

Listen Imagine Compose Primary

Music & drama education award winner 2024

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At the music and drama education awards in February this year, Listen Imagine Compose Primary (LICP) won the award in the excellence in primary/early years category. This article, by its principal architects, outlines the work that was done, as well as why, what, and how.

For many years now, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BGMG) and Birmingham City University (BCU) have been cooperating, working with children and young people composing music and researching this. LICP evolved from a myriad of previous composing projects and out of school, including a secondary-age iteration of LIC. It is one of very few longitudinal projects or studies of children composing in primary schools in the UK or elsewhere.

Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, LICP was a partnership between BCMG, BCU, Sound and Music, Birmingham Music Education Hub, Bristol Beacon, and the participating schools. It was a 2-year action research project in primary schools in Birmingham and Bristol involving 9 composers working in 8 schools, alongside class teachers and school music leads to support 480 children, initially in Year 4, and then in Year 5, to compose music.

There were three core aims:

- To work with teachers and composers to develop meaningful and relevant composing activities for children i.e. composing activity which worked for that school and those children and went beyond composing as a 'painting by numbers' exercise to one in which all children engaged in high level composerly thinking and doing.
- To better understand children's composing and progress as composers.
- To improve the quality and frequency of composing in primary schools, something which was identified by the participating schools as needing development in their setting.

And four main research questions:

1. What can we learn about children in Years 4 and 5 as composers?
2. What is it to make progress as a composer in the primary classroom?
3. How do we structure or plan activities, lessons and schemes of work to support children's learning and progress in composing?
4. What pedagogies support children learning and progressing as composers?

LICP was established from the get-go with a number of parameters in place which had arisen from our previous work. We were very clear that LICP was to be exploratory, designed to find out more about composing pedagogies in what might be termed 'normal' primary schools, notably with generalist classroom teachers rather than music specialists, as we know that the former is more likely to be the norm in our primary schools. We were also very clear that this work involved composing *pedagogies*, it was not a 'let's put on a show' project, which all too often composing work with children and young people can involve. There were

performances, certainly, but we did not work backwards from a performance to the preparation for it, we worked forwards from teaching composing. This, we feel is an important aspect of LICP, and one which we were very careful to inculcate in all the adult participants. Often, children's composing projects happen in rarefied environments with large or additional space(s) and/or with self-selecting groups of children. Instead, this project sought to develop high quality practice in the context of real classrooms, that could be replicated by generalist teachers, with the sonic resources available to them and which could be integrated into ongoing music curriculum development.

In order to do this, LICP did not just involve sending composers into schools, there was a considerable CPD element underpinning the work for composers and teachers. This included 5 full days of composer professional development which had a significant focus on working effectively with schools, teachers and curricula, and 6 days of seminars, where teachers, composers and researchers shared experiences, findings, expertise, and discussed pedagogies and practices. Built into LICP scheduling were regular meetings between composers and the schools' Music Leads, along with key local music hub contacts, to ensure integration and embedding into future curriculum planning; post session teacher-composer reflection meetings; specialist mentoring and peer buddying for composers. As the project was designed to run over two school years, in the second year there was built-in support for Year 4 teachers to deliver similar activity with their new classes.

What the children actually did in each school was decided by the composer-teacher partnerships, and discussed with the LICP coordinating team. We were keen for composers to work with the reality of the children and the resources available to them in each school. Crucial to the project was a focus on supporting children to create their own music; as we know, every school is different, has different resources, as well as different structures, and, of course, the youngsters are different in each too! Over the two years, the children composed for voices, body percussion, found objects, classroom percussion; software/apps such Soundtrap, BandLab, Chrome Music Lab; instruments they were learning; school ensembles; professional musicians; and even a carillon! They were inspired by topics as diverse as fossil hunting, the Vikings, the water cycle, and Kandinsky, and music including Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Holst's *Planets*, *Bruno* from *Encanto*, and *Stripsody* by Cathy Barberian.

Supporting all this work was a Planning, Reflection & Progression Toolkit which pulled together our thinking from previous projects. This gave LICP consistency and coherence, whilst allowing flexibility and responsiveness to each school, and the skills and experience of each composer. This Toolkit, newly revised in the light of emergent LICP findings has now been published. Hard copies of this can be purchased from the BCMG website or downloaded as a PDF for free <https://www.bcmg.org.uk/listen-imagine-compose-primary-2>

The toolkit takes generalist teachers through thinking and planning for composing with their classes. It is not intended to be an off-the-shelf resource, though, for the reasons stated earlier, what it does is to provide a reflective planning framework. This, for example, is one of the many diagrams:

Planning for children's composing



What is the learning context?
What opportunities for learning does this context offer?

Topic	Event	Music	Own intentions
<p>What possibilities for composing and composing learning are there?</p> <p>What possibilities for learning about the topic are there?</p> <p>What possibilities for wider musical learning are there?</p>	<p>What possibilities for composing and composing learning are there?</p> <p>What is the purpose of the event or occasion?</p> <p>What possibilities for wider musical learning are there?</p>	<p>What possibilities for composing and composing learning are there?</p> <p>How might the composing connect to performing or listening activity?</p> <p>What possibilities for wider musical learning are there?</p>	<p>What possibilities for composing and composing learning are there?</p> <p>How might composing connect with the children's development as composers and personal development?</p> <p>What possibilities for wider musical learning are there?</p>



What have the children already done and know?
What do you want the children to learn?
How does this fit into long term planning?
How might planned composing activity fit in with other music activity?

Commented [MF1]: Placeholder image for positioning - Hi-res image supplied

Whilst this one is designed to help with helping children arrive at a musical idea:

How might children arrive at a musical idea?

By using their imagination



By improvising freely on an instrument – musical doodling



By creating musical ideas and gestures suggested by the shape of an instrument



By improvising on an instrument within given parameters



By imitating sounds in the environment



By borrowing an idea from someone else or from other music



Commented [MF2]: Placeholder image for positioning - Hi-res image supplied

The toolkit is only one, but very tangible output from LICP. In addition, we know that it has had a significant impact on children, teachers, schools and composers on the development of practice and pedagogy. Some comments from children involved show interesting aspects of their thinking:

'You kind of feel this incredible feeling that just rushes through here [pointing to heart].'

'Composing isn't always easy, because before the lessons, I thought composers just threw a couple of notes in and then you made a song. But when doing the lessons, I learned it's not that – you have to focus on lots of different bits at a time.'

The teachers too had some important things to say, remember these are by-and-large generalists:

'It has made me realise how much emphasis had been on the performance aspect of music previously and although there were elements of composition, these were very structured and scaffolded and limited children's creativity. Listen Imagine Compose Primary has completely thrown open the gates of what musical learning could be and our music curriculum has for more opportunities for children to develop their composerly thinking, build on it over time, and although there might be guides and scaffolds in place, children have more opportunities to take their compositions in their own direction.'

'Children are a lot more creative than they often get credit for and if they are given an exciting brief, with lots of opportunities to test and try out their ideas, they will do all of the hard work themselves!'

'[I've learnt] how important sound is in a classroom. Teachers are taught to try their best to maintain silence. This allowed me to realise that sounds/music is a form of expression and learning. It has a place in the classroom.'

LICP is not over, though, there is still more to come! If you, your school or music hub are interested in CPD for teachers based on the Toolkit and other project learning, please get in touch.