

Supporting Autistic children to learn & play traditional music:  
Documenting our Action Research Project

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February 2024



**Music Generation**  
**Cork City**  
Chathair Chorcaí



# Contents

Introduction	3
Section 1: Context	3
1.1.1 The researcher & music educator	3
1.2 About Creative Tradition & Music Generation Cork City	4
1.3 About the schools & Autistic classes	5
Section 2: Preparation	6
2.1 Research, training, & CPD	6
2.2 Team meetings & collaboration	7
2.3 Preparing classes, musical content, & activities	7
Section 3: Self-reflexive teaching practice	8
3.1 About the process	8
3.2 Self-reflective notes	8
3.2.1 Scoil Íosagáin	9
3.2.2 South Lee Educate Together	22
Section 4: Action items & issues to explore	25
4.1 Team Approach	25
4.2 Mindset	26
4.3 Time & Attention	26
4.4 Sustainability & Advocacy	27
References	28

# Introduction

This report explores the process of establishing new traditional music classes for Autistic children. The following began as my own self-reflective teaching notes, which were later shared with Katherine Zeserson, whom I collaborated with as part of an action research project. I also shared this with my colleagues, and we realised it could be quite useful to other music educators. This is not peer-reviewed, other than getting feedback from trusted music educators. At this stage in my career, sharing my own teaching experience is hugely important to me, and indeed quite personal at times, as you may spot throughout the writing. Having spent several years publishing academic research, this sharing of my own practice feels timely.

Over the course of this project, I documented several teaching strategies and contemplated how to make Irish traditional music more inclusive - both in special Autistic classes, mainstream education, and community contexts. I focused solely on the *teaching process*, rather than gathering data on the children and young people. With proper ethical clearance, more information may - and should - be gathered in the future. Indeed, including the voice of children and young people is vital to researching outcomes of youth initiatives.

I've structured this document to help organise my thoughts, but the language used throughout is relatively informal since these are my own self-reflective teaching notes. When necessary for context, I include dates and timestamps to entries. Section 4 presents a few concluding thoughts on how to make traditional music more inclusive for children and young people. But rather than offering a formal policy recommendation, this section reflects on the major themes of my own teaching experience. It provides me a bit of closure on some actionable items and important issues I want to explore in the future.

A note on terminology: Prior to this action research project, I often used the abbreviation ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), but have since abandoned this terminology. The word 'disorder' no longer sits well with me. It frankly feels inaccurate and incomplete in terms of capturing what Autism is all about. I also used person-first language (e.g. child with Autism), but now tend to use identity-first (e.g. Autistic child). There are mixed opinions on the 'best' terminology within the Autistic community itself, as explained in this very [good video](#). The best approach is to use the terminology that Autistic individuals use and prefer themselves, which is why the terms 'Autism', 'ASD', 'Autistic people, and 'people with Autism' all make an appearance throughout this documentation. Rather than being inconsistent, this reflects the diversity of the contexts and participants.

## Section 1: Context

### 1.1 The researcher & music educator

I am a traditional musician, music educator, researcher, and Autistic mom to a little Autistic boy. My teaching and research experience is intimately connected to the fact that I am all four of these things. These parts of me are nearly impossible to untangle, and therefore personal and analytical observations are peppered throughout this document.

Throughout my 20-year career as a music educator in the United States and Ireland, I have taught Autistic students with as much care, sensitivity, and curiosity as possible. Although rewarding, I felt woefully underprepared to support the various and diverse needs of my students.<sup>1</sup> This was the driving force behind my proposal to the Arts Council in 2021, which secured the Agility Award to better support young musicians with

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<sup>1</sup> For context, I was fortunate to have attended a 4-year Music Education programme. As an undergraduate, I did take one Special Education module back in 2003, but this was general and did not cover how to best support students in the music classroom. Even with formal teacher training and knowing a lot about Autism from my own family life, I still felt unconfident to teach Autistic children in my traditional music classes.

Autism. This funding coincided with my son receiving his diagnosis of Autism at age 6. For years I've wanted to do more for children with Autism in our traditional music programmes. Although it wasn't conscious, I think that getting our own diagnosis at home probably sparked me into action. Perhaps subconsciously I was trying to help my own little boy. Either way, another nice coincidence also happened in early 2021; Music Generation Cork City received funding from the Toy Show Appeal to similarly conduct research to support children with Autism (and those within other marginalised groups). The stars aligned, which ultimately manifested this document.

One last note about my own identity here: Throughout this project, I reflected upon how my Autistic students experience the world, and how this compares to my own understanding. As I read, explored, imagined what it was like to be Autistic, I inevitably began to question where I fall upon the spectrum. I couldn't help noticing all the similar characteristics and behaviours that I shared with my Autistic son and many of my students, including the tendency to fixate on very specific personal interest. (This document is one example of the obsessive level of detail I can delve into while researching topics I'm passionate about). I also find it difficult to make and sustain eye contact, rock back and forth whilst concentrating, and use music and other creative processes as coping mechanisms. While chatting to one of my son's therapists one day, I mentioned that I might be Autistic myself. I was half joking at the time, but she forwarded me a link about [Adult Autism](#). I felt more like my son than not, and so I underwent my own assessment and was diagnosed as Autistic in early 2024. It has happened so recently that I'm still processing the whole thing. I am somehow both totally shocked and not surprised at all. I've been on quite the surreal journey the past three years - from my son's diagnosis, being involved with this project, and now understanding my own neurodiversity. I need to express my gratitude here to my students; I have learned nearly more about myself as I have about how Autistic children learn, play, enjoy and use music. It has been enlightening being a part of this project.

I love writing and researching musical phenomena, and correspondingly tend to go a little overboard with writing up teaching notes. This is how I naturally approach things due to my own personal interest and background in academia.<sup>2</sup> However, I want to emphasise here that writing is only *one* of many ways to support children with Autism. I do not believe that other music educators *need* to go through such a formal process of writing to teach and inspire young musicians. On the contrary, I have learned that *less writing* and more *being with* the students is the best course of action. This documentation is text heavy merely due to my own process, interest, and my participation in Music Generation Cork City's action-based research project.

## 1.2 About Creative Tradition & Music Generation Cork City

Creative Tradition was first established and partnered with Music Generation Cork City in 2013, and since then, we have delivered traditional music education to hundreds of children, young people, and adults throughout the northside of Cork City.<sup>3</sup> We have always taught people with Autism and other special needs in our schools and community-based projects, like Club Ceoil Knocknaheeny. At first, we taught Autistic children in our mainstream music classes with the help of SNAs and primary school teachers. This approach has mixed outcomes. Some children can excel, while others may have to partially (or entirely) withdraw from music to self-regulate. One of our students, for example, wears headphones for most of music class, while a few others miss music completely since they are taken for learning support at the same time.

Over time, we started creating smaller groups to facilitate better environments for children with special education needs. Inclusion has always been a pillar of Creative Tradition's programme, but we often lacked the sheer amount of time, preparation, training, and team meetings required to best support children with

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<sup>2</sup> I conducted ethnomusicological research at the University of Limerick and University College Cork, so used detailed fieldnotes as a major research tool for over a decade.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see [www.musicgenerationcorkcity.com](http://www.musicgenerationcorkcity.com) and [www.creativetradition.ie](http://www.creativetradition.ie). In 2020, Club Ceoil Knocknaheeny started providing classes to adults with support from the Musical Neighbourhoods project.

Autism. (We work within a small, fixed budget every year). Since 2021, we have systematically spent more time and resources to try and better the playing field for our neurodiverse students. This development was made possible through our ongoing partnership with Music Generation Cork City and support from the Arts Council of Ireland.

### 1.3 About the Schools & Autistic Classes

While Creative Tradition reaches many more Autistic students in additional school programmes and in Club Ceoil, this action research project focuses on new music classes started in two primary schools, Scoil Íosagáin and South Lee Educate Together. Documentation began in September 2021, but here is a little history for context.

Scoil Íosagáin Boys National School is an all-boys Deis school in Farranree in the northside of Cork City. In 2017, Creative Tradition and MGCC partnered with Scoil Íosagáin to establish a traditional music programme. The pilot project focused on tin whistle and singing instruction alongside large group performances (80-90 boys playing and singing together). Several teachers in the school are musicians, including Brian Hennessey (guitar) and Jim O'Connell (banjo), and so the school is very musically active, even outside of Music Generation classes. In 2019, the school programme expanded to include traditional flute, fiddle, bodhrán, guitar tuition, and a smaller grúpa cheoil ensemble. In the beginning, we taught Autistic students in mainstream tin whistle classes (based in their main classroom setting, with their primary teachers present).

With over 300 pupils, Scoil Íosagáin has a dedicated sensory room, nurture room, and three ASD units. As per Department of Education guidelines, one ASD unit is comprised of six students, one teacher and two Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). During this research project, Scoil Íosagáin's three Autistic classes included six junior infants, five senior infants, and six senior boys (ages 8-11). Several boys in the junior infants unit do not use spoken language (I will use the term 'non-speaking' which is preferable to 'non-verbal.' Non-speaking Autistic children are often VERY verbal, while not using spoken language). All the boys in the senior infants, and senior boys units are verbal (although two in senior infants are very shy/quiet).

South Lee Educate Together (SLET) is a newly formed co-educational, non-denominational primary school. Creative Tradition partnered with SLET in its very first month (September 2019) to create a holistic, traditional music programme. In the beginning, SLET comprised of one teacher, one principal and eight junior infant students, and we essentially hosted an Early Years traditional music programme. Since then, the school has grown to over 100 children (from 4 to 10 years of age), with its own dedicated sensory room, nurture room, and Autistic classroom. As they build their school, the demographics increase dramatically each year. South Lee Educate Together is currently located in Coláiste Stiofán Naofa in Ballyphehane while they build their own school in Togher.

From September 2019 until June 2021, Autistic students learned in mainstream tin whistle/singing classes (in main classroom settings, with their primary teachers present). In September 2021, SLET established a dedicated Autistic classroom of six students (five senior infants and one 1<sup>st</sup> class pupil). SLET has more Autistic students who remain completely in their mainstream classes, and these students learn traditional music as usual alongside their peers.

SLET budgets, fundraises, and collects money to support its own music programme. It does not have funding from Music Generation or any other initiative.

## Section 2: Preparation

### 2.1 Research, training, & CPD

For many years, I felt insecure about how to best support children with Autism. I was nervous about the correct terminology, approach, activities – pretty much everything that teaching music entails. So, during Summer 2021, I did some self-guided research, reading, and continuing professional development with organisations such as [As I Am](#).

The first book I read was *Teaching Music to Students with Autism* (Hammel and Hourigan 2020), which gives a good overview, including issues of gender and the various challenges young people face with their modes of communication, behaviour, socialisation, cognition, and sensory processing. The book highlights the importance of taking a team approach to supporting young musicians with Autism (which was reinforced by my own teaching experience). The book also provided vivid examples of working with Autism children in music classrooms (vignettes), alongside some good musical activities. One of the book's limitations was that it was written for music educators in the United States with full-time salaries, so the application to part-time 'musician educators' is not straightforward. But most of the information crosses cultures and situations well.

The second book I read was Music Generation Sligo's *Con Tutti: Music Education & Autism*, which included resources and an accompanying CD. While this was very useful for my younger, general music classes, this book is not geared towards teaching instrumental music or students older than age 7. Music educators leading hip-hop, traditional, or pop and rock programmes will certainly want to add their own repertoire and activities to support children with ASD in a cultural appropriate manner.



There are many podcasts, videos, and talks available online about Autism, which are handy for people under time pressure to read several books. My favourites include:

- [The importance of being present with Autistic children](#) without having to 'fix' them.
- [This video](#) explores Autism as a mechanism to enrich humanity, rather than being a 'disorder.'
- There is also an entire [Ted Talk playlist](#) about Autism, which is an incredible resource to explore.

Many of the above are about Autism in general (rather than music), but they are valuable for those looking to find out more about their Autistic students. Wherever possible, I suggest accessing content that has been

created by Autistic people themselves. I notice that many of my favourite videos (like the ones above) are neuroaffirmative in nature and created by people on the spectrum.

## 2.2 Team meetings & collaboration

In August 2021, I started to meet with the staff of Scoil Iosagain and South Lee Educate Together as part of this project to launch new music classes for Autistic students. In the context of Covid-19, I needed to first discuss with principals and the board of management in order to restart the school music programmes. Once meetings were allowed to take place, we met face-to-face in school to set up safe protocols and discuss the music programme for 2021/2022.

Each meetings covered the planning of the whole traditional music programme, from infants music, mainstream traditional music classes, to supporting the students with Autism in their units. We covered the various aims, objectives, and needs of each partner, including the children's needs and desires. I also conducted a series of meetings with teachers within the Autistic classrooms to get some basic information about the students themselves (i.e. names, ages, likes/dislikes, sensitivities, etc).

Once we started music classes in September, we conducted regular, informal check-ins, and a more systematic review at the mid-term break and the end of the school term. Then again in early January, we held more team meetings to review and plan for the second term. This consistent informal and formal modes of communication was hugely important (although time consuming for the music and classroom teachers).

## 2.3 Preparation for classes, musical content, & activities

After getting some information about the students, I created a timetable to suit each school. Scoil Íosagáin opted for whole group classes for their three ASD units. Both the junior and senior infants ASD classes last about 25 minutes. The juniors have limited attention spans, and one boy in the senior infant's classroom gets a bit anxious when visitors linger too long. Considering this, I kept the infants' music classes nice and zippy. The senior ASD class in Scoil Íosagáin have a 35-minute music lesson each week.

South Lee Educate Together opted for a more individual approach since their students needed special attention. Students are taken out of class for either 1-to-1 or for 2-to-1 lessons for 10 minutes. The brevity was a challenge, but it was necessary to meet the students in a private quiet atmosphere considering some of their sensory needs.

With the timetable complete, I started planning our music classes, including medium goals for the term and weekly plans for each class. I began gathering repertoire and activities which might help to support the students' goals. Objectives for the infants' classes were very simple, including:

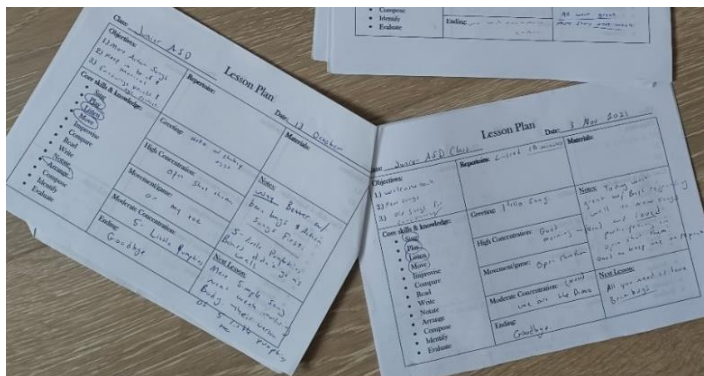
- feeling safe and ok with a stranger entering and making noise in the classroom;
- saying hello and goodbye (using gestures & eye contact);
- listening and sharing various music instruments (turn taking);
- explore loud/quiet, high/low, fast/slow sounds;
- explore textures and feel of instruments;
- feel beats individually and in groups.

# Section 3: Self-reflexive teaching practice

## 3.1 About the process

I used the following lesson plan template to plan, organise and document my new Autistic classes. I mostly used the template to think through my own process, but I also printed about a dozen of these and handwrote plans to use week after week. Once I was in the classroom, I would focus solely on the young people themselves. Rather than looking at the plan, I would memorise it and go in with my intentions for the class. Even though I'm a big planner, I always try my best to 'read the room'. So, if the students needed a calming or more exciting activity at some point, I would change the plan slightly in the moment.

Lesson Plan			
Class:	Date:		
<b>Objectives:</b> 1.) 2.) 3.)	<b>Repertoire:</b>	<b>Materials:</b>	
<b>Core skills &amp; knowledge:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sing</li> <li>• Play</li> <li>• Listen</li> <li>• Move</li> <li>• Improvise</li> <li>• Compare</li> <li>• Read</li> <li>• Write</li> <li>• Notate</li> <li>• Arrange</li> <li>• Compose</li> <li>• Identify</li> <li>• Evaluate</li> </ul>	<b>Greeting:</b>	<b>Notes:</b>	
	<b>High Concentration:</b>		
	<b>Movement/game:</b>		
	<b>Moderate Concentration:</b>		<b>Next Lesson:</b>
	<b>Ending:</b>		



At the end of class, I would usually exit the room and jot some bullet points down straightaway on the lesson plan to explore later. I would note what worked, what needed changing, and just some interested observations about the students' reactions to the musical activities. The class teachers/SNAs often gave immediate feedback as I would leave the class, and I tried to absorb as much of the tips and suggestions as possible. As my teaching timetable was so busy, I took very quick notes (1 to 2 minutes of bullet pointing), before moving to the next class. I also experimented with voice recordings notes about my impressions of the session, since it was quicker than writing notes. Both these methods helped to remind me of the many interactions that took place during the music session. When I got home later that evening, I would elaborate about the musical experience. After the project concluded, I edited the notes to eliminate spelling errors and used pseudonyms instead of my students' real names. Other than this, editing to the writing below is minimal to reflect my thought process at the time of writing.

## 3.2 Self-reflective notes

This section shares my elongated self-reflective teaching notes for Scoil Íosagáin and South Lee Educate Together. Teaching traditional music in Autistic units/classes in three different schools really benefited me, as I was able to compare how the same song or activity worked with various children.<sup>4</sup> I quickly realised that one music activity can be engaging and effective in one ASD unit but may completely flounder in another! As I taught senior infants ASD units in two schools, I realised some songs or activities worked brilliantly in one school, while went horribly in another. So, I knew that age wasn't a factor. It is still a mystery to me why this might happen, but it is probably because there are so many variables, including the students' personalities, relationships within the classrooms, interests, needs, and mood on the day. If I had only taught in one school, I may not have noticed this, or worse, I might have overgeneralised that an activity just didn't work well with Autistic children or that age group. More realistically, it may have just been uninteresting to that very specific context.

<sup>4</sup> While I haven't included elongated notes here, I also teach in St Mary's on the Hill's two ASD units.



### 3.2.1 Scoil Íosagáin: Teaching Notes

I've written far more details about Scoil Íosagáin's Junior Infants ASD class than my other classes for this project, probably because it was the largest class comprised of students with the most profound needs (due to their young age, alongside Autistic needs). While I also see young, non-speaking students in SLET, I see them individually and in groups of 2, which was far easier to manage physically, musically, and socially.

#### Scoil Íosagáin, 29 September 2021

Today I started teaching in the three ASD units of Scoil Íosagáin (this terminology is used within the school by teachers, parents and students alike). Here are some reflections.

Junior Infants ASD class (10:15-10:45): I arrived in Scoil Íosagáin and passed through all the Covid-19 protocols, which took far longer than I expected (filling out contact tracing forms, etc). With all my gear it was a bit daunting, and I was a minute or two late (which I absolutely hate and was panicked about). I gathered my thoughts though and knocked on the youngest ASD unit's door. They have a traffic light system posted to let visitors know if it is ok to enter. This morning the sign was pointed to green, so in I went after composing myself.



When I entered all the children and staff were already sitting in a circle on the floor. They were listening to music on YouTube. I started with the Name Bag & Hello Song. The Name Bag activity was inspired by Thomas Johnston. It's a fabulous name game, as students choose to whisper, sing, shout, or call out their name in whichever way their mood/personalities dictate. In addition to learning their names, it gives a real insight into the characters of a classroom. I sang my own name into the bag (see below), and then walked around to each child encouraging them to sing/speak their name. Teacher/SNAs helped non-speaking students, and these children were able to touch the bag, whisper, and/or wave. Today none of the boys said their own names. (A few of the boys are non-speaking, while other use spoken language occasionally).

After the name bag, I took the shaky eggs out of the bag and started to sing the Hello song. I sang each boys name and passed them an egg and encouraged them to shake to the beats using gestures and eye contact. These 2 activities worked so well in SLET, but it didn't go well this morning! The class teacher looked at me impatiently a couple times during the hello song. One student, Shane, also had a bit of a meltdown because he kept grabbing the name bag. He literally couldn't wait to see what was inside of it. I let him look and feel the bag to calm him, but his teachers were trying to direct him away from the bag and kept saying 'wait your turn',

etc. So I learned quite quickly their approach and that he's working on turn taking and sharing a lot in school. Shane really didn't like being redirected, and lost it.

Grabbing at instruments is quite common amongst ASD students as they're using their touch senses to explore sounds and to gain a sense of control over their sonic worlds (Leon in SLET does something similar). I've noticed that the teachers will say very simple, clear instructions when this happens to try to defuse the situation (most commonly 'Not Available' or 'Jessie First, then Shane'). They won't go into the reasons why, just very clear, simple instructions.



After the Hello Song, I did a couple minutes of the 'Shake Shake the Shaky Egg' activity, but by then things were kind of falling apart with Shane's meltdown affecting the others. The teacher asked me 'Do you have anything else?' (which was totally humbling!). So I went straight into this lovely Goodbye Song, featuring the low whistle. It is a really simple, peaceful Phrygian tune. The teachers looked relieved when it was over, and the students quickly went to their table for lunch with the SNAs.

The feedback that I got from the teacher was tough to hear; Apparently, there had been a mix up with the time. I was told the lesson was to last from around 10:15-10:45 or (10:40 depending on their attention span). But the class teacher was told it would start at 10am! So, the students were sitting over 15 minutes waiting for me to arrive. While I was panicked that I was a minute or two late, they were thinking I was about 17 minutes late! By the time I started music, they boys were already getting tired (which explains why the class teacher was so impatient with me as well). This explains a lot of why things went so poorly. It's still a mystery what caused the miscommunication, especially considering the crazy amount of team planning & prep that we accomplished. At least we know this won't happen again next week! I still felt so bad that I unknowingly kept them waiting, I know it's the toughest thing you can do to children with ASD (and their adult helpers). After apologising profusely (which was accepted), we made a good plan for next week including:

- Be clearer with Shane about whose turn it is.
- Use simpler language: In fact, there is no need to talk at all. If you can just sing, play, gesture & demonstrate better, that would be ideal.
- Develop something more sensory-based for Cormac, who needs a lot of support and sensory feedback
- Start 5 Little Pumpkins with visual board for next week
- Keep it to 4 or 5 short, clear activities
- Create a Visual Strip so students know what is coming up next and how much longer music will last.

The above was also an excellent lesson in the importance of setting up the classes the right way – even though I accidentally got the wrong time, the whole context was off right from the start. It doesn't matter if a mistake happens due to my own carelessness or a genuine miscommunication within the team, it will most certainly affect the boys learning experience, and all we can do is correct as soon as possible for the next session.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): I got to know the teacher (Ms. Hackett), SNA (Caroline), and boys today. There are 5 boys (Christopher, Peter, Aiden, Mason, and Callum). In general, the senior infant ASD class is calmer to manage than the junior infants as they have one less student and they can better communicate their needs verbally. Two of the boys (Christopher and Peter) are a bit shy and don't talk much. Aiden and Callum are very happy, bright, chatty little boys, and they love to discuss things in GREAT detail. It is a balancing act to try and give the other boys equal attention and support, since they tend to do most of the talking. (Plus, Aidan and Callum are very charismatic and enthusiastic about music, so it's so hard to suggest they quiet down. We will focus more on turn-taking to help this out).

I did the very same lesson plan with both infants' classes to gauge their abilities and get to know them and interests. The senior infants REALLY liked the shaky eggs. We had a chat about what types of stuff they would like to do in music class. I asked questions like, 'If you could learn any instrument or anything, what would you like to do?' The boys are a bit young to be asking questions like that (since some of them haven't had exposure to instruments before). But Christopher said that he wanted a drum. Since they liked the actions and shaky eggs so much, I think in the Hairy Scary Castle would be great for them. I think I will start that with them next week, as it takes a while to get them used to playing the percussion instruments.

Both the SNA and teacher were really pleased to have music in the classroom and participated at the table with the boys. The same was true of the SNAs and Teacher in the junior infants class – every adult was totally focused on helping the boys in the music class, which provided a lovely communal atmosphere for the boys.

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): Today was the first meeting with the senior boys' ASD unit. Ms Heaphy teaches alongside the SNAs Sarah and Jill. There are 6 boys in the unit ranging from 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> class. All the boys are verbal – Mark, Colin, and Matthew are very chatty. James and John are a bit more reserved, but can communicate well. John is the smallest and youngest by quite a bit, so the social dynamics are much different than the infants classes who are all peers. All the boys work in their mainstream classrooms for part of the day and spend the other part of the day in the ASD unit. Their ASD classroom is very small and narrow, so it isn't ideal for music (in contrast, both infants ASD units are in large, open rooms with lots of space). It is cramped with 6 boys and 4 adults, so I might suggest moving it (but we had issues of space in the school as some rooms are being used for isolation rooms for the pandemic. Plus the boys get over excited when in new environments).

Today, we played a little game with the shaky eggs and had a chat about their own goals. I thought it was important to meet the boys and ask them directly what they wanted to get out of their music classes this year. They had a larger vocabulary to discuss what types of things they wanted to learn and do. Several boys (as a couple teachers/SNAs) said they wanted to learn guitar. Two other boys wanted to learn the accordion (Matthew) and saxophone (Colin). The general plan is to host a series of classes for the unit this term, but in the future, it would be great if we could include these 6 boys within their own music classes in their mainstream classrooms (with Paul or Karl). If large tin whistle classes don't suit them, I think it would be great to have them learning a traditional instrument in smaller groups. I'm really hoping that Matthew will be able to join a smaller group of 2-3 other students to learn the accordion.

Since most of the boys mentioned learning guitar (and nearly all were excited about the idea), we will do an introduction to guitar later this autumn. It will be a nice way to start group music-making and we could also include the boys in the larger grúpa cheoil in the future. For today, we just got to know each other and did some rhythm games. The boys were extremely chatty (especially Mark and Colin who dominated the conversation). I'm getting a sense that they might talk all day and not get to much music-making. The SNAs mentioned that they get side-tracked quite easily and they're working on their attention spans and staying on

task). So, I'll try to guide them back to the musical action next week and promise to chat with them at the end. They also seem like a VERY creative bunch of lads, so there is lots of scope to explore music, rhythms, stories, expression, emotions, and songwriting together.

**Scoil Íosagáin, 6 October 2021**

**Junior Infants ASD class (10:00-10:25):** Today went so much better, particularly now that I have the right time and we know each other. I also created a visual strip to show the students what is coming up next. They use similar ones throughout the day. Shane goes up to me at the end of each song and pulls the song off the board (all the songs/activities we do are posted using Velcro).

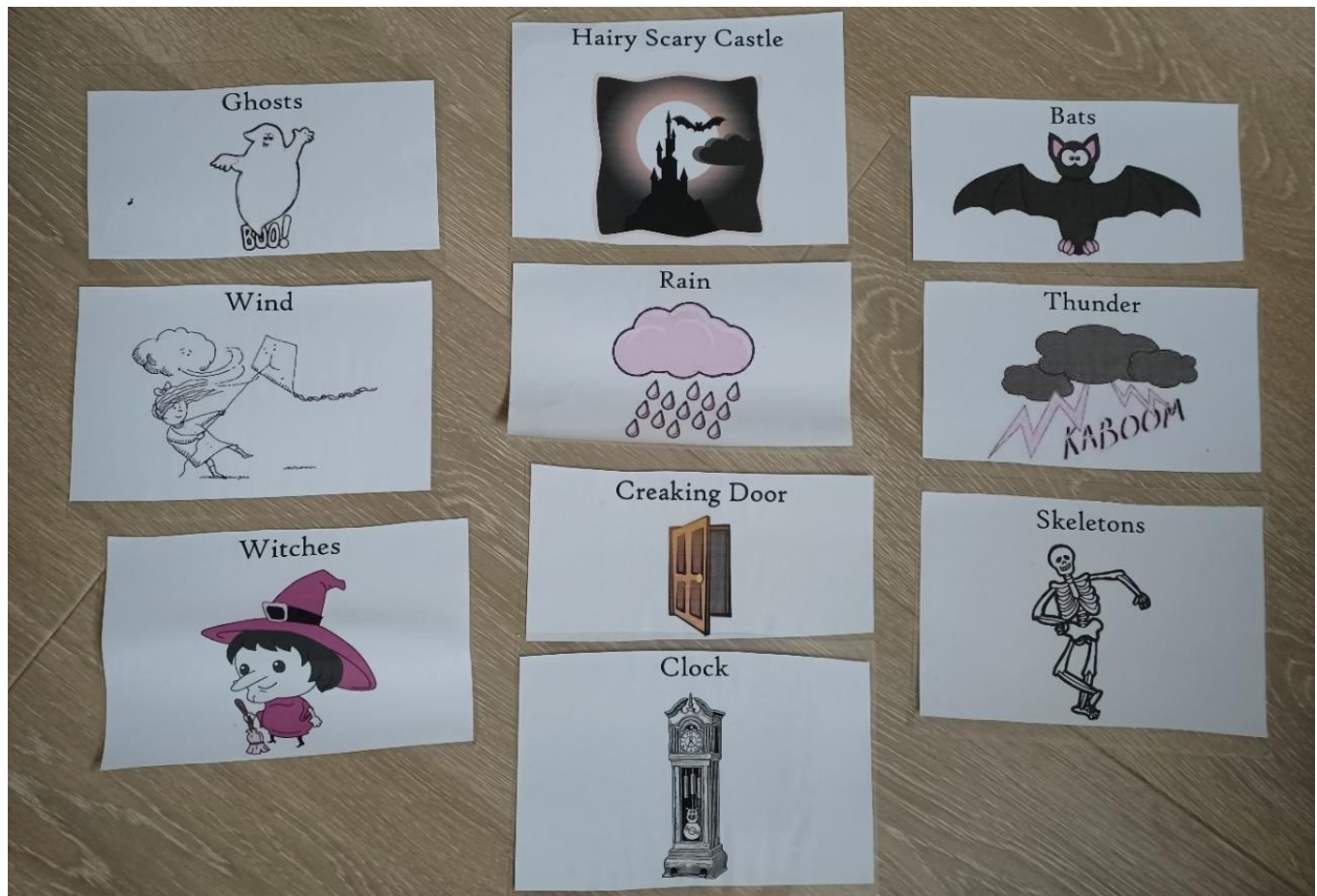


Shane did better with sharing since he knew what was coming up. (Plus, he knew what was in the Name Bag). We did the Hello Song, 5 Little Pumpkins, On my Toe, and the Goodbye Song. All went better, with more attention and engagement from the students this week. Feedback this week was to:

- Include action songs earlier in the lesson to help Cormac with his sensory needs.
- Make the Hello & Goodbye songs much shorter for their attention spans. As a music teacher, I sort of disagree with this suggestion, because junior infant students need so much repetition. But the teacher is really concerned about the time pressures on their attention as it causes sensory overload, so I think it is best to follow her lead. The students will get musical repetition week to week (I will repeat songs more weeks than I usually do).
- We also changed our final goodbye song. My slow, Phrygian song wasn't resonating with them, so we moved to a more upbeat (Major) goodbye song. I also disagreed with the teacher on this recommendation, because I think it is important for all students to be exposed to different tonalities and a variety of feelings in music. But again, to establish a happy environment, I thought it best to default to the classroom teacher (and perhaps boys?) musical tastes. I can always introduce more diverse melodies later.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): I don't tend to use the visual schedule with the senior infants class, as they don't use that system in their classroom (and perhaps they can better process verbal instructions). I might experiment with using it in the future, since it is so handy just to keep on track with the lesson (I find it useful myself!)

Today in Senior Infants, we sang the Hello Song, did a Shaky Egg activity, and introduced the Penguins Come to Tea dance/song. We also started a new musical story, called Inside the Hairy Scary Castle. It's a story



featuring sound effects, singing, and percussion instruments. The boys really listened attentively to the story and sounds of the haunted house. We played maracas for the skeletons, woodblocks for the grandfather clock and tambourines for the thunder and lightning, along with vocalisations. We practiced sharing the instruments and tidying them up at the end of class. The story includes visual cues for when it is their turn to play.

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): We started body percussion with the senior boys' today, as I thought it would help to connect to their physical/sensory needs and help kick start group music-making. We first did the basics (i.e. stomping, clapping, booms, clicks, etc), before moving on to more advanced body percussion rhythms (my favourite one that goes 'boom, clap, boom, fizzy fizz, click, etc). The boys and their SNAs/teachers did really well - everyone participated together and were smiling at the end. Some of the boys needed it repeated several times slowly, as they had coordination issues. But they never got frustrated, and it seems to be a good activity to help with their physical & musical progression. We worked on feeling and chanting too.

I brought in some percussion instruments today as well. We covered their names and the basics of how they are played. We tried out some of the body percussion rhythms on the instruments and played a listening game. The engagement from the teachers and SNAs is great in this class. They're all learning and playing together, which makes for a great, fun, supportive atmosphere. We will do more advanced rhythms next week to build on today's lesson, and we will learn a new song.

## Scoil Íosagáin, 13 October 2021

Junior Infants ASD class (10:00-10:25): Class went really well this week, even more engagement than the week before. The students got new beanbags, so they seemed way more comfortable (especially Cormac who needs a lot of feedback to help with his proprioception). After the Hello Song, we did a 'Super Simple Song' [Open, Shut Them](#) to work on actions and opposites. We did On My Toe (an action song up the body from the Music Generation book), 5 Little Pumpkins and the Goodbye song. Next week, I should:

- Continue doing the action songs earlier in the lesson, it worked great today.
- The 5 Little Pumpkins visual board didn't go so well as it distracted students. Next time, we might try it with the teachers modelling for the students.
- Try out additional simple songs with actions.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): Last week went so well, that I used the same exact lesson plan as last week. We sang the Hello Song, played pass the Shaky Egg, danced/sang Penguins Come to Tea, and continued the Hairy Scary Castle musical story. The boys really engaged and participated with the musical this week as they were familiar with the story. Some were able to sing a little, and all listened and played their parts when it was their turn.

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): We continued with our body percussion unit today. We warmed-up on the easy rhythms we did last week then progressed onto the newer trickier ones today. Again, the boys and teachers were fully engaged with the lesson and participated great with all the rhythms and moves – helping each other when needed. As part of the boy percussion unit, we also listened, sang, and learned the beats to ['The Wellerman.'](#) It's a great song with a lot of potential. I'm hoping that the senior boys' ASD unit will learn it first and then we can teach some of the mainstream 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> classes to sing it together.

In terms of my own teaching, I made sure my lesson plan included directions to myself to keep them a bit more focused on music this week. They still tend to chat too much about random things, and I usually allow them to speak for longer than their SNAs seem to like. Personally, I like just being present with them and hearing the random things they think of in music class. But I totally recognise how important it is to support the SNAs/teachers, since they are helping the boys with larger skills (like turn-taking and staying on topic).

They boys were very interested in the Inside the Hairy Scary Castle activity. The activity is usually works well for 6 to 8 year olds. So, I assumed that the senior boys' would think it was a bit childish, but they keep asking me about it, since they all love Halloween. Since I had the percussion instruments with me, we decided to try it out as a class today. They absolutely LOVED the story, and I don't think they were too young for it at all. Perhaps it's because they haven't had proper music classes the past 18 months because of Covid? Or maybe they are just a nice innocent group of lads. Either way, I'm really glad that we tried it out, because we were working with the percussion instruments anyways and needed an activity for listening and turn taking. So, it went great.

## Scoil Íosagáin, 20 October 2021:

Today we finished off our Halloween themed activities in all three ASD classes. The day went really well, and all students were settled into the activities. After the midterm break, we will plan new activities for the boys, including:

- Add more action-based songs, dances, percussion games, and instrumental playing for the infants classes.
- The senior boys will start guitars in November. We will also continue with body percussion and the Wellerman song.
- The senior boys (3<sup>rd</sup> class and up) would hugely benefit from attending small group tuition with their peers on the other traditional instruments. One boy, Matthew, really wants to learn accordion, while

most of them have chosen guitar. My instinct is that it is better to involve them in the traditional music programme wherever possible, rather than then learning in isolation within their own class.

### Scoil Íosagáin, 3 November 2021

Junior Infants ASD class (10:00-10:25): Today was perhaps the most effective class that we've had together so far. The boys really responded well to our new songs (Good Morning & [We are the Dinosaurs](#)). They were super happy and excited to do Open, Shut Them again. I think repeating the song is really helping them to connect with it and enjoy the music and movement more. So, we will keep some old favourites going. Autistic students like to know what is coming up next, so old songs can really settle them while also encouraging participation. It seems great to use old songs in-between new material to help the students stay focused and regulate. The teacher mentioned that Cillian (shy, non-speaking 4 year old), love the Beatbugs's [All You Need Is Love](#), so we might try that out next week to see if he will come out of his shell.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): Since we finished up our Halloween themed story, we started new songs and activities today. We began with the Hello Songs and Shaky Eggs again to establish a consistent schedule and warm-up to the music classes. Then we did movement type activities to start working on rhythm and body coordination. We did 'We are the Dinosaurs' similar to the junior infants. The senior infants were well able to act out the different actions & moods of the dinosaurs on the first try, so perhaps it is a bit easy for them. We also did 'Point to the Window', which is a movement song in 7/8, which works on uneven rhythmic couplings. We finished with the [Chicken Dance Medley](#) to incorporate dance and well-known nursery songs.

The senior infants are really engaged and able to focus, and they are generally much more regulated than the junior infants. Therefore, we tend to make our own music in the senior infants or might use the speaker to play music to move/dance. In contrast, the junior infants often need colourful, visual cues to engage with the music. My own music-making (apparently) is not nearly as effective as music videos (like Super Simple Songs). I'm generally against the overuse of YouTube, but in this context multiple adults and kids are using the visuals together to focus active music-making, so it seems to be a fantastic tool for the time being. While I often play a variety of instruments for the senior infant class, the junior infants become quite upset sometimes during instrument demonstrations. (One boy is still working on sharing and not grabbing other people's things, and another boy has a sound sensitivity).

The senior infants had a substitute teacher today, so they were generally out of sorts. Perhaps this is why the new material didn't go as well as I imagined it would. Two boys participated fully in all activities, while the other two boys just listened (but listened very attentively). Perhaps these two boys were quiet because of the new material? Next week, I will use the same lesson plan to see if their reactions change at all. The repetition might help the boys to engage better, as the songs will be more familiar (it might reassure them).

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): So today we started 'Introduction to Guitar.' Mark and Sarah (SNA) had their own guitars already (and Creative Tradition had a few others in our instrument bank). It took me a while to tune all the guitars earlier this morning because they hadn't been used in ages. But it was really fun to get started with them; The boys were really excited. They listened to instructions well, despite their excitement. Today, we mostly went over the names of the parts of the instrument, how to care and hold a guitar while sitting, and did a bit of plucking vs. strumming. I mostly taught aurally today, but will start using visual cues next week.

Doing only guitar for 30 minutes seemed too intense/specific for them, so I thought it best to do about 20 minutes of guitar and 10 minutes of our singing & body percussion. That combination worked really well today, and we will try it again next week. We continued with the Wellerman beats & singing after our guitar practice. This gave the students a break as well since their fingers aren't used to the strings yet.

## Scoil Íosagáin 10 November 2021

Junior Infants ASD class (10:00-10:25): Today I tried the same lesson plan as last week since the boys responded so well to it. I also thought it would be good since it would give the boys repetition and a consistent, familiar music schedule. Unfortunately, it was an off day in general for the class. When I entered, Cormac was really upset, and he had been crying for a while; his loud crying disturbed the other students, so, we started off in an unsettled atmosphere.

Instead of using the shaky eggs for the Hello Song today, I passed out some percussion instruments to introduce different sounds to the boys. The change of routine really upset Shane, who began to have a meltdown because the eggs were missing. He grabbed all the instruments and was cradling a maraca (which was closest in shape to the eggs). But he was still too upset to participate fully. (I might try eggs and percussion next week or something!) With the two meltdowns happening simultaneously, we only sang part of 'Good Morning' then went straight into Open, Shut Them. The boys really calmed down with the visual of the song happening on the board. Cormac quieted down, and Shane came back into the music circle. Shane was so excellent at the Open, Shut Them song. He did the louds and quietes so well (and actually vocalized the words for the first time).

As I mentioned before, I don't like relying on the interactive whiteboard all the time, because I want to promote 'active' music-making with the youngsters. But in a situation like this, it was a necessary tool to redirect their attention. From my view today, YouTube actually helped them to engaging in 'active' music-making. The meltdowns were a huge distraction to everyone, but a favourite music video helped to soothe the boys. Soon after, they were all moving, playing, and listening once again. Since September, I've realised how crucial it is to include visual elements during music classes for Autistic children. In this scenario, YouTube isn't a mindless or passive musical activity - it is a mode of self-regulation and reconnection to something familiar, calming to students coping with overwhelming emotional and sensory inputs.

Aidan did remarkably well in class today, particularly during the 'We are the Dinosaurs' activity. He is usually very quiet and doesn't speak or sing, but in past weeks he has tapped, clapped and rattled the shaky egg to the beats. Today during the dinosaur song, he marched and sang the words with lovely tone and pitch. The teacher has been playing the song in-between music lessons and, so the repeated exposure of the song is really helping their engagement. In general, the teacher is fantastic to support and follow-up on musical ideas. Next week, we will introduce:

- Christmas songs. Even though it is super early, we will start one winter/Christmas song to help provide repetition before Christmas celebrations. (Plus, Music Generation's calendar ends early on 8<sup>th</sup> Dec).
- 'All You Need is Love' to work on Cillian's participation and engagement. It's important to use students' own interest to get them involved in active music-making.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): We tried the same exact lesson plan today to provide familiarity to the new songs & activities. We covered:

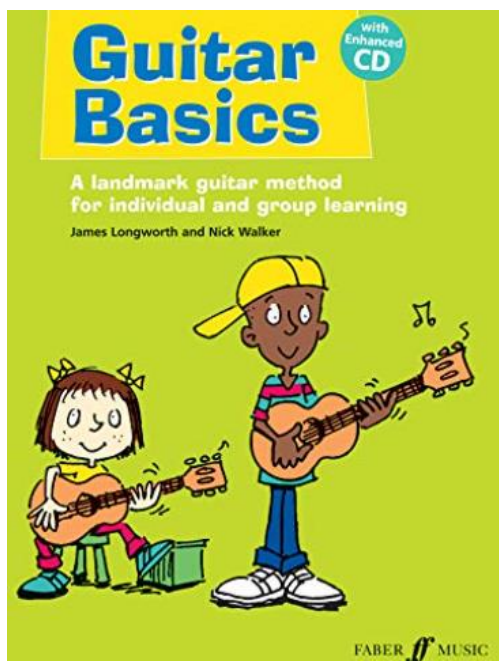
- Hello Songs and Shaky Eggs
- We are the Dinosaurs
- Point to the Window'
- Chicken Dance Medley

The boys did participate well again, all except for Mason, who mostly just listened and watched us. He mentioned that he didn't really like dancing. I reassured him that it wasn't really 'dancing,' that it was more songs with moves, but he wasn't buying it at all! Plus, he's probably right: doing three movement activities is a bit unbalanced and music class should probably have more variety. So next week, we will incorporate songs and percussion instruments again. Mason said he wanted to do The Hairy Scary Castle again (all the other boys wanted that too). I told them Halloween was over, but maybe we could write another musical story based



on Christmas. They seemed to love this idea, so I will have to come up with something for next week. Maybe they can help me to write a new story with corresponding music.

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): Today we continued with singing/body percussion for Wellerman, which sounds really nice now. We used the guitars as drums, like Nathan Evan's does in his version of the song. The boys got a kick out of this. We discussed Sea shanties and the link between Irish and Scottish folk songs. After about 10 minutes of singing we got into our guitar songs.



I'm using a guitar method book to facilitate things. Like lots of Autistic children, the boys really benefit from seeing clear visual resources to learn. So, I photocopied some pages of the book, like a picture of all the parts of the guitar, chord charts, names of strings, and the songs we're learning. I chose this book because it has a very clear accompanying CD featuring different styles of music to play along to. This really helps the boys to listen to the beats and play together. I'm generally not a huge fan of backing tracks (I usually like when young musicians make their own music alongside their teachers). But in this context, backing tracks provide real stability for the group and helps to facilitate aural learning and musical feeling (i.e. grooves, 12 bar blues, etc). It also helps the teachers to play the music and practice during the week when I'm not there. So, for the time being, it is helping them a lot. The book is helping to keep things simple and clear. The teacher and SNAs are learning guitar right alongside the boys, which is another massive help. The boys get a kick out of the adults trying the same new song as themselves. The group cohesion is really strong, which helps their musical and social progression.

### Scoil Íosagáin 17 November 2021

Junior Infants ASD class (10:00-10:25): Today we tried out 'All You Need is Love' to encourage Cillian to come out of his shell a bit. The teacher mentioned he really 'comes alive' when he hears it. Funny enough, when we tried it today, all the students just vacantly stared at the YouTube video. We had warmed up with our Hello Song, and I was encouraging them to shake their eggs along with the music, but there was just stunned silence. This is a good example of the whiteboard acting as a crutch, rather than tool for engagement (opposed to the fabulous active engagement they did with action songs on YouTube back on 10<sup>th</sup> November). It could be argued that it successfully got them to listen with rapt attention. Maybe with more instructions to shake and repetition next week it will be improved.

SNAs were helping to move the students' arms to the beat. They do this quite often each week if a boy is not participating for several minutes. At first, I was taken aback by this practice. I felt that it was a bit invasive to be moving a child for them. In all my years of teaching music, I rare (if ever) touch a student to encourage them

to move or shake in a certain way (sometimes I reposition fingers on the fiddle, but even that is rare). Perhaps this stems from my training or something. I tend to instruct and/or demonstrate a movement, hoping that the student will try it on their own accord. But, considering the students in this particular class, who have profound communication and sensory processing difficulties, touch and moving with the boys seems to be a very practical way to encourage them to participate and feel the music. Important thing to add: none of the students seemed *opposed* to the teachers/SNAs moving their arms to the music. The SNAs helped boys with very low energy or were too shy. I got the impression that they were helping them to feel the music and to engage a bit, rather than doing it 'for them.' And of course, the teachers had a gentle touch without force, so it did not seem to be a problem for anyone (quite the contrary). I am profoundly struck how different it was in terms of my own approach. I would have never communicated through the body in the same way – the teachers gave implicit permission that I was allowed to communicate physically with the boys. In fact, it was encouraged through gestures, pointing, etc. Lots of the boys need sensory feedback to listen. So, squeezing and hugging is not only appropriate, but is necessary to make some of the boys feel safe and regulated.

We also did [We Wish You A Merry Christmas](#) (on the speakers, not on video), which was a great action song for them to engage with. It is similar to the louds and quiet in 'Open, Shut Them' too, so this song was a very good choice for this class.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): Although it seems early to be doing Christmas activities, it is necessary since students with Autism (and young children in general), need lots of time to learn and become comfortable performing new songs and music. I came up with a little Christmas medley for the boys, inspired by our 'Hairy Scary Castle' activity. It's based on three songs; Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, [Up on the Housetop](#), and We Wish You a Merry Christmas. I tell a story to link all three songs into an overarching narrative. Each song has actions, visual cues, percussion instruments and singing.



Since it was my very first week making up the activity, there was room for improvement on my part (to sing and deliver the story with confidence). But overall, it was received very well. The boys even gave me tips on what to add to the story for next week. I'm so glad that I created a little story based on Mason suggestion last session. Since the boys are verbal, we were able to have a chat about the story and directions for next week.

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): Today we played all three of our songs on Guitar, some of which have words to them. They are very short, but great in variety, and it leaves us time to practice them a few times. And some of the boys try out a song as a 'solo'. I am noticing that John is much smaller and younger than the other boys which puts him at a disadvantaged trying to play the guitar. He is only in 3<sup>rd</sup> class, and is sweet and shy compared to the more confident boys (especially Mark who tends to dominate). Ideally John should access music in his mainstream class or in small group tuition with boys his own age in the future.

## Scoil Íosagáin 24 November 2021

Junior Infants ASD class (10:00-10:25): Shane, Brian, and Cillian were out sick today, so we have a quieter, smaller class with Aiden, Cormac and Kyle. It was a completely different dynamic, which makes me wonder about musical provision for the students, Cormac in particular. We did the Hello Song, followed by a new song Hello, Reindeer and [We Wish You A Merry Christmas](#) from last week. Cormac was engaged the entire time, which is rare. During a few classes, music has upset him and caused him to become dysregulated (or sometimes he is overwhelmed in school before music class starts, like on the 10<sup>th</sup> November). Sometimes an SNA will take Cormac to the sensory room during music to help him regulate. There were three occasions that Cormac did not join the music circle at all, and he opted to sit at the table behind the circle. He would then eat his lunch and listen to the music. On two occasions, he sat in the circle on his beanbag, but the SNA had to sit with him and rub his back to get him to stay sitting. Today, in contrast, Cormac was sitting on his beanbag and participated the entire time. He only got up once to come over to me and sit on my lap. It was surprising, interesting and incredible to witness. It was one of the first times he acknowledged my presence (in a typical social way). Shane is usually so busy and attention seeking, so many of the adults tend to pay attention to him (for practical reasons, as he can be physically unpredictable). I'm wondering if this has massively affected Cormac. Maybe he actually never felt safe to come up to me before. Since it was quieter, perhaps he was able to get closer and more into the musical action. This leads me to think that Cormac might need music provision in smaller groups - perhaps in twos or threes like in SLET.

Today was also the first day that we tried to complete 6 songs (all really short). It went well, so perhaps their attention span for music is improving. I'm still keeping things really snappy and not using much spoken language (which saves time and promotes clarity). Next week we will try to incorporate jingle bells into our Christmas Songs.

The teachers raised concerns about the upcoming 'Christmas Concert' today. The school hopes to record videos this year for the parents (covid restrictions are still in full effect). The musician team will help wherever possible. One idea was to have all the MGCC tutors play tunes for the ASD units - to accompany their singing. The teachers were nervous to introduce newcomers to the boys, since they can get dysregulated with a change in the schedule (and new, loud things in general). We agreed to try a musical collaboration later in spring (perhaps for St Patrick's Day), and I can help them to make a nice musical video this side of Christmas.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): Today we practiced our Christmas story medley with story, songs, actions, and percussion instruments. It all went well, and I was more comfortable with the storytelling aspect of it. Because it involves three songs, it pretty much takes up the whole class, and it is tricky to practice things twice. So today, we just warmed up with 'Up on the Housetop' to practice the claves part before launching into the full story. It went great, and one boy suggested that we add a part where the boys and girls come down in the morning to open the presents. They are so creative and I'm happy they have the space to express it in the classroom.

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): Today we played all three of our songs on Guitar, and all the boys are doing well. There was a new boy, Riley who sat in today. He is a sweet, shy boy who seemed really interested in music. I must find more about him next time, I look forward to getting to know him. We were so enthralled with the guitars the past two weeks that we didn't do too much singing, moving or games. So next week we will start some Christmas songs so the boys can join in Mr. Hennessey's class for 'Glow on the Go' carolling coming up.

## Scoil Íosagáin 1 December 2021

Junior Infants ASD class (10:00-10:25): The boys' teacher, Mrs. Worsley was out today, but the class went surprisingly well considering the boys can become upset to changes to their routine. Cormac was also out, so it was also a little quieter. We did a very simple lesson just to build on the progress that we have been making. We sang the Hello Song and the boys' name while passing out and playing the shaky eggs. Then we sang

Hello Reindeer & We Wish You A Merry Christmas, which are quite simple. We tried up to sing and play Up on the Housetop, but that was much more challenging for them (and probably more appropriate for the senior infants). It went surprisingly well though, and they were more engaged than I thought they would be. We ended with Goodbye Reindeer and the Goodbye song (which are variations on each other), so it was nice and familiar to the boys. Things are building nicely to our last class together next week.

Senior Infants ASD class (11:30-11:55): Today we practiced our Christmas story medley with story, songs, actions, and percussion instruments. It all went great again even though the teacher was out sick. This was our third time doing the activity and the boys are now very familiar with their parts, actions, and percussion rhythms. We're hoping to dress up and make a video next week for their families. The boys have responded so well even though they have experienced inconsistency in terms of their SNAs and teachers being out of school. (These boys also work for part of the day in their mainstream classes).

Senior Boys' ASD class (12:00-12:40): Today we focused mostly on singing to prepare a bit for Glow on the Go. We sang Shaken Stevens 'Snow is Falling' and a few other classics. The boys were familiar with them from last year as well, so it was a fun sing along to prepare. There were all 6 boys in class today with the teacher and 2 SNAs, so it was a bit crowded and noisy today in the small room. We did so much singing (and did the Wellerman too), that we didn't get to the guitars today. I left the music with the teacher though and they might practice during the week without me, and I'll see them next week too for one more practice.

### Scoil Íosagáin 8 December 2021

We were supposed to have our last class of the term today, but unfortunately Storm Barra closed all schools in Cork. It is a pity, because we were supposed to practice for GLOW and video record music for the boy's families. But the show must go on, as they say.

### Scoil Íosagáin 10 December 2021 GLOW Christmas Celebration

I met the senior ASD class this morning to practice for our performance in Hollyhill library as part of MGCC's GLOW celebrations. Four out of the six boys were out sick, which was another spanner in addition to the storm on Wednesday. We made the most of it for the two boys and their SNAs/teachers. We practiced our songs and did a social story to prepare them what to expect. It was important to explain the order of things for them (i.e. we're going to pack up the gear, get on the mini-bus, sing outside the library, and play guitars inside, the seats will be set up for you, and Jessie will help to announce everything so you know what is happening, etc).

I went carolling with the 6<sup>th</sup> class boys after our practice and met the senior ASD class in Knocknaheeney around 1pm. After singing outside, we all went in to play. Mark was very excited, while Matthew was a bit more chilled out and quite. Another boy (Riley) went along to watch. He didn't play because he only attended one music class so far. I was setting up the chairs, chatting to the photographer, librarian, and getting the fiddle students ready. While we were setting up, Mark had a little meltdown because he thought his mom would be in the audience, but she ended up not being able to make it. The SNAs were quickly and gently calming him down behind the scenes while I set up the concert. I barely knew anything was happening, they were so supportive and attentive. He bounced back quickly and was his usually chatty self for the concert.

We played along to a backing track which helped us to listening together in a new environment. Matthew is still working on holding the instrument the right way (he's currently working with an OT this body placement gait/posture). The boys did great, and it was so lovely to have the SNAs performing alongside the boys. It made them less nervous, especially since most of their group was out sick!



The library was an ideal place for their first performance, since it was a very quiet, informal environment. After their songs, the guitar players went into the ‘audience’ to listen to other boys play fiddle. We all chatted afterwards, and Music Generation gave them little chocolate bears, so they were delighted with themselves! They were only playing guitar as an experiment for a few weeks, so they have great potential to do more performances in the future. The backing tracks acted as very good warm-ups, and to help with listening, rhythm, and pulse. But in the future, we could use the guitars more creatively, perhaps writing our own songs or tunes and linking in with the other traditional musicians in the school. We will continue with the guitar in the new year, but might move Matthew to accordion since he showed an interest in that specifically. Mark loves the guitar and will progress well on that.

### Scoil Íosagáin 15 December 2021 (Christmas video)

I went into Scoil Íosagáin today to help record videos for the boys’ families as they aren’t doing any live performances. I hadn’t seen the little boys in a couple weeks because of the storm, so things were a little shaky, but it was really nice to do something for them. I dressed up in my Christmas dress and brought them sweets. I visited the junior infants from 10:00-10:40am. Their attention span is usually pretty short, and they can get tired or anxious if activities go on too long. So, we only had a little time to record and not able to practice beforehand or do multiple takes. Mr Hennessey came to help video, so the teacher/SNAs and I were free to play and sing with the boys. We did a couple songs with the speakers and one with YouTube for the visuals. It wasn’t really a ‘performance,’ more like us just getting dressed up and doing our regular music class while another teacher filmed. It was a good way of capturing the musical outcomes for the boys. Being on a conventional stage with a big audience would be too overwhelming for them at this early stage.



After their music, I mingled and helped get the boys settled for their lunch. The context of this junior infants ASD class is important to keep in mind; The 6 boys have 4 adults in the room, and they provide essential help with basic things like health and safety. All adults are fully engaged helping the boys unzip their lunch bags. Some of the boys are working on saying 'sandwich, please' while others point to pictographs of what they would like out of their lunches. The boys working on basics like sitting, eating, drinking, symbolic and verbal communication, and self-regulating themselves. They need help going to the bathroom and washing their hands. In this context, what can do in the music classroom is really inspiring. Their teachers are also fully engaging in the music programme, as they feel it helps their communication and engagement with activities in school.



Later in the morning, I visited the Senior Infants ASD unit to help film their Christmas Musical Story. Their teacher has been out for a few weeks, and a new substitute was there today. I also hadn't seen the boys for a couple weeks because of the storm. So, we ended up doing a more participatory music class rather than a presentational performance. Like the junior infants, Mr Hennessey came in to film for their parents. All five boys were really engaged in the musical story and participated along with percussion instruments and sung the words that they knew. I struggled a bit with navigating the background music, showing the visual cards and singing/demonstrating all at once. It would have been easier if an SNA or teacher was participating (but this couldn't be helped since the school is facing staff shortages during the pandemic). The boys didn't seem to mind at all, and they were all really paying attention to the story and playing/singing along with the songs. The spirit of the class was really lovely, excited and joyful. We will do more games in the New Year. I'll start researching some kinaesthetic games like this [Dalcroze Game](#).

I truly enjoyed my time teaching the boys the past couple months. It just has been so rewarding, and I feel like I've learned more than they have! In January, I will conference with the teachers about what types of activities and goals we should set for our music classes. I'm so looking forward what they will be able to achieve and experience next term.

### 3.2.2 South Lee Educate Together: Teaching Notes

South Lee Educate Together, 23 September 2021

I began working with the Autistic children today in South Lee Educate Together (SLET). The school opted to host smaller group interactions with their students, rather than me teaching all 6 students together. Five of the students in the Autistic class are senior infants and one is in 1<sup>st</sup> class. (Teachers, students, and families use the terminology 'Autistic class' rather than 'unit', and almost always 'Autism' rather than 'ASD'). A few more children attending SLET are on the spectrum, but attend music within their mainstream classrooms (aided by their SNAs). At the rate the school is growing, there will likely be two Autistic classrooms next academic year.

I work with students individually and in pairs, and so, I only have a brief time to see them each week. Pairs of students get 15 minutes, while individuals get a 10 minute session. At times this feels too short, but on the positive side of things, it seems to suit their attention spans, they get in-depth individual attention, and it is easier for me to plan and navigate than large, long classes (such as in Scoil Íosagáin). In SLET if a child is ever out sick, I also get to extend the other children's music times but a little bit.

Our first session together today was based on play and just getting to know each other through music. We played with the shaky eggs, and used a call and response game (which went really well for every student). The students vary in their strengths and abilities, including their verbal communication. All the children (5 boys and 1 girl), communicate verbally to varying degrees; Conal Mc (6) uses the least spoken language, while Conal D (7) is the most chatty (rambles about anything at all, often not related to the current music or activity). Conal Mc will only say a couple words here and there, usually one word at a time when needed. Lizzy is limited in her verbal communication as well, but does frequently vocalise and gesture to communicate. Olly also doesn't use much verbal language, but when he does, he often engages in echolalia until the music lesson ends. Olly is incredibly intelligent, artistic, and musical - probably the most outstanding character I've worked with this year. His strengths and weaknesses are quite extreme; He has enormous musical potential, having probably the most innate musical ability of any 6-year-old I've met and worked with. His ear and ability to remember patterns is off the charts for his age, so he would hugely benefit from regular music training and instruction. (He also comes from a very musical family). Sam is quiet and has a short attention span, but is more social and gets along well with Ethan. Ethan is incredibly loving and social, but has attention, focus and communication problems. (Ethan & Sam work together well in their paired music class).

Anyways, today I just got to know the students, and started to make a proper individualised plan for each of them for the year. All the students were incredibly excited and happy to engage with the music (especially Olly). Conal Mac was a bit challenging to work with considering his profound disability (like many Autistic children, Conal has more than one diagnosis and disability). I'm out of practice working with children with such needs. I was alone on my own with him, so there was very little social interaction/interplay and no practical support from an SNA.

I'm also teaching children with Autism in SLET's mainstream classrooms. One little boy, Leon (senior infant) is working on sharing and taking turns, which makes class noisy and challenging at times for him. But his SNA and peers are incredibly supportive, and it is so important to include Autistic children in larger classes if the environment is a positive one for their needs and development.

#### South Lee Educate Together, 30 September 2021

Today we tried out various percussion instruments and the keyboard in our sessions. I also created little books for each student, so I can take notes on their progression, likes and dislikes. It also functions as a shorthand so I can keep of our work together. Olly, Lizzy, and Sam tried composing their own melodies today. They created their melodies on the xylophone or keyboard, and then we used a simple colour coding system to write into their books (as a memory aid, not to work as reading and writing formal musical notation). I'm hoping their pieces can be revised and expanded upon in the coming weeks. The books are left with the keyboard, and I met with their teacher and SNAs about our colour code system. Music has been a calming influence on the students in SLET, and we planned for the students to 'practice' their musical compositions during the week when I'm not there. Music can be used as a short respite from the noisy, busy classroom setting. Some of the students go for movement breaks throughout the day, and music can be used as a way for students to decompress and regulate themselves after a more intensive group activity in their classroom. Olly, in particular, uses music throughout the day. When he is dysregulated, he will draw while listening to piano music on his iPad. In the future, perhaps he can make his own music or practice piano when distressed or overwhelmed. We keep the piano and their individual notebooks available in the room next to the Autistic classroom so students can access during the week.



### South Lee Educate Together, October 2021

Just a basic update about our activities in October. I've decided not to do such formal write-ups about the students in SLET on the computer, since I've taken quite detailed notes within the students' music notebooks. These notes can always be transcribed later in the future for more analysis if needs be, but for the moment I like the more individualised approach I'm taking in SLET. Anyways, as a recap, in early October, we did one more week of music composition using the colour coded system on xylophone and keyboard in pairs and individually. Conal D and Lizzy also experimented with creating their own beats using apps on their iPads. Conal is really interested in pattern and maths, so we explored working with 8 beats and subdivisions.

### South Lee Educate Together November/December 2021

I've discovered that Conal Mac loves dancing much more than anything else. I've noticed that he will pretty much shut down (look like he is comatose) when I play more flowy, introspective, abstract music. Even if I encourage him to play along or move, he completely disengages. Conal has quite profound sensory needs, and loves the biofeedback. So we've been doing dance parties. Anything with a bit of rhythm really keeps him engaged. I've tried to incorporate a bit of shaky eggs into it as well to get a rhythm connected to his body. But even small percussion instruments seems abstract to him, he doesn't connect to them at all. But he will move his body along to the beats all day if you'd let him. It was really interesting to discover his mode of music-making, and let him just roll with it, rather than trying to force him to choose piano, percussion, or the other instruments.

Conal D had to drop music altogether in late November/December because Christmas is a major a trigger for him. I was aware of this all term, so I was careful to avoid Christmas related music in the school, but apparently it isn't even just dysregulation at seeing a Christmas thing, it's just the whole lead up to the Christmas holidays completely throws him off until January. (He always missed the last week of school before the holidays). So we will pick music back up for him starting again in the new year.



## Section 4: Action items & issues to explore

To conclude, this section explores some broad reflections about my experience teaching traditional music to Autistic children. Starting with a small observation: Throughout this project, I noticed I often relied on general music repertoire (i.e. holiday and children's songs) rather than focusing solely on Irish traditional and folk music. This was done within the context of collaborating with primary school teachers who often suggested activities, themes, or songs. In the future, I would love to develop a collection of traditional tunes, songs, stories, and dances that connect to my Autistic students' interest and goals. Given more time, I believe there is much more scope to be creative within the tradition.

There are several steps needed to establish high quality music classes for Autistic children, including taking a team approach, getting into the right mindset, and setting aside the appropriate time and energy. I hope the following reflections will help to make traditional music a little more accessible in the future. A community organiser or teacher might read this and be inspired. Or at very least, it will act as a reminder about how much I have learned from my students. Irish traditional music has enriched my life so much over the past two decades, and so, it feels right to share it with *all* my students to the best of my abilities.

### 4.1 Team Approach

A team approach is essential to teach and support Autistic children in the music classroom. Team meetings before, during and after a series of workshops proved crucial, as it created a collaborative environment and tracked the progress of students and teachers alike. I met regularly with teachers in Scoil Íosagáin and SLET throughout the project, both informally and formally at the end of term. In contrast, in 2022 I restarted classes for Autistic children in St Mary's on the Hill, but meetings were much less frequent. Correspondingly, there was less of a communal atmosphere in the classes. Scoil Íosagáin and SLET embedded play and communication between the children, SNAs/teachers, and music educators. Children in these schools progressed and engaged more than in St Mary's where SNAs/teachers were peripheral (or disconnected entirely) to the music-making.

In retrospect, I wish I would have collaborated more with other music educators to share ideas, approaches, and tips. At times, I felt like I was 'reinventing the wheel.' I spent a lot of energy creating a programme for my students, when I probably could have just borrowed some good practices from colleagues. While Music Generation have built an impressive network for young people, it is quite poorly set up for tutors to interact and share with one another. This is mainly because we work in different centres and have little (or no) time to collaborate. During this project, I had a great teamwork experience with the primary school teachers, but I lacked the funding and time to collaborate with the other Creative Tradition and Music Generation tutors.

Further CPD is needed for all Music Generation tutors. Considering the sheer number of neurodivergent children in our school programmes, training in how to best support Autistic children should probably be a requirement, rather than considered special training. Since this project, word has gotten out that I teach Autistic children, and I have since received dozens of invitations to work with learners on the spectrum. This is both flattering and exciting (since I love the work so much), but it has also created a specialisation scenario within the Creative Tradition team. I tend to teach all the Autistic children and early years music, while the other tutors lead the more 'advanced' and mainstream workshops. Ideally, the important work of inclusion should be equally shared throughout the team. Likewise, I would argue we should move away from having separate 'inclusive music programmes.' Inclusion shouldn't be implemented only by experts in disability studies or music therapists. All hip-hop, pop and rock, classical, and traditional music programmes should be inclusive in nature. Organisers and music educators on the ground will likely need practical tips and training to make this a reality, which is one of the many reasons why collaboration and continuing professional development is essential.

## 4.2 Mindset

I was struck how flexible I became after teaching several weeks in the Autistic classes. As a chronic planner, I love to research and gather suitable repertoire and activities for my students. It calms me down. But this year, I quickly learned that once you establish your plan, it is vital to stay flexible. Say you wanted to start with an upbeat song but the children in your room desperately need calm; you most certainly need to ‘read the room’ if you want your music class to go well. Yes, it is necessary to understand the basics of Autism and prepare for classes. But more importantly, music educators need to be fully present, aware, calm, energetic and flexible throughout the entire music lesson. I suppose this is true of every teaching scenario, but it is especially true while working with Autistic children who often look to adults for help with their self-regulation. They need to be seen, accepted, and celebrated, and teachers can’t do that if we’re buried within our own fixed goals and lesson plan. I no longer tell people I *teach traditional music*; I teach *children* and traditional music happens to be the medium. Rather than being pedantic, this shifts my focus towards a truly child-centred approach to music education.

Of course, music lessons should be written with the young people’s needs and interest in mind. This project demanded that I question my own assumptions to best serve my students. For example, I prefer to learn and teach aurally, which is perhaps unsurprising since Irish folk music is an oral tradition. However, I quickly realised that one cannot merely rely upon established pedagogy and methods to reach and communicate well with Autistic children. Sometimes you need to forget the past (and your formal training), and just centre yourself around what the young people need in the moment. A major lesson I learned was that Autistic children need lots of visual aids and simple instruction (with the fewest words possible). I really needed to adapt my teaching, and fortunately I have now formed new habits that I can carry with me. The clarity I developed this term will help me to teach traditional music more sensitively and creatively in the future. I am truly grateful for the lessons my students have taught me this past year.

## 4.3 Time & Attention

Teaching music to Autistic children and young people takes time, more time than one would usually use to plan general music classes. As I mentioned above, a team approach is needed, so extra meetings to collaborate is essential. The visual aids and other resources that Autistic students need also takes time to adapt and create. If I had to guess, it probably takes three times longer to prepare for my ASD classes than my early years or instrumental classes (fiddle & flute). It inadvertently creates a scenario where some tutors are prepping and working harder to support young musicians than others. For example, a tutor who preps 10 minutes and teaches one hour gets paid the same as a tutor who preps one hour for their Autistic students and then teaches one hour.

I think the success of my Autistic classes in Autumn 2021 was partially due to the amount of time I spend planning and self-reflecting as part of this project. I don’t think every music educator needs to write notes to the same extent (certainly not, it would probably stress people out). But some reflection would be important for tutors to support young people in general (and children with Autism and other special needs specifically). The time needed to reflect should be officially built into their teaching timetable.

I also feel that the amount of emotional and physical energy needed to teach Autistic students is much higher than that of my usual traditional music classes. I feel a deep obligation to keep the students well-adjusted to their school environment. To me, there seems to be more at stake, so more care is needed and given. I noticed myself being more excited, but also more exhausted, after my Autistic sessions (particularly in the larger classes with six children and multiple adults).

Another reason why I put more energy into my Autistic classes is probably due to my own personal experience. There were several occasions throughout this project where I got emotional or teary-eyed when

seeing one of my Autistic students upset. When this happened, I was sometimes thinking about my son. My heart would just break at the memory of him being overwhelmed, and now seeing this other Autistic child similarly struggling in an everyday situation. Other times, I might just have a subconscious reaction, as if seeing a student emotional would trigger the same type of emotion in myself. Being an empathetic teacher undoubtedly helped me to work with Autistic children, but it also took a toll on my own energy levels. Plus, at the time I wasn't aware that I was Autistic myself. I did not take the necessary steps or time to calm myself down, because I usually needed to go straight into another class. In retrospect, it is no wonder I was more tired than usual. This emotional toll doesn't generally happen during my more standard traditional music classes. This situation should not be thought of as either good or bad, it is just the reality on the ground. As I mentioned before, I was both more energised and more tired teaching Autistic music classes. The best response is to honour that level of energy output by building it into the teaching timetable in a more sustainable and systematic way.

#### 4.4 Sustainability & Advocacy

One of the best outcomes of this project is that I feel significantly more confident in my ability to support Autistic children to learn Irish traditional music. So much so that it feels only natural to share my experience with others. Over the past year, I've witnessed the young people's musical potential and joy, alongside all the challenges that Autistic children face in school and the wider community. This awareness has emboldened me to advocate on their behalf.

Considering this was a short-term project, I always knew that we would need to seek more funding if we wanted to keep providing extra support to Autistic children in Scoil Íosagáin and South Lee Educate Together. Nonetheless, it saddens me to face the reality of reintegrating the Autistic students back into mainstream music classes, while we source more long-term funding. In one way, I suppose my job is done: I promised to try out some new classes for Autistic children, and I've accomplished that. But after the connections I've made and the progress I've seen, it feels so wrong to stop here.

I feel a strong sense of duty to provide more inclusive ways to learn traditional music, not just as an individual teacher, but to help nurture a better environment. While my first instinct is just to teach more Autistic children, I know there isn't enough hours in the day for me to help everyone. I know that I can make more of an impact if I share my experience, encourage other traditional music teachers to get involved, and focus on advocacy work.

In the coming years, this is precisely what I hope to do. Luckily, I will not go it alone, as I will continue to work within the Creative Tradition and Music Generation networks. Indeed, our partnership ensures dozens of Autistic children get access to traditional music education every week in our programmes in Scoil Íosagáin, St Mary's on the Hill, Strawberry Hill, and Scoil Aiséirí Chríost. Moreover, I am eager to collaborate with a multitude of educators and organizations across Ireland who are making significant strides in this field. I am committed to playing my part in this collective effort. The young people I've had the privilege to work with deserve nothing less than our wholehearted support and dedication.

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