

# Together at Home

## (An After-School Music Club for Syrian Children)

### Tutor Team Project Summary

#### Background

Together at Home after-school Arabic music club was set up in response to the needs arising out of the lockdown during the covid pandemic amongst the families in the Syrian resettlement programme in Surrey. It was decided to offer this club online with weekly meetings to children between the ages of 7-18, to provide a break from the monotony of being in lockdown, possibly isolating and being away from their peers. The aim was to create an interactive platform where young people could meet to have fun, develop their music skills and be creative and expressive themselves through the medium of music; positively impacting their health and well-being, emotional, mental and psychological.

Through the careful selection of tutors, the ambition was to deliver these sessions in a very caring, nurturing and trauma informed approach, so as to create a safe, fun yet educational space for participants. As important as learning musical skills, technique and theory, was the spending of that regular weekly time together, making new friends, playing interactive games, being involved in trauma informed pedagogy to teaching music, and a space to share their interests, stories, and happenings of the week.

Instruments were delivered to the families including keyboards, guitars, violins, Arabic instruments (Saz and Oud); and some iPads. The Project Manager James Pinchen, and the MD Sara Khorooosi personally visited families delivering these, making a first contact point developing initial relations and explaining specifics like instrument tuning and technical help to connect online.

#### Activities

A tutor team delivering weekly zoom sessions online for one hour.

A typical early schedule would include a fun/interactive ice-breaker activity eg creating a live soundscape to a visual rollercoaster ride, using a spinning wheel to decide on order of activities; a musical exercise eg rhythm tapping on an item found in the house eg a cereal packet; instrument break-out sessions working to a pre-prepared backing track encouraging playing together and a multi-layered approach to provide appropriate learning depending on abilities of each participants; a final sharing of each other's break out developments, and a final 'jamming' session altogether.

The musical content was very important. We started with music set to a fusion framework built around Arabic rhythms and simple chord/melodic scales and motifs to give a sense of knowing/familiarity whilst also exploring eg we developed Arabic lyrics 'Asfouresghir' to an ancient English Folk song set to the Arabic Zaffah rhythm.

We offered additional 1-1 individual music lessons, which most participants took up.

We delivered some training at an online networking and training event.

Once lockdown measures eased and face to face meet-ups began, we introduced 2 termly meet-up sharing events, with music activities, food, art workshops and a celebratory sharing of their work for family and friends. These proved vital in maintaining real life contact with young people and families and strengthening those connections within the group as families formed friendships whilst their children were engaged in music making in a safe environment and out of the home.

## Outcomes

Word of mouth amongst the Syrian community became the biggest way of recruiting participants. It wasn't long before we were inundated with numbers and had a waiting list in place.

Friendships were formed amongst the participants and their parents/carers.

New musical skills acquired on their instruments, and a deeper knowledge of music theory, styles, genres and groups. Our wish to give opportunities to experience playing an instrument of their choice was quite ambitious as we soon discovered the difficulties of them being able to tune a violin on zoom for example, or teaching the complexities of the Arabic saz, became a hindrance rather than a door to creativity. Most young people moved onto keyboards eventually.

Future recommendation would be to only offer easier online options of keyboards, percussion, maybe ukulele and vocals.

Tutors developed in their adaptability to be able to respond to the varying everchanging needs of the participants due to covid, technical difficulties, barriers to accessibility.

Feedback from the participants affirmed a positive impact on health and well-being. The participants in the older group set up a what's app group between them, developing new friendships.

We discovered the participants to have very different thoughts/ideas around music to those of local community children of similar ages. This influenced our learning content, deciding to share various styles of music and groups/bands/orchestras, whilst also learning from their culture and their rhythms and song arrangements.

The younger ones developed a shred interest singing along to musicals; so we added some karaoke to our break out groups and it served as a platform for them to sing together, make friends, and have the 'hanging out' experience in a safe environment, one would hope for in a real life after school club.

Older children were harder to engage. We needed a different approach. Often, we made a piece of music with perhaps a participant rapping some lyrics over. When this was achieved, a huge sense of achievement was very evident. We used more computer technology teaching some basic Garageband and Soundtrap skills which some participants really took to and were then working on their own compositions during the week, and sharing with others at weekly sessions.

With this difference in needs it was decided to split the club into 2 age groups: 7-12; 13-17. This functioned much better for everyone. With older participants it took a little longer for friendships to form but once established participants were even asking to meet up during holiday times!

Initially, during lockdown, attendance was very high, but then naturally faded as school began and participants were going to real life after school clubs, playing sport and generally being outside. Attendance became more sporadic. Also sometimes participants were signing in but they were out in the street, in a park, in the car, highlighting the fact that it worked very well as a response to the particular needs to have it during lockdown. We felt this due also in part to the fact that it was free, so commitment levels tend to be lower and parents/carers were not generally making sure or helping the children to be there on time. This also meant that children were not necessarily being encouraged by parents/carers to practise during the week either. With so much time, energy skill and commitment from the tutor team, along with the funding required to have set the whole project up, we felt at times a wasted opportunity, as there was a split within the groups of those who really wished to attend and to be there and learn music too, and those who perhaps weren't so interested.

With sporadic attendance it was challenging to work towards a piece of music to be showcased. Balancing the needs of each participant who showed up at weekly sessions required an adaptability and flexibility from the tutor team, to be able to allow each session to almost be a 'stand alone' in its own right but also to be working towards a song together.

Co-ordination of face to face meet-ups was very challenging with many hands at work. The initial 2/3 were very successful in terms of turn out and musicality and creative expression. However, as lockdown eased, Parents were often committing to bringing participants but then at last minute opting out, or asking for them to be collected at too short a notice which meant many participants missed out.

There was a noticeable trend in a few participants who when they reached a certain age, their parents would take them out of the club, explaining that they didn't want to do music anymore as other more academic subjects were more important. We learned this was common back in Syria too. Even some very talented and dedicated participants were withdrawn, and we simply never saw them again.

There are issues around music and culture, religion, education which we could do with learning more about. Also attendance problems around the time of Ramadan and we learnt not to schedule sessions for then!

## Learning

We were presented with many technical challenges of working online; Wi-fi connection problems, signing into zoom difficulties, siblings sharing a small device, not enough space; not knowing how to use zoom and features to be able to cut out unnecessary sounds etc.

We incorporated time within sessions to make sure all participants felt comfortable, and were able to participate in some way online & not necessarily in the way tutors' tech was set up ie mostly with mac's with the latest downloaded zoom updates and ability to share screen and sounds etc. Many participants were on phones or shared iPads.

Initially e-mail was the main method of communication with families. However, although these were received, they were not necessarily being read, since the preferred means of communication to the Syrian families was via phone calls or text messaging. This led to many duplicate messaging via phone-calls for our Syrian tutor Raghad Haddad which took up a huge amount of her time and also the time of SA admin team. Eventually she was given a separate phone to keep contact with families.

Within SA we experienced a huge gap in our knowledge of how to work with these newly arrived communities, how to understand their needs so as to improve access to our services better, and how to adapt our communication to make it accessible and practical.

The tutor team never quite know their home situations; requiring much leniency over club rules one would expect to apply eg missing sessions. Some were having to move house and therefore missed many sessions; whilst others were caring for siblings whilst parents were in and out of hospital and appointments. We tried to keep contact via support workers, and eventually directly especially if already having 1-1 sessions.

With all these challenges, we soon discovered that adaptability and flexibility in our approach became our anchors to success. We started with having very scheduled plans with timings for each session and outcomes, but soon discovered that this best served as a toolkit from which we could draw upon in response to the needs of the participants at each session. Risky, since we wanted to be prepared, but also imperative to be able to respond with efficiency, fun and creativity.

Organising transport for the families to attend face to face events was challenging as they live so widely apart. Support workers did their best to co-ordinate efforts.

The added challenge of any covid cases meaning either drivers couldn't bring participants, or participants themselves couldn't attend, or tutors had to miss the live event. Rules around covid diagnoses and prevention and days of isolating also meant some missed out.

Older children were harder to engage. We really had to have a different approach. Often, we made a piece of music with perhaps a participants rapping some lyrics over and when this was achieved, a huge sense of achievement was very evident.

Sharing what they had learned in the week in their 1-1 lesson became important and served as a basis for the start of each session, a sort of musical fun show and tell!

Tuning of stringed instruments to beginner players online was almost impossible! At times very frustrating to both participants and tutors. We re-visited families and personally taught/showed again how to tune and set them up with tuning apps making sure they knew how to use them, and insisted that they do this with help from parents where possible, so that they were ready to start at the beginning of the session. We even invited them to come earlier and we would help with tuning.

## Tutor recommendations

- Offer a choice of only keyboards, percussion, vocals and perhaps ukulele
- As a response to lockdown, the project certainly served its purpose and more
- Provide each new participants with a (translated) **welcome package**
- Instrument and device and set up instructions for both
- An explanation of the importance of attendance
- Signature from parent/carer to help support the participants in this achievement
- Commitment from a parent/carer to bring the participants to termly meet ups, or agree for participants to be collected by SA mini bus with the assigned chaperone as carer.
- Let us know 48hours in advance if can't attend.

## Possibilities

A diverse ensemble for those interested to progress further in music and engage in shared creative musical experience. In the case of another lockdown scenario, it is felt there would be the need for the club again, but with limited instruments and incentivised to encourage attendance. Perhaps funding for more iPads as many were using phones which limit how many people you can see, and don't allow many zoom functions.

**Participant comments:**

Why do you think you wanted to be part of this music project?

To play the Saz

I like playing drums.

Because I love music and singing.

I learn guitar :-))

Because I want to learn how to play the drums.

It's cool.

Because I wanted to learn music.

**What do you like best about the TAH club and sessions?**

playing the piano

It's good

There are lots of friends. I improve my experience.

I get to meet people and get better at singing.

that we can play very loudly and make a lot of noise.

It is really fun and I like to play some beats.

The music.

Not sure.

**SPRING:**

Why do you think you wanted to be part of this music project?

I love singing.

To play the piano and socialise with others.

It's fun.

It's very nice. The teachers and friends.

**What do you like best about the TAH club and sessions?**

I love singing and performing. I want to enter a competition when I am older like with Britain's got talent.

I like them because I learn new things each lesson.

Socialising and sharing what I learn with others who also learn similar things.

Listening to music makes me feel relaxed and comfortable.

Playing the drums.

I liked because I've learnt many good things with my friends.

**Tutor comments**

Club AUTUMN:

-Huge increase in confidence as the young people are speaking more with each other both online and when we met. They all feel confident to ask if they didn't understand for clarification and were more and more able to follow instructions. Confidence on their instruments grew as they learnt more about notes, scales, chords, rhythm etc. It was very much like a club, friendships forming, jokes being shared, music being shared, performing to one another and learning from each other.

-Participants are more engaging in the sessions. There is more attendance and I noticed there are more friendships between them. Also, participants are more confident and happy.

#### Club WINTER:

-There has been a real development of a group dynamic amongst the members with much socialising, sharing, playing of games, telling of jokes and general increase in social skills. With this has come an increase in confidence with those reluctant at first to speak and join in in almost leading things at times, and those perhaps shy to share, soloing at the end alone. There is much laughter and fun times in the groups with visible increases in their health and well-being.

-The YP really enjoy being part of the group - individual "show and tell" and learning songs together.

-I noticed huge increase with the confidence and well being.. Participants made a significant improvements in both social and musical aspects.

#### Club SPRING:

-Clearly there was an increase in self-confidence as their abilities developed on their instruments. There was much participation from them and more ownership over the music learnt and composed too. It was particularly great to see the enthusiasm and sense of achievement when challenged to try things which they did.

-I think wellbeing was a keyword for sessions during the last term. I noticed improvement with confidence and having better self-esteem.

#### Lessons AUTUMN:

-More relaxed in sessions by end

-More chatty and at ease as term went on

-More confident using online technology

-Hard to tell as comes across as over-confident but accepts needs to practice more

-At the beginning of term, Ali wasn't keen to sing on camera, preferring to turn it off but a few weeks into the term, he had developed greater confidence. By the last few lessons he had attempted to write his own song and was incorporating dance moves when singing all on camera! Music and singing brings him great joy and allows him to carve out a unique space within his family dynamic for 30 minutes a week.

-She became more sociable (Raghad used the term socialised but I think she means sociable).

-He is able to make some friends.

-He became less shy and more confident.

-He seems more confident and social.

-She seems happier with her new instrument and engaging more. With the lessons.

-He showed more engaging and interest to learn more.

-Practising violin helped Siham in her well-being. And self confidence.

-Mona is less shy and engaging more in the lessons.

#### Ind Lessons WINTER:

She is confident in lessons

She has two younger siblings who are quite seriously ill with frequent trips to hospital so whilst this is difficult to manage, she really enjoys time learning her instrument

He is confident and balanced

He was over-confident (outwardly) initially saying things like "I don't need to practice" but he has levelled this down over the term

He enjoys his lessons and is definitely more confident on the keyboard now.

Music helped sham to be more confident as she herself expressed once

Music helped Aisha to look after herself and to be calm and increased the confidence.

She seems more confident compared with the beginning of the term.

Hadi seems to be more confident around people and less shy showing his skills.

Mohammad confidence have increased, and he seems happy.

Music seems to help Siham to overcome her difficulties.

Music seems to help Mohammad to be more confident.

Muna is more confident and having lessons on her instrument increased her confidence.

#### Ind Lessons SPRING:

-She is more confident and more open

-Sham also showed more confidence playing and performing in front of people.

-Aisha is enjoying her music sessions and she said that helps her to relax and feel better.

-As MHD said music is a relaxing thing after a long day study.

-He said music is fun.. He used to enjoy listening to songs and share it with me.

-Hadi became more confident playing and showed enjoyment during lessons that he attended.

-Music definitely helped her to overcome her hard times. And she said she feel happier when she play music and take lessons

-Mona seemed happy during her sessions and more confident.

#### Parent/carer comments

##### AUTUMN term

-I'm really glad for my son because he feel happy and his skills has been improved.

-Sham has improved very much on the piano during lessons with Raghad.

-The club allows the children to make a relationship with the tutors which is especially nice during lockdown. It is so good to make connections. The children were so excited when they saw the tutors in person and love seeing them online and in the club.

-It has been very good for him to see others in person and not always do everything online on computers. It is good to have a distraction from online activities. He has been composing songs at home and playing the guitar and the keyboard.

##### WINTER

-Playing games, share their ideas, show their talent.

-Playing games.

-He loves his teacher very much and enjoys learning new things to play and learn new skills

-She loves meeting with the students and the teachers, she loves the challenges and the playing and is excited about learning to play the piano.



-Her wonderful teacher.

- She has no friends outside of this club and made important connections. Her confidence has grown.

## SPRING

-She loves to play the piano and to express herself.

-Music is very important to Kendah. And she feels she is improving. She often talks about the club and the lessons. She loves the teachers very much. She enjoys playing and always looks forward to both the club sessions and the individual lessons. She hopes to continue in the future.

-She likes her teacher and her friends and she always excited to see her friends and to play the music together.

-Meeting others and talking to other people.

-Mixing with other children outside the house.

-The lessons online was amazing especially for us because of travel. It's good to meet every few months like (term). It will be great to do something especial such as : sing as a team, orchestra or to be mixed with others not just Syrians or refugees if we do it like ISM. The place as well, if there were more activities for kids and for adults, that would be great.

-Kendah has gained more self-confidence and made new friends. She has tried new things and has learnt to play different instruments. She has learnt a bit to play the violin and plays beautifully on the piano and hopes to continue learning.

-At the beginning she didn't know anything but now she is improving and has better ideas with music.

-He is improving his skills a little but being together with other people is the best thing. He needs more encouragement to attend online. I don't what encouragement, but he is shy.

## **Tutor comments regarding musical skills**

She has made a huge step during this term.

She is more confident playing her instrument.

He is much better and his musical skills are improving.

He missed few lessons but during the lessons he attended he improved a lot.

She made a lot of improvement.. And since she started on her keyboard (what she really wanted) she showed love to learn music.

He showed lots of improvement.

During the few lessons she made she showed the interest to learn

Mona showed improvement during this term on her saz

A does practice and has improved over the term

G has been a great student spending lots of time practicing and learning production

S has learnt both keyboard and production this term and has really improved in both

M only came to me for the second half of the term but when he concentrates can learn well.

S made huge steps of improvements

A skills improved during the last term very much

Since K chosen the keyboard, she seemed happy and improved a lot compared to the time she spent in this instrument.

S had shown some improvement despite her extremely difficult family situation.

K showed so much improvement on her instrument. And she seems enjoying playing on keyboard so much

S showed phenomenon talent and improvement on her instrument and in music in general

S made a huge step improvement on her instrument.

H showed some improvement on his instrument but he was also a bit busy studying to his GCSEs.

M didn't committed so well to lessons this term. They also had some internet issues prevented them from attending some lessons. But generally when he attended he seems engaging and improving.

H had some internet issues so he didn't attend some of the lessons. But during the sessions he attended he was so much involved and he showed good improvement.

A couldn't make all sessions for some hard reasons with the family. But she tried her best improving on her instrument during the sessions.

M showed improvement on her instrument during lessons.