualitative and quantitative data, respectively (see Appendix 1). The concise length of the questionnaire was devised to improve response rates (Deutskens et al., 2004) whilst fulfilling the research aims. The questionnaire gathered information on the volunteers' prior experiences, current career and the impact that volunteering had on them both personally and professionally.

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from the University of South Wales Faculty Ethics Committee, where the first researcher is situated. The research was conducted in accordance with the

University of South Wales' Ethics Guidance for Research and Consultancy and the British Educational Research Association (BERA)'s Ethical Standards (BERA, 2018). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were provided with a detailed information sheet in advance of deciding whether to participate. All participants provided informed consent to completing and submitting their online questionnaire. Data were stored securely on a password-protected platform and not used for any other reason but that which it was intended. All identifiable information was anonymised, and participants were known only by a computer-generated code.

Data analysis

Since the entire possible sample was relatively small ($n = 31$), statistical analysis was not considered relevant. As such, simple descriptive statistics were generated for the quantitative data, and both content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) employed to explore the qualitative data. As the response rate was 51.6% ($n = 16$), we do not intend to generalise conclusions to all volunteers but suggest that the outcomes can be insightful and potentially indicative. The findings of the questionnaire will be presented, analysed and contextualised in the Results and Discussion section.

Results and discussion of findings

Duration of volunteering engagement

Respondents to the survey commenced their volunteering with MMB between July 2009 and September 2017 and concluded their volunteering between August 2011 and October 2018. The average volunteering engagement of the respondent cohort was 33 months (2 years and 9 months), and the mode was 45 months (3 years and 9 months). Both the mean and the mode far exceed the minimum required commitment of one academic year (9 months). 19% of the sample volunteered for the minimum required commitment of one academic year (9 months). The longest engagement was 96 months (8 years). This demonstrates that engaging with this project extends far beyond a Conservatoire-based commitment for most volunteers in the sample.

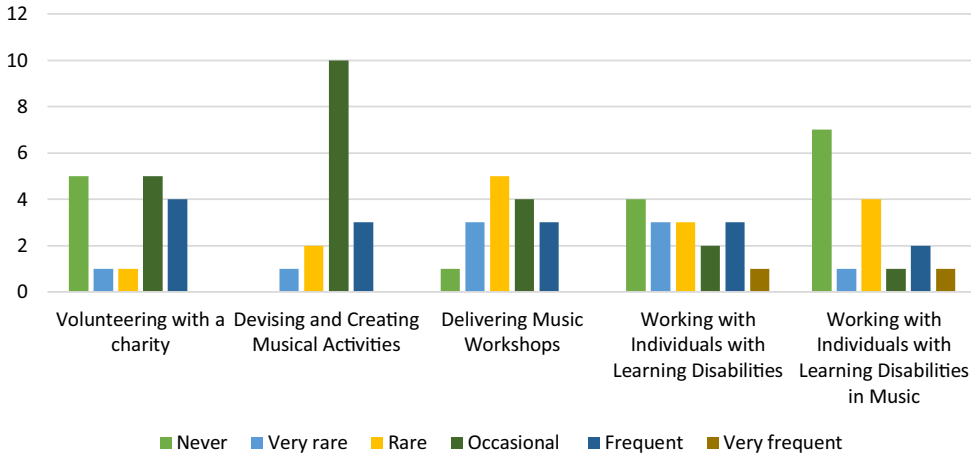
Prior experiences

Graph 1 shows that respondents had a range of experiences prior to volunteering with MMB. Experiences of working with a charity were varied (Never = 5, Occasional = 5, Frequent = 4). 10 of the 16 participants had 'Occasional' experience of devising musical activities, and 7 had either 'Occasionally' or 'Frequently' delivered music workshops, which is arguably to be anticipated when studying at a Conservatoire. However, experience of working musically with individuals with learning disabilities was much less common, with 7 respondents 'Never' having done so, 1 'Very Rarely', 4 'Rarely', 1 'Occasionally', 2 'Frequently' and only 1 'Very frequently'. Experience of working with those with learning disabilities in a more general sense was more mixed, with 4 'Never' having done so, and only 1 'Very frequently' doing so.

Progression after volunteering

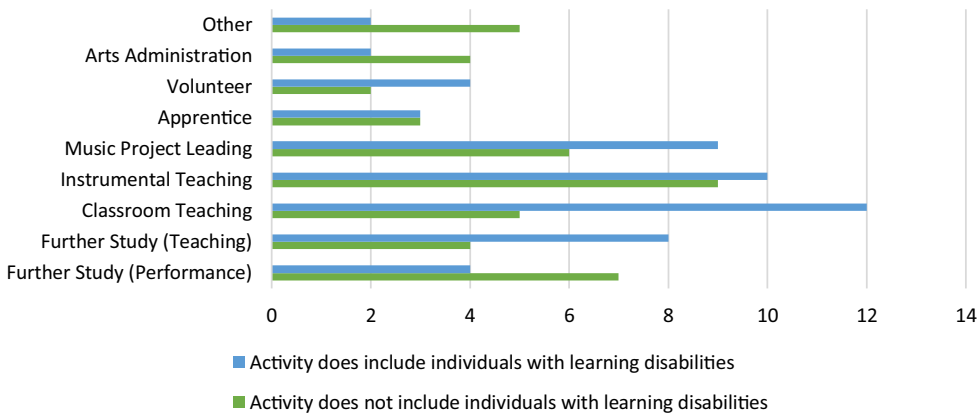
Graph 2 shows that since completing their studies at the Conservatoire, respondents had been working in a breadth of different roles. It is interesting to note that in every category, some respondents are working with individuals with learning disabilities. The division between those working with individuals with learning disabilities and those not working with individuals with learning disabilities is arguably partially dictated by the role, for example, those studying performance or working in arts administration appear less likely to be working with individuals with learning disabilities than those who are volunteering, working in music projects or engaging in

What was your experience in each area prior to volunteering with Melody MMB?



Graph 1 Experience Prior to Volunteering with MMB.

What have you been doing since you left the Conservatoire? e.g. further study, volunteering positions, professional work. (Please tick all that apply)



Graph 2 Continuing Professional Development Since Leaving the Conservatoire.

further study relating to teaching. Having said this, some respondents in each category are working with those with learning disabilities, showing that this is possible. Of note is the fact that more than double those working in classroom settings are working with those with learning disabilities compared with those who are not. A similar trend is seen in relation to Music Project Leading, with 9 respondents working with those with learning disabilities, compared to 6 respondents not working with individuals with learning disabilities.

Instrumental teaching has a more balanced split, with 10 respondents providing instrumental tuition to those with learning disabilities, and 9 respondents not involved in instrumental tuition for those with learning disabilities. This is arguably the intention and success of MMB since it is

Melody's main aim to raise both awareness and opportunity for instrumental tuition for those with learning disabilities (Melody, 2012). Similarly, from those respondents who are taking further study in relation to Teaching, 8 are working with individuals with learning disabilities and 4 are not working with individuals with learning disabilities. This shows a definite trend: alumni of MMB are consistently working with individuals with learning disabilities. Overall, 54 responses relate to working with individuals with learning disabilities, and 45 responses relate to provision that does not involve working with individuals with learning disabilities. It should be noted that there is no comparative group in this study, and so it is not known whether similar percentages of students and graduates would be working with participants with learning disabilities if they had not been involved in a project such as MMB. Further research is required to understand whether these numbers are significant or are impacted by the MMB project.

When asked whether they felt that volunteering with MMB was useful in securing the aforementioned positions, 94% ($n = 15$) respondents suggested that they did, giving examples of positions that particularly valued this experience such as Masters courses in Music and Special Educational Needs and Music Therapy. Of the 94%, some respondents discussed the value of having such an experience on their CV, whilst others reflected on utilising the skills learned from MMB during interviews and observations. Several respondents referred to going on to Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses and note the relevance of volunteering with MMB to this trajectory. The one respondent who suggested that volunteering with MMB had not directly supported them to secure their post added that: 'the experience was definitely useful in terms of being able to confidently go out into a variety of different settings and be prepared to deliver accessible music sessions'.

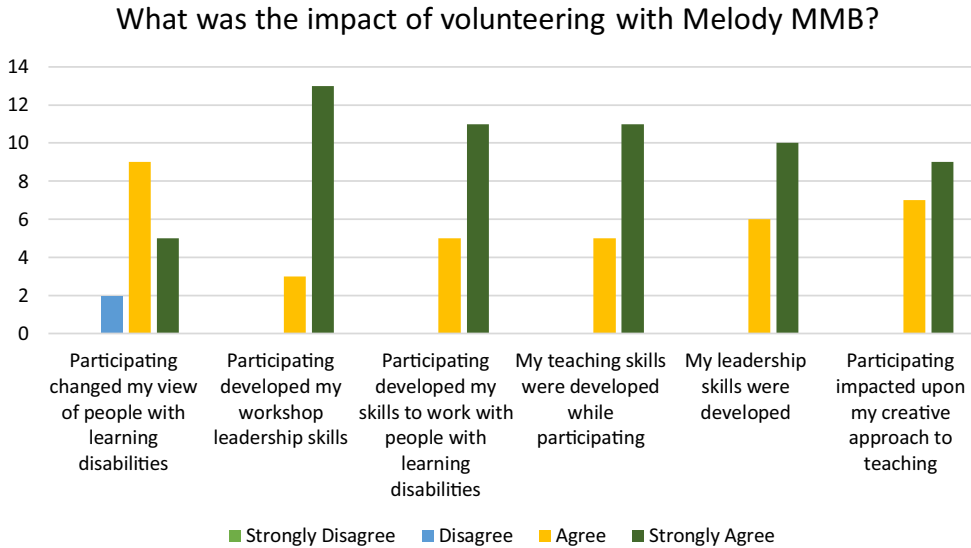
A development of this study might be beneficial to better understand how employers and recruiters for further study view the skills and experiences afforded by this project, as well as how participants understand their facilitator's experience following the training.

In reflecting upon whether volunteering with MMB had impacted their future career trajectories, 63% of respondents suggested that MMB had influenced their career trajectory and 25% of respondents suggested they were already committed to this trajectory, but that MMB had affirmed this. Whilst 12% of respondents noted that MMB was not a defining feature of their career trajectory, all respondents in this category noted that the skills gained by volunteering with MMB had remained relevant and valuable, such as 'it has definitely helped me become a better teacher when dealing with children who have learning disabilities'.

Graph 3 shows how respondents rated the impact of volunteering with MMB in relation to the discrete areas discussed. The notion that 25% ($n = 4$) of volunteers already had some experience in the field is reflected in the fact that two respondents noted that the experience did not necessarily change their view of people with learning disabilities. Aside from this question, the overall trend was that respondent either 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' with all other statements, which related to development of workshop leadership skills, skills relating to working with people with learning disabilities, teaching skills, leadership skills and creative approaches to teaching. These positive findings were mostly reflected in the qualitative data, but the strength of the 'Strongly Agree' responses potentially emphasises the extent of this outcome.

The impact of volunteering with MMB

When asked to describe their experience of volunteering with MMB in their own words and the impact it had upon their engagement with individuals with learning disabilities, several themes arose in the data when analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The most prominent themes were tangible skills and tools; positive experiences; community and relationships; professional development and wider studies; and wider society. Each theme will be discussed in turn, with evidence of the participant quotes which generated the theme.



Graph 3 Impact of Volunteering with MMB.

Tangible skills and tools

Respondents listed several tangible ‘skills’ that they had gained through the process of volunteering with MMB. This appeared consistently across responses: many respondents were able to recall concrete experiences that the project had taught them. This included ‘careful planning’, ‘how to communicate and support others’, ‘how best to help mentee’, ‘skills I now use in my work’ and ‘how to cater for and adapt things’. One respondent was more specific in noting that the experience developed their ‘musicality and presenting skills’. Respondents also noted the tools that they had added to their toolkit through participating in the project. These included ‘suitable approaches’, ‘specific training’, ‘speed of instruction’, ‘creative approaches’, ‘Makaton levels 1–4’, ‘numerous ways to approach’ each situation and managing ‘expectations’ in an informed way.

The breadth of examples listed shows that respondents valued different aspects of the experience, potentially reflecting their varying levels of prior knowledge, but also the richness of the provision offered to volunteers. These findings suggest that respondents learned tangible and transferable skills during their time as volunteers. Many go on to discuss their continued use and application of these skills in their future professional life, evidenced in statements such as ‘with a partner of a community music company I run’ or ‘with other ex-members’, whereas others note the skills they learned were ‘useful for life in general’.

Positive experiences

Lots of different adjectives and expressions were used to denote the positivity of the experience of volunteering for the respondents. Every respondent included a positive adjective in their response, with the commonest being ‘fantastic’ and ‘rewarding’. ‘Brilliant’, ‘proud’ and ‘excellent’ featured too. This suggests that in recalling their experiences and summarising it in their own words, 100% of respondents were eager to attest that the experience had been a positive, worthwhile one.

The term ‘confidence’ was very prominent across the responses. Throughout the whole questionnaire, raising volunteers’ ‘confidence’ appears one of the main legacies of the project. This is interesting in the context of the project being outside of students’ formal tuition at the Conservatoire. Further, the project required a minimum of an academic year’s commitment to

Table 1. Typical Experience of a MMB Volunteer

Term 1 (October to December)	Term 2 (January to March)	Term 3 (April to June)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial half day training provided to orientate all volunteers. • New volunteers are paired with an individual MMB participant to support. • Experienced volunteers devise and deliver an activity (10 min in duration) for the participants. • Public sharing event/Concert at the end of the term. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half day training provided to all volunteers. • New volunteers are supported to devise and deliver an activity (10 min in duration) for the group of participants. • Reflective feedback is provided to volunteers on a regular basis. • Volunteers continue to provide one-to-one support to a MMB participant. • Public sharing event/Concert at the end of the term. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half day training provided to all volunteers. • All volunteers independently devise and deliver an activity (10 min in duration) for the group of participants. Reflective feedback is provided to volunteers on a regular basis. • Volunteers are able to continue to work with their allocated participant, and/or begin supporting another/different participant. • Public sharing event/Concert at the end of the term • Certificates and gifts for volunteers leaving the project.

consolidate learning and develop confidence, and the ‘non-judgemental’, ‘supportive’ atmosphere respondents experienced may have facilitated this. Whilst respondents also discuss concrete things they have learned, it is the feeling of ‘confidence’ which permeates the responses, both in terms of ‘leading activities’, ‘devising items with people in mind’, ‘knowing how to communicate’ but also ‘learning about disabilities’ and opportunity to observe ‘experienced tutors interacting with the students’. This feels like an important outcome of this research, that the feeling of ‘confidence’ is arguably more impactful than any specific skill. This echoes the wider literature which discusses that music education students reported lack of confidence in facilitating or preparing to facilitate sessions with learners with learning disabilities (Whipple & Van Weelden, 2012).

Community and relationships

This was an interesting and unanticipated theme, generated by the open nature of the questions and thematic analysis process. Several respondents (56%, $n = 9$) commented on the quality of the experience in relation to the group and the sense of community they felt. Respondents referred to this as ‘friendships with like-minded people’, others as a ‘positive atmosphere’. Responses focused on the specific qualities which gave these impressions, including ‘supportive environment’, ‘non-judgmental’, ‘sense of being in a team’ and ‘felt valued as a volunteer’.

These comments are particularly interesting as they may suggest a distinction between the nature and outcome of this volunteering opportunity and that of the typical offer or provision of the Conservatoire. Potentially, since there was not a mark or grade attributed to the experience, volunteers perceived the project as less judgmental. Additionally, the specific role and contribution of a volunteer, in contrast to that of a student or employee could be notable here. Further research is required to investigate and evidence this finding.

Respondents also acknowledged that group relations were an important dimension of inclusive workshop practice: Evidenced in comments such as having the ‘space to get to know’ and becoming ‘supportive friends’ of the participants. Table 1 demonstrates that this is given diligent thought in the way that the volunteers’ year is devised, giving plenty of time for development of ‘positive relationships’. Respondents highlighted the importance of this in comments such as, ‘listening to participants’ voices’ and ‘devising items with people in mind’, indicating an awareness of the fundamental principles of universal design for learning (Darrow, 2016) and the development of a respectful community of practice, including participants, volunteers and tutors.

Professional development and wider studies

This theme, the focus of the research questions, provided some valuable feedback. Respondents offered various perspectives on this topic. For example, one respondent noted: ‘Helped me decide if I would like to pursue a career in music’, whilst another commented that they continued to collaborate with other volunteers after the project and that this became the foundation for a business idea. 88% of respondents ($n = 14$) noted that this experience was fundamental to their future practice (‘ideas for future work’, ‘starting point for career’) and several respondents acknowledged that the experience had introduced them to a trajectory that they may not otherwise had considered (‘opened up another career pathway’, ‘new experiences’).

This reflects the earlier question where there appeared to be a split between respondents who either had very little experience in this field or who had quite a lot of experience. It appears that this project appeals to those who are either committed to working with people with learning disabilities and use this opportunity as a springboard or platform and to those who are attracted to volunteering with this project as something novel and different from their experience and studies to date. It should also be noted, however, that respondents are likely biased in their receptiveness to working in music with those with learning disabilities because of their decision to participate in the MMB project in the first place.

Three respondents referenced their wider studies at the Conservatoire in relation to the MMB project. One respondent noted that they enjoyed this experience ‘alongside’ their studies, whilst another noted that ‘this was the most influential part of my 4 years at the Conservatoire’. This is a particularly powerful statement, as this aspect of their Conservatoire experience was an optional, non-credited project, and therefore, its impact may not necessarily be known to the wider Conservatoire. This perhaps signals the need for more joined-up thinking and sharing of resources and experiences between MMB and the Conservatoire, as well as between music educators with an expertise in learning disabilities, and the wider sector. The third respondent noted that MMB was a ‘musical way to relieve the pressure of studying and working life’, another interesting perspective which firmly positions MMB as distinct, separate, and other than the mainstream provision of Conservatoire education.

Wider society

The final theme related to respondents’ awareness that their experience occurred within a wider context. One respondent commented on the fact that ‘engaging with families was eye opening’ and led them to recognise that ‘society is not disability friendly’. Another respondent noted that the experience had made them more aware of the ‘challenges people face’. One respondent referenced the social model of disability (Barnes, 2012) and identified that volunteering with MMB had supported them to identify barriers posed by society, rather than by an individual’s impairment. This is a profound response from a practice-oriented project without theoretical or philosophical dimensions and demonstrates well the power of active, experiential learning in an authentic context. As suggested by Laes and Westerlund (2018, p. 34):

‘It is thus argued that through teaching with, and by, rather than about [disability], we in music education may move beyond normalising understandings and practices of inclusion, towards an expanded notion of professionalism.’

Advice for future practitioners

When asked what they would say to students considering exploring music-making with individuals with learning disabilities, 100% of respondents said they would encourage others to engage with this opportunity (‘do it!’, ‘go for it’, ‘try it’). Some qualified their answers with reasons for volunteering with MMB. For some respondents, this involved providing adjectives to describe the experience (‘rewarding’, ‘worthwhile’, ‘creative’, ‘interesting’, ‘inspiring’, ‘challenging’). Other



Figure 1. Word cloud of responses to the question ‘Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of volunteering with MMB?’.

respondents gave musical context: ‘there is more to music than being cramped in a practice room’, ‘the true power and emotion of music can be seen when making music with individuals with learning disabilities’ or ‘makes you reflect on what it means to be a ‘musician’’. Several respondents ($n = 9$; 56%) commented on what they got from the experience: ‘personal joy’, ‘you get so much out of it’, ‘the most inspiring work I do’, ‘learn about yourself’. Two respondents encouraged students to volunteer first, one to clarify what the offer is (‘Volunteer first and make sure it’s for you, but then commit wholeheartedly’) and the other as a supplementary way of gathering more experience (‘Go along to MMB to see what it is about and shadow a teacher in a special school if you can’). Overall, it appears that the respondents included in the sample are firm ambassadors for working inclusively in music with participants with learning disabilities, in mainstream and special education as well as in the community, further advocating the aims of Melody (Melody, 2012).

Concluding thoughts from the sample are represented in the word cloud below (Figure 1), which illustrates a content analysis of the responses, with the commonest responses in the largest font.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the impact of volunteering with MMB on students and graduates of the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire’s professional development and career trajectory. Whilst traditional Conservatoire education focuses on performance and instrumental mastery, this project is among an increasing number of smaller projects and opportunities which broaden the skillset and career options of Conservatoire graduates. The results of this study demonstrate that past volunteers reflected positively on their experience of volunteering and have applied the skills they developed in their careers. Whilst a percentage of the volunteers chose to engage with MMB to continue their chosen pathway in working with people with learning disabilities, a larger group noted that they had not considered or experienced this work before and, after choosing to volunteer with MMB, had subsequently pursued a career in this field. 88% ($n = 14$) of respondents suggested that the experience of volunteering with MMB was influential to their future practices.

Although this paper found volunteers now working in arts administration roles were less likely to be working directly with people with learning disabilities, it also evidenced the opportunities MMB provided to develop the confidence of all volunteers to work with individuals with learning disabilities. Alongside this, volunteering with MMB heightened volunteers’ awareness of the wider lived experiences of disabled people and barriers posed by society as opposed to individuals’ impairments, which is surely beneficial to individuals, employers and society.

A further important finding of this small-scale research project was that the respondents echoed sentiments found in the literature which suggest that a lack of confidence is one of the biggest barriers students experience when considering teaching or making music with those with learning disabilities. The outcome of instilling volunteers with confidence in this area is arguably more important and impactful than any specific skill.

We hope that this article demonstrates the demand, value and impact of incorporating such opportunities in Conservatoire education and may serve as a stimulus for further investment and development of this sector.

Further research is needed to understand how the participants experience their time at MMB, future training opportunities they may encounter, and whether employers recognise and value the training that MMB Alumni have received. This study could be extended to include more in-depth interviews exploring in more detail the individual experiences of volunteers. Collaboration with the aforementioned organisations who are innovatively and successfully practising in this field would be valuable for Melody as well as for the Conservatoire sector. Respondents' comments about the provision being separate from the Conservatoire's main offer also support this notion of collaboration with professional partners as enriching and valuable. Additionally, a greater understanding and awareness of training opportunities available for music students in Higher Education, and the wider workforce of music educators working with people with learning disabilities, would be beneficial. This may enable more joined-up thinking and for students to benefit from the exciting practice occurring in the field.

Whilst conducting this study, we, the researchers, realised that we too fit within the two distinct groups of volunteer experiences revealed within the findings. The first researcher was committed to working with those with learning disabilities before engaging with Melody and had personal experience in this field, whereas the second researcher had no experience of learning disability before volunteering and was attracted to the MMB project whilst studying at the Conservatoire, as it was something different. The outcomes of volunteering with MMB for the second researcher are similar to those reported in the findings above, agreeing wholeheartedly with the statement recorded by one of the participants of this study, that 'this was the most influential part of my 4 years at the Conservatoire'. We hope that many more musicians will share in this important work and disseminate its importance widely.

Supplementary material. For supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051722000237>

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