



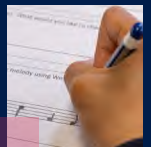
**BIRMINGHAM CITY**  
University

# LISTEN IMAGINE COMPOSE PRIMARY

Research Findings Executive Summary 2025

**Birmingham Music Education Research Group**  
**The Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education**  
**Birmingham City University**  
**Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (Nancy Evans)**

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**LISTEN  
IMAGINE  
COMPOSE  
Primary**

Birmingham  
Contemporary  
Music Group



**Sound and Music**

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# INTRODUCTION

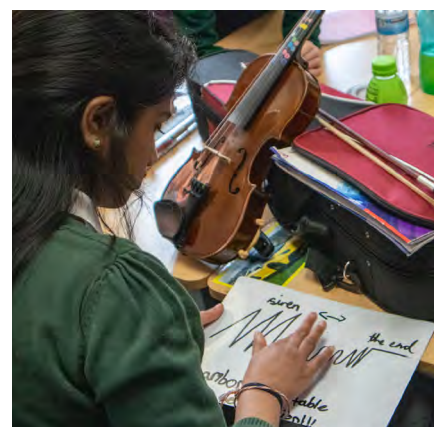
Listen Imagine Compose Primary (LICP) was a partnership action research project between Birmingham Contemporary Music group (BCMG), Sound and Music (SaM), Birmingham City University (BCU, research partners), Birmingham Music Education Hub, Bristol Beacon, five schools in Birmingham and three in Bristol. Over two years, nine professional composers worked with 16 classes (generally two per school) of Year 4, then Year 5 children (480 in total), and their class teachers. The project was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation through an Arts Based Learning 'More & Better' grant and drew on knowledge and practice developed through a number of past projects undertaken by the partners, both jointly and individually. LICP is part of a long-term partnership between BCMG, SaM, and BCU which has collaboratively been researching the teaching and learning of composing music in schools in England for many years.

The aims of the project were to work with teachers and composers to develop meaningful and relevant composing activity for children, and to better understand children's composing and how they progress as composers. A wider and more long-term aim is to improve the quality and frequency of composing in primary schools. Running alongside the activity in schools were reflective symposiums and continuing professional development for both teachers and composers. LICP is an award-winning project. In 2024 it won the Music and Drama Education Awards for Excellence in Primary/Early Years.

LICP was about the processes of teaching and learning composing in school classrooms. It was concerned with composing by children, with developing their composing skills, techniques and creative aptitudes, and supporting them through the composing process. Though performances and informal sharings did take place throughout the project, they were not the focus of the children's composing or the end product.

Nearly all the professional composers participated in the same professional development prior to the activity in schools (a few joined later), and the project was underpinned by a draft toolkit which brought together previous learning. However, each composer was asked to work with their paired school and class teacher to plan content that was responsive to that school – its curricula, its demography, and the resources and space available to them. This meant that, though there were many unifying features across the different school contexts, each school and their composer explored different content and different approaches.

This document sets out the project activity, shares some of the research findings and makes recommendations.



# POLICY CONTEXT

Composing has been part of the UK National Curriculum since 1992, however, the understanding of children as composers and how they progress is still poorly understood and under-researched. Ofsted's music report *Striking the Right Note* (2023) highlighted that 'In most [primary] schools, the weakest aspect of the curriculum was teaching pupils to become better at composition' and that 'Very few schools had considered the underpinning knowledge that pupils need in order to learn how to construct and deconstruct music'. (p5).

Teachers report that composing is the part of the music curriculum they struggle with most (Berkley, 2001; Ofsted, 2021). Those teachers who are music specialists most frequently come from a performance or academic music background rather than composing. All these factors can result in poorly structured and piecemeal approaches to composing where children repeat the same composerly thinking and doing throughout their primary school life. In addition, schools often rely on external music schemes where composing can be reduced to a painting by numbers approach, without a deeper understanding of children as composers and how they learn and progress as composers (Bolden, 2009; Burnard and Younker, 2008). However, teachers are often highly skilled at supporting children's creative learning in a range of subjects, using pedagogies for supporting group work, scaffolding learning, planning for differentiation and progress, and using effective questioning and feedback. These skills are highly transferable to supporting children to compose.

The Model Music Curriculum introduced in the UK as an exemplar in 2021 makes suggestions as to what kinds of composing activity might take place in the different years of primary school but does not, nor does it set out to, offer advice on how to support children with their composing. Helpfully, it encourages teachers to link listening and performing activity with composing activity. While it invites teachers to ensure their children are familiar with a 'range of musical styles and genres', the suggested composing activity is firmly grounded in Western Classical Music with a strong focus on notation. Its model of progression for composing is one of increasing length and complexity i.e. composing short melodic ideas then moving to 8-16 bar melodies, creating simple rhythms then adding pitch, including more pitches, then adding chord sequences, or using more complex structures.

Our experience has shown us that children's composing tends to be less linear and more messy with children using, exploring, and being fascinated by the interrelated elements of music right from the start, and that progression comes from children's increased understanding, and sophisticated use of, musical elements and sound resources available to them.

National music education initiatives in the last 10 years such as Whole Class Ensemble Tuition (WCET) and Sing Up! have focused on instrumental learning and singing. When done well, WCET often includes composing or some form of creative music making, but composing was not a core role of Music Hubs in the original National Plan for Music Education (NPME) (Department for Education, 2011). In its more recent iteration, it is encouraging to note that composing and creating music are mentioned more frequently in the NPME2 (HM Government, 2022) as part of the overall vision. Beyond the classroom there are clear progression routes for young people learning a musical instrument (from WCET to beginner ensembles to area ensembles) and a good understanding of what progression in learning an instrument looks and sounds like, but the same does not exist for young people composing.



There is also a history of composers working with young people to compose as part of orchestral and other music organisation outreach projects both in and out of school. Such projects can often be short term, sometimes as a result of limited funding, and have a performance outcome or act as preparation for attending a concert. This can take the focus away from the composing process and from children's longer-term learning and progress as composers. This is what Listen Imagine Compose Primary set out to investigate.



# PROJECT ACTIVITY

The LICP project included the following activity:

- 18 half-day **composing workshops** with each class over two years (children in Year 4, then Year 5)
- **Reflection sessions** after each day of school workshops
- 4 days of **composer professional development** (3 prior to the project)
- 1 day **fact-finding visit** by composers to their school
- 6 days of **whole project seminars** spaced out across the 2 years (3 per year)
- 2 days of **support for the Music Lead** in each school
- 1 half day each year of **in-school professional development** for all staff in each school
- **Peer to peer support** between composers
- Composer **mentoring** from experienced composers, and music educators
- 3 half-day **BCMG or other musician visits** to each class each year
- A **steering group** of critical friends made up of teachers, composers and academics
- Creation and publication of a Planning, Reflection and Progression **Toolkit**



## Reflection sessions:

Reflection sessions took place in schools after each day of workshops and involved the composer and the class teachers - with the school Music Lead and researcher joining on several occasions. These sessions were an opportunity for the composers and teachers to reflect on the day's activity and to plan and refine the next workshop. Supporting these reflective discussions, was a common pro-forma (which can be found in the Toolkit) with prompts and questions. In year two of the project, composers and teachers were also asked to reflect more deeply on the children's composing, again with a common pro-forma.

## Composer professional development:

The initial three days of composer professional development was led by Professor Martin Fautley and BCMG's Director of Learning, Nancy Evans. Day 1 included: exploring the composing of 8-year-olds; considering the implications of working to build composers not final performances; considering what getting better at composing might look and sound like; and preparing for the fact-finding visits to schools. Day 2 included: understanding learning and doing and the relationship between them; planning for the short, medium and long term; understanding planning in schools; contexts for composing in schools; creative pedagogies. Day 3 included: pedagogies and activities for supporting children through the composing process; reflecting on activity; and, sharing and discussing what was learnt from school visits. In Year 2 of the project an additional day revisited planning effective composing learning and doing – in particular preparing children for composing; building relationships with teachers and the wider school community; teaching styles; and using classroom space effectively.

## Whole project seminars:

There were six whole project seminars across the life of the project. Initially, these were used to support teachers and composers to understand each other's worlds; to establish a climate of distributed expertise and reciprocal learning; to develop collective understanding of children in this age group, their learning, creativity and composing; and, to give teachers and composers time to plan together outside of the pressures of a busy school day. As the project progressed, the seminars became more focused on sharing activity and learning, often using the project research questions to focus discussions. They were also an opportunity to feedback interim research findings and identify future discussion points. The very last seminar shared, celebrated and reflected on the learning and activity that had taken place across the whole project for all participants.

# PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS AND COMPOSING ACTIVITY

## **The Oaks Primary Academy, Birmingham with composers Natalie Mason and Germa Adan**

The Oaks Primary Academy is located in the Druid's Heath estate on the southern edge of Birmingham. It has a long history of supporting children through the arts and making partnerships with arts organisations in the city. They also receive instrumental lessons from Services for Education. Curriculum music is taught by the class teachers and the Music Lead was not a music specialist. 82.5% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding.

Children at The Oaks started by exploring what a composer was and sharing their own musical tastes. Their subsequent composing built from this and focused on the children's emerging musical identities. Across the two years, they: created and sequenced rhythmic and melodic (pentatonic) ideas using classroom percussion; explored text setting, vocal techniques, ostinatos, layering and graphic scores inspired by habitats; composed narrative film music for a professional flautist and classroom percussion, learning how to evoke a particular scene, mood, atmosphere or emotion, and organise their ideas into bigger structures; and composed songs using a verse chorus structure. After a change of composer, due to maternity leave, children focused on songwriting inspired by Haitian and Jamaican music and by topics including Spring and outer space.

## **Acocks Green Primary School, Birmingham with composer Michael Betteridge**

Acocks Green Primary School is two-form entry school about five miles southeast of Birmingham's city centre with a strong track record of supporting music and the arts. The Music Lead for the school is a music graduate and curriculum music in the school is delivered by class teachers. 37% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding.

Across the two years, the young people: composed variations on a given melody; created a mini opera inspired by the Vikings, exploring verse chorus structure and setting lyrics for their own voices and for a professional singer; composed a 'concerto' for a professional percussionist and ensemble of classroom percussion, thinking about musical gestures and accompaniment; used Soundtrap software to compose using recorded found sounds, exploring and using software functions such as fading, changing pitch, reversing sounds and cutting to develop material and using the composition techniques of layering, sequencing, and repetition; and, were inspired by the poetry of Benjamin Zephaniah, thinking about the rhythmic and pitch patterns of speech. They composed for children learning instruments in their class and throughout the school, in doing so, learning themselves about each instrument's different sonic possibilities.

## **Bournville Village School, Birmingham with composers Angela Slater and Chloe Knibbs**

Bournville Village School is a three-form entry school located five miles south of the city centre. Curriculum music was taught throughout the school by a specialist music teacher and by class teachers. Many children in the school are learning instruments and there is a school orchestra, choir and hand bell group. The school has a long history of working with music organisations in the city. 17% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding.

Across the two years, the children composed music inspired by: stories (creating rhythmic motifs for animals and soundscapes to describe habitats); ancient Egypt (using the idea of code from Egyptian hieroglyphics and the structure of pyramids to create and extend melodies); the solar system (composing melodies, rhythms and simple harmonies with expressive intent); the journey of a river (using this as a way of exploring melodic shape and structure); climate change using Luke Jerram's Gaia exhibition (songwriting and using the free software Audacity); the sonic possibilities of particular instruments; in addition to themes they chose themselves. As well as composing for classroom percussion and instruments they were learning, they also composed for solo BCMG musicians – viola, cello, saxophone and for the carillon (located in the school!) – and explored ways to accompany a solo line with ostinatos and drones. They explored notating their ideas both with graphic and traditional staff notation as well as creating text scores.

### **Horfield Church of England School, Bristol with composer Richard Barnard**

Horfield Church of England School is a two-form entry school about three miles north of Bristol city centre with a long history of excellence in the arts. Music is taught by a music specialist and by class teachers. Many of the children learn an instrument and there is a school orchestra and two choirs. About 20% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding.

Over two years the children; explored theme and variations with an invitation to compose an additional Goldberg Variation (inspired by J S Bach), composing melodies, melodic sequences and accompaniments for right and left hand piano using the G major scale arpeggio and chord; composed for piano inspired by the ragtime music of Scott Joplin, adding pitch to syncopated rhythms, developing musical phrases and choosing left hand chord accompaniments as well as learning how to notate their music using traditional staff and graphic notation; composed sea shanties – writing lyrics and setting the text to melody, using verse chorus structure and thinking about narratives and musical expression; used Soundtrap software to create rhythmic ostinato loops, layering and sequencing them as well as adding drones and melodic riffs; and created an opera inspired by Beowulf, working in groups to realise different parts of the story, thinking about character and emotion, setting words to music, exploring consonance and dissonance through using chords and intervals.

### **Tiverton Academy, Birmingham with composer Chloe Knibbs**

Tiverton Academy is a diverse school south of the city centre which uses the International Primary Curriculum. Support for the arts is strong, particularly for the visual arts, and the school was also part of ACE's Creative Collaboratives project. Curriculum music was taught by a visiting music specialist from Services for Education and focused on singing. 47% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding.

Across the two years, the children: composed soundscapes inspired by the fossil hunter Mary Anning for voices and classroom percussion; explored the connection between sound and colour, shape and form, through the visual art of Kandinsky, creating graphic scores for classroom percussion; composed music inspired by the sounds of Victorian factories and textile patterns for body and classroom percussion and vocal sounds, creating ostinatos and loops which were sequenced and layered using grid scores/notation; explored the idea of call and response through composing duets for a visiting viola player and classroom percussion, thinking about narrative; composed a class song inspired by climate change using Luke Jerram's Gaia exhibition as a starting point, drawing on the multiplicity of languages in the class; composed melodies for a visiting oboe player, thinking about how to extend melodies and add rhythm, dynamics and expression, recording their ideas using western staff notation.



### **Walls court Farm Academy, Bristol with composer Will Frampton**

Creativity and pupil voice are at the heart of Walls court Farm's approach to learning and much of their learning is guided by enquiry questions. This led to a core question guiding the activity in the school 'What does a composer need in their toolkit?'. They also had a particular interest in investigating how music technology could support children's composing. Many of their classrooms are open plan with the children able to move freely throughout. Music is taught by the class teachers. 22% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding. Across the two years, children composed using a variety of music technology, software and apps including BandLab, Samplar and oscilloscope apps, DAWs, Synesthesia software, modular synthesizer, live electronics and microphones. Using these technologies, they explored sampling, editing, manipulating, layering and sequencing sounds including voices, found sounds, a professional cellist and violin player and classroom percussion. Throughout there was a strong focus on investigating the timbre of sounds, their qualities and properties, and on how music might be visualised within the software but also through graphic notation.

### **Fair Furlong Primary School, Bristol with composer/singer songwriter Kala Cheung**

Fair Furlong is located on the southwest edge of Bristol. The school joined the project a year later than the other schools. Curriculum music is taught by the class teachers. 50% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding.

As Kala is primarily a singer songwriter, song writing was a key focus of activity. Her approach centred on supporting the children's identities, both musical and otherwise. She structured her schemes of work through firstly asking the children to listen to themselves, then to the world and then to the universe. Thought was given to how to create safe creative spaces for musical ideas to emerge. The children were encouraged to document these ideas through drawing, doodling, humming, jotting down emotion and feelings, words and phrases. They were then invited to explore these ideas through improvisation before translating them into lyrics, melody, beats, and bass lines, exploring compositional techniques such as lyric writing, text setting, structure, layers, harmony, parts and making intentional choices throughout. The children composed for their own voices, body and classroom percussion.

### **Allens Croft Primary School, Birmingham with composer Robert Crehan**

Allens Croft Primary School is located six miles south of the city centre. They are a Platinum Artsmark school and have built partnerships with many Birmingham arts organisations as well as receiving instrumental lessons from Services for Education. Music is taught by class teachers supported by a very experienced Creative Arts Lead. 60% of children are eligible for Pupil Premium funding.

Across the two years, children composed music inspired by: carnivals (samba and gamelan), creating and layering rhythmic and melodic ostinatos for unpitched and body percussion and notating these using graphic scores; Vikings, composing narrative compositions for a professional saxophonist using melodies and rhythms; landmark buildings in the USA, using this topic as vehicle to think about different kinds of musical structure; Winter, creating songs using poetry and visual image as stimulus for a school performance using pitched and non-pitched percussions; the sonic properties of the viola, creating a collection of musical ideas for the viola and structuring these using narratives into longer duets for which they performed the second part; Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, using the melody as the basis for composing theme and variations and adding simple harmony.

# THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although there is considerable research into children's composing (Wiggins, (1994, 1999, 2005), Kratus, (1986, 1991), Kaschub, (2009, 2010, 2024), Smith, (2008), Hickey, (2001, 2015), Glover, (2002), Barrett, (1996, 1998, 2003), Burnard, (1999, 2000), Burnard & Younker, (2004, 2008), MacDonald, & Miell, (2000), Webster, (2003) and Paynter & Aston, (1970)) it remains an important field for study and in some areas, our understanding is continuing to develop. While significant progress has been made in understanding children's composing processes, there is still much to explore, particularly within the context of classroom environments. More research is needed to understand how composing can be effectively facilitated and integrated into everyday classroom practice. To address this the LICP project centred around the four research questions below which emerged from previous partnership working between BCMG, BCU and SaM and from the existing research in this area:

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?

Each of these research questions are addressed in this summary in turn, and can be considered sequential, as each has implications for the next. There is considerable overlap between the questions, and so although they are discussed individually, the boundaries between them should be considered porous.



# METHODOLOGY

The LICP research took a qualitative approach to the multiple data sets outlined below. The report findings in this document mainly draw upon observation field notes, reflection sessions and interviews with teachers, composers and children:

- **Researcher workshop observations** – fieldnotes and recordings where appropriate
- **Reflective discussions** between class teachers and (and sometimes Music Coordinators) composers with researchers after workshops
- **Reflection documents** completed by composers and teachers after workshops
- **Focus group interviews** with class teachers and school music leads (1 per year)
- **Focus group interviews** with composers – recordings and transcription (1 per year)
- **Focus group interviews** with groups of children (14 group interviews in year two of the project)
- **Teaching materials** created by composers and teachers (44 schemes of work with associated lesson plans)
- **Supporting materials** for teaching and learning (PowerPoints, audio and video files, listening resources)
- **Composer professional development day materials** (PowerPoints, observation and discussion notes)
- **Observation data and fieldnotes** from whole project seminar days (6 days across 2 years)
- **PowerPoints** from whole project seminar days showcasing activity from schools.
- **Pupil work** – audio, video where appropriate, children's written work, children's music notation
- **Research team** reflection sessions

## Observations:

The project's approach to observation adhered to principles of naturalistic approach, in which composers were observed teaching, facilitating and enabling composing in school settings alongside the class teachers. Observations were partially structured, in that researchers grouped their notetaking around the project's four research questions.

## Interviews:

Interviews with composers and teachers also took a naturalistic approach with free-flowing discussion encouraged, where participants responded to researcher questions, but conversations followed an open disposition, enabling the views of participants to avoid being led by researchers' preconceptions. A naturalistic approach to interviews was particularly important with the focus groups of children, where the researchers wanted to ensure children's own views and perceptions of composing and, in particular, their own composing emerged. Questions were directly related to children's composing experiences rather than unfamiliar concepts, and extended space was given for children to respond. A breadth of responses across the group was encouraged by the researcher.

## Analysis:

Each group of data was analysed using the six-stage process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in which data underwent processes of familiarisation, systemic coding, the generation of themes from collated data, the development and reviewing of these themes, further refinement and re-naming, followed by the process of report writing.

Each set of research data was analysed through two cycles of coding, allowing a significant set of themes to emerge. The researchers' approach to thematic analysis utilised their knowledge as teachers and researchers in the music education field to draw together our reflections on the different data sets and to identify commonalities between them. This document shares only the key findings.

## Ethical Consent Statement:

The research adhered to ethical procedures of the British Educational Research Association guidelines (2018) and ethical approval was given by Birmingham City University's Faculty Academic Ethics Committee for Health, Education and Life Sciences.

# RQ1: WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT CHILDREN IN YEARS 4 AND 5 AS COMPOSERS?

This research question explored what we can learn about children in Years 4 and 5 as composers in their classroom environment. It revealed their approaches to the generation of ideas, use of visual symbols and notation, the ways they plan, structure and express their musical/composerly thinking.

**1. Children generate ideas in different ways.** Some children described finding musical ideas as an automatic process happening in their heads, whereas others hinted at a longer process of bringing something into being. Some children preferred working with others, finding the sharing and combining of ideas stimulating.

*"I know what sounds I need in my music and why, because I get many ideas, and I get to make all of these different ideas and sounds. So, a sound pops up in my head...I can organise my musical ideas into larger structures."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"Composing feels really amazing because it's a bit like carving: you start off with nothing and then it comes to something, and for that to come from you is quite an amazing feeling. It's not just something you hear; it's something within you."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"You can always say that you've got to trust your gut in every piece. So, like, even if you say you've got to add this, or you think you've gotta' add this, you just choose which one fits better."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"[I prefer] composing with my friends, because you could actually add some of their ideas to your ideas and then it would just help by just connecting them together."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"[I prefer composing] with my friends...because even though sometimes you can't decide on one bit, then you can have one part of the song that's yours, and then you can have one point of the song that's theirs."* [Year 5 Pupil]

**2. Children are not short of ideas for their music and these ideas come from a variety of sources.** When working within a composing brief or when working from their own intentions, the children drew from a wide range of sources, reflecting their own reference points and interests. This included both notions for individual musical ideas and for musical structures. Children also responded to starting points given by composers in unexpected ways.

*"One pupil's piece is on the topic of hot chocolate, and they have included musical references to stirring, spinning and sprinkles."* [Fieldnotes, 8/2/23]

*"So, we've based our piece on sleep. All the different stages of sleep."* [Pupil in fieldnotes, 9/6/23]

*"I had an interesting chat with one of the boys, because he wanted to do football chants. He was kind of writing them, and I was saying, 'Oh, you can use the rhythms in the pitch.' So, he did, and he was going about it in a very musical way."* [Visiting musician]

- Researcher:** *They seemed to respond in an 'out-of-the-box' way – did you anticipate that would happen?*
- Composer:** *Yes, I find that the more restricted you make it, then they will always burst out of that! So, it's always better to have more clear and restricted starting point and then they can obviously go off on tangents after that.*

### 3. Adults initially underestimated what the children were capable of.

They underestimated the existing musical resources and experiences of the children and were sometimes surprised by the children's responses to what they were given and by their ability to work with complex ideas.

- "...when they start composing themselves, what they're drawing from seems to be limitless."* [Classroom Teacher]
- "They've got more to bring to the composing process than I perhaps expected...They've got a broader range of music experience than I expected."* [Classroom Teacher]
- "I was struck throughout the whole year, from the very beginning, by how much imagination and creativity these children have and also their ability to take on huge concepts. There's one example that always sticks in my mind of introducing melody to them, and I had only really said this point once or twice about how you could do a melody backwards. I hadn't mentioned it again, and that's what they were doing. They had taken on what I think is actually a very big concept for an 8-year-old and they had run with it."* [Composer]
- "There was huge variety, I would be surprised if you could draw any kind of norms because...there were children who took the task that we gave them and went far beyond what we expected of them."* [Classroom Teacher]

### 4. Children have clear intentions for their music, both in terms of the sounds they want and how they would like it to be structured.

It was clear that some children were able to imagine the sounds they wanted using their aural imagination. When children translated non-musical ideas into musical ideas this offered a rich opportunity for children to think carefully about the sounds they wanted and why, and for the adults to observe this process.

- "I always love seeing [Pupil's] graphic scores, the way she notates everything. She makes me smile so much. Do you remember that time when she said, 'You playing my graphic score sounds like heaven! She gave me really clear directions – it needs to sound like the chaos of heaven.'"* [Composer]
- Teacher:** *The children were trying to build that bridge between description in a verbal sense and how's this going to play out in sound? They were thinking a lot about materials like ice and rock and they were very aware that some of the instruments have more of that twinkly sound about them.*
- Composer:** *So, they were thinking about instrumentation and selecting colour.*
- Teacher:** *Whereas with the rockier planets they were really sort of going for those deeper percussive sounds.*
- Composer:** *They're not just [thinking] about what they'll [compose], they're thinking about instruments they need....*

*"At the end, I want it to be quite gloomy."* [Pupil in fieldnotes, 11/2/22]



*"One child discusses wanting a "little fade" with only the high notes of their instrument to symbolise the word 'mist'." [Fieldnotes, 11/11/22]*

*School Music Coordinator to Classroom Teacher: "You were saying they had ownership...they knew what they wanted from it. They were interpreting the sound."*

*"When asked to give a commentary on symbols they are creating to represent their music, children can clearly articulate what they sound like. It seems they already have a sound in their mind." [Fieldnotes, 16/11/22]*

**5. Children demonstrate an understanding of the composing process and that they are thinking like composers, i.e. using 'composerly thinking'.** The term 'composerly thinking' stems from previous research (Fautley & Evans, 2024) and is used to describe children's aesthetic decision-making and awareness of composing as a process.

*"If you don't organise all your ideas, it might get muddled up and then you won't know what you're going to do." [Year 5 Pupil]*

*"If you don't do those [plans], then you wouldn't be able to go into your main body, which is [how] you can structure and organise ideas." [Year 5 Pupil]*

*"You kind of feel like you are creating a piece that would help make you think and make you curious about what you want to add, what instruments you want to use. What do you want to remove or take out?" [Year 5 Pupil]*

*"I'm thinking of [Pupil] who was working independently until the end and has done this phenomenal piece. He had these fragments and while he couldn't explain what he had done in words, it was clear that he had four ideas, he'd used the same pitch and reordered them and then there were eight over here, and it was just really considered." [Composer]*

*"[Pupil] had used the drum pattern, but then she'd gone – I'm going to stop here, and have a bit of silence, and I'm not going to use the kick drum here, and there was a level of detail that was not just 'copy-paste-copy-paste'." [Composer]*

*"[Pupil] used the guitar sample, but then he actively aligned things, so it fitted – that's interesting, you haven't just repeated, but you've gone, 'that needs to change to make this work'." [Composer]*

**6. When children compose, they often work multi-modally.** Multimodality describes the practice of communicating ideas in more than one medium simultaneously. For the children in the project this included moving, gesturing, drawing and arranging instruments in specific ways.

*"Some children are bopping up and down as they sing and move – they are in the composing. Something about this takes over – they embody the composition." [Fieldnotes, 25/11/22]*

*"When I ask the children to share their music with me, they very quickly work together to get themselves organised – the monster wants to be in the middle of the 'waves' and this narrative prompts them to move their chime bars out of the way...the instrument positioning is key." [Fieldnotes, 26/5/22]*

*"Children are engaged in making sounds for a worksheet – creating symbols and adding them to the grid. The children are creating wavy lines in the air with their hands, they're discussing and collaborating – hands on foreheads, sitting at tables or crouching on the floor. They're earnestly writing and thinking – they can't stop doing this, even when the composer asks them to, for a mini-plenary." [Fieldnotes, 16/2/23]*

## RQ2: WHAT IS IT TO MAKE PROGRESS AS A COMPOSER IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM?

This research question explored what progress in composing might look, feel and sound like from the perspectives of teachers, composers and children.

**1. Increased confidence and growing pride in sharing ideas and the music they had composed.** Over the period of the project, children's confidence to share their music and ideas with others grew. This was noticed by both teachers and composers. Part of this confidence came from an increased sense of their own musical identity and the validity of their own responses.

*"They were quite quiet last time, but this time they were really brave about sharing their stuff."* [Composer]

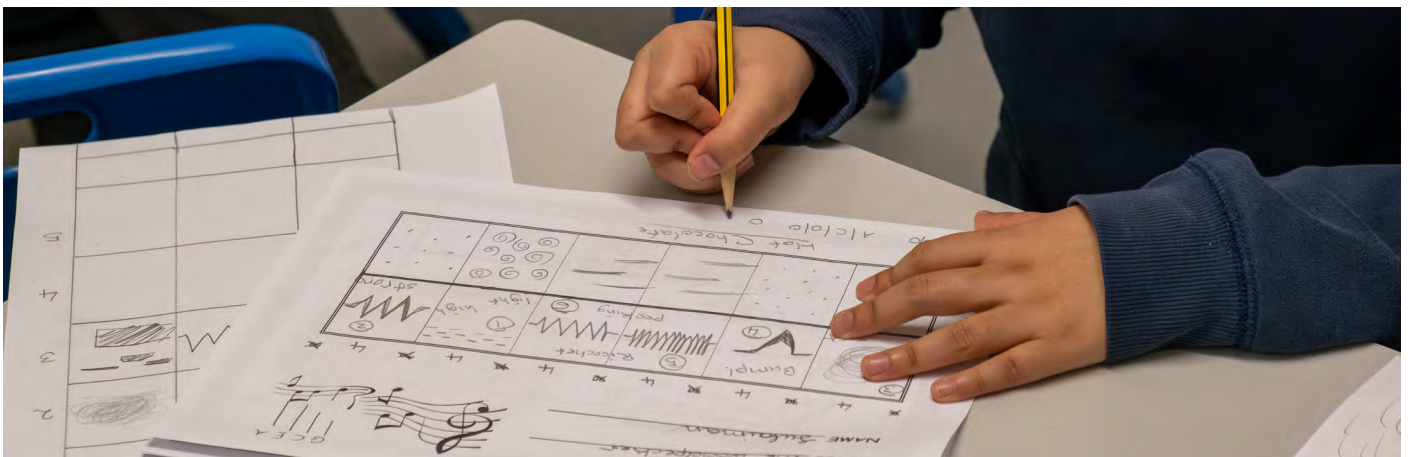
**Classroom Teacher 1:** *She wouldn't normally be one to share or to say, 'Sir, listen to this,' but she was really proud of what she'd produced.*

**Classroom Teacher 2:** *There was a lot of them that were proud of what they'd done that wouldn't normally offer their...if I said, 'Can I have an example?', for someone to read their example of a written piece of work, they wouldn't do it. Even in music, they probably wouldn't have shared...like that, but they were much more forward.*

*"They are happy with difference."* [Composer quoted in fieldnotes, 2/2/23]

*"Pupil comfortable to share "my interpretation was" in response to another group's piece, so composing voice was coming through and being supported."* [Fieldnotes, 25/1/23]

*"... [the composer] helps me quite a lot, because I was nervous at first to actually create my own music. They helped me by [allowing me to] compos[e] in 'private' first, and then after that they started, like, letting me give ideas to the class and then that way, I could, like, perform. It gave me the confidence."* [Year 5 Pupil]



**2. Increased understanding of, and ability to, engage in the composing process and to work with each other to realise ideas.** The children developed a deeper understanding of the composing process through collaborating with others. Part of this progress stemmed from their ability to experiment, refine their ideas, and respond to each other's contributions.

*"So, what I noticed today, was that it was more like second nature to them. In terms of the music, how they were putting it together, they were experimenting and moving it around to get the different notes and order they wanted."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"As soon as composing begins, children are collaborating together: talking, showing each other their work, gesticulating and concentrating with great intensity."* [Fieldnotes, 24/11/22]

*"They were sort of whispering among themselves and making slight little changes. And I felt like they were picking up on ideas from each other. They were listening and I think responding to each other's work."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"When I didn't know what a composer was, I was like, I'll just sing a random song and stuff. Now, I'm like, thinking. I think of a word, I make that word into a beat, like a quaver and something, say words and make them into a song and somehow expand it."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"A young person can hear and apply X – then you see that in their composing when you ask those questions. That's progress for me, and it's very tangible. That young person who really struggled with the idea of what pitch is, and now they're using it structurally in a composition or phrase. That's the kind of progress I'm seeing."* [Composer]

**3. Increased ability verbally to describe sounds and music, to talk about where their ideas come from and how they are composing – to each other, to adults and to the class.** The children talk about their composing and use these conversations to improve their music and to work effectively with others in groups. While being able to describe music verbally is not essential for creating music, it was helpful when they worked in groups and for adults to understanding their thinking.

*"One thing I'm noticing is just their communication skills about and the way they interact with each other and adults too. This is becoming more refined and confident as well."* [Composer]

*"The [example] that springs to my mind is of a learner that's from a disadvantaged background, who speaking to her before the project would not have been able to talk to you much about music in general...and then this project allowed her to see how accessible [music] can be...So, I think being able to give experiences to children who otherwise would not have had that exposure and that experience was very special."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"I know what I like to do is start off low to high or high to low. That's my main thing. I can talk confidently about my compositions with other people."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"We sandwiched the intervals. We spent a long time discussing which sounds we liked and how to put them together."* [Child speaking from fieldnotes, 25/11/22]

*"...their ability to have more confidence in describing their music. So, there's all these kind of progress things that are around composing as well, which are relevant."* [Composer]

**4. The children became more intentional in their musical choices.** Children increasingly demonstrated that they knew what sounds they wanted in their music and why. This was also clear when working in groups, the children were able to articulate and justify to their classmates why they wanted something to happen in a certain way.

*"I think they [the children] were getting much better in my class at explaining why they did like, or didn't like, certain sounds – they were getting much more confident. They could explain to you why that sound was their preference in their piece of music."*

[Classroom Teacher]

*"They were all good at explaining their choice to each other and saying, 'I've done this because...'"* [Classroom Teacher]

**5. There was increased willingness to evaluate, revisit and refine their music both individually and collaboratively.** Over time the children became comfortable with the idea of going back and revising their work.

*"We've learnt that we need to judge our own pieces, and we need to think about how it should improve. We can take stuff out of our piece to actually not make it over complicated."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"They had a good critical analysis at the end of it. They were able to listen and unpick their piece."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"The thing I've really enjoyed is hearing my own music. It says that I could do it. It shows me what I can improve on in my music."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"A lot of the children were talking about when it wasn't working and how they found a way of making it work. This was really positive for me, because it showed they were making judgements about the music, the music they were making, making it better and thinking, 'Yeah, I like that better than how it was before.' So, it's been nice to see that process and that at any age you can do that."* [Composer]

**6. Increased ability to work within and beyond set composing parameters.** Children increasingly moved beyond the parameters they had been set, in particular, when they had a strong conceptual idea of their own. Not only did they break the rules set for them by the composer but also the rules they had set themselves. However conversely, progress was also seen as an increasing ability to compose within the parameters set.

*"This child showed a love for symmetry, and this is evident here and not only works within the activity, but moves beyond, as he plays with the boundaries he has been set."* [Fieldnotes, 16/11/22]

*"There were a lot of choices and creative thought going on as a class. The children broke rules within the rules they had set-up."* [Composer]

*"Progress being that sometimes they've followed the task brilliant, and also progress being that they've completely sacked it off and done their own thing. That's probably more interesting! Following the rules, or breaking them, could both be seen as progress."* [Composer]



**7. Emerging composing identities.** As the project progressed it is clear that the children experienced personal growth as they composed. Their aspirations grew and so did confidence in their identities as composers. It is clear for some children they had no idea what a composer was at the start of the project, and it was a revelation to them that this was something they could do.

*"You can make music for other people too...To be honest, I didn't know what a composer was. I didn't know that you could write music, and people would play it for you, because I just thought the people who are playing the music, they made their own music."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"I've seen them grow as composers...they've got all those colours and emotions within the music that they can use to compose."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"They're much more aspirational, having had that contact in the partnership with composers."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"...in the middle workshop sessions.... I let them do independent composing and that was quite revealing in that it allowed certain children who perhaps were being hidden or carried a bit by other children, to actually have the time and space to think and make their own decisions."* [Composer]

*"[Composer] made me wonder what I could actually do. He pushed me quite nicely. He gave me a nice idea of how I could actually compose."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"When I was in Year 4, I used to sing in the shower. Some random words, and stuff. But since I learnt about composing, I felt like what I was singing in the shower could be put into real music."* [Year 5 Pupil]





## RQ3: HOW DO WE STRUCTURE OR PLAN ACTIVITIES, LESSONS AND SCHEMES OF WORK TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND PROGRESS IN COMPOSING?

This research question explored how planning and activity supported children's composing learning and progress. Key findings included the importance of starting points, planning sound resources thoughtfully, flexibility and responsiveness, building connections to prior learning, planning for the composing process rather than final compositions, and ensuring equitable access to the composing process for all children.

**1. Composer starting points were varied, often reflecting the approaches of the individual schools and were frequently linked to prior learning.** The composers were asked from the outset by the project team, to work in harmony with how music was planned in their school. For some composers this meant working in cross-curricular way exploring class topics throughout the two years including: Vikings, Mary Anning, Kandinsky, carnival, textiles, Victorian factories, books the class were reading, the seasons, habitats, climate change, ancient Egypt, rivers, outer space, the solar system. The composers were also asked to ensure that when working with cross-curricular topics, learning and progression in composing was central to their planning.

*"This was tied to the topic and the knowledge they've already got, so they could really get into it. So, they weren't spending time thinking about the topic knowledge, they were applying the music to what they knew straight away."* [Classroom Teacher]

Connecting to cross-curricular activity also supported the class teachers to make links with their own specialisms and pedagogies in ways they may not have considered before.

*"I'm an art specialist, so I think it was quite nice to bring Kandinsky into it. We can carry that on further in lessons now, trying to show them putting the colour in as well. I think there were really interested that someone could do that – you know, and here is sound and what would that sound be like?"* [Classroom Teacher]

Sometimes, starting points came from school events such as composing a song for a school celebration or, the starting point was the visit of a professional musician and the sonic potential of their instrument.

## 2. The composers musical starting points and musical examples were very diverse.

The range of music the composers drew upon both as starting points and as examples were diverse. This included the composers' own music, music that reflected the composers' interests, and music that responded and connected to what the children were exploring. There was a vast range of styles and genres represented and many LICP composers, particularly, the female composers were very conscious of including women's music both contemporary and historical. Similarly, all composers were conscious of making sure their choices were diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Some composers took time to learn about the children's and teachers' musical likes and dislikes. Some composers used the works of established composers as clear models for the children's creations, such as the development of theme and variations. In other cases, the connections were more thematic.

## 3. The children were invited to compose for a wide variety of sound resources.

Throughout the project, children were encouraged to compose for a variety of mediums, including classroom percussion (pitched and unpitched), body percussion and voices. They also created music for the instruments they were learning, explored a range of music technology and software, and for professional musicians and singers. Composing for professional musicians and with music technology and software, enabled the children to get immediate feedback and to play the role of composer rather than composer and performer. It also enabled equity between those learning an instrument and those not.

*"There are children in this class that learn instruments, in addition to this music 'lesson'. So, it's important that those children who don't have those lessons are having that opportunity in class to play an instrument as well."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"As well as the instruments from the box, some children are playing their own trumpets, violins, guitars, flutes and there is even one child playing a scaled down bassoon. Some amazing communication is going on in these moments – pupils are listening to each other and responding with their musical patterns at moments they have chosen as musically appropriate. Music hangs in the air."* [Fieldnotes, 9/12/22]

*"The best bits of composing are when [composer] lets us pick and decide which instruments from a range of instruments, like glockenspiels, rain sticks..."* [Year 5 Pupil]

*"Composing is providing opportunities to explore the instruments, hear a lot of different music, to learn how to sing in a group and to listen. So, I feel like there's been some multi-tasking that I wouldn't have anticipated, as I've worked with the children to create a musical environment."* [Composer]



**4. Planning for composing not for compositions.** A key aspect of the composer CPD prior to the project was asking the composers to focus on the children's composing processes rather than creating compositions for performances.

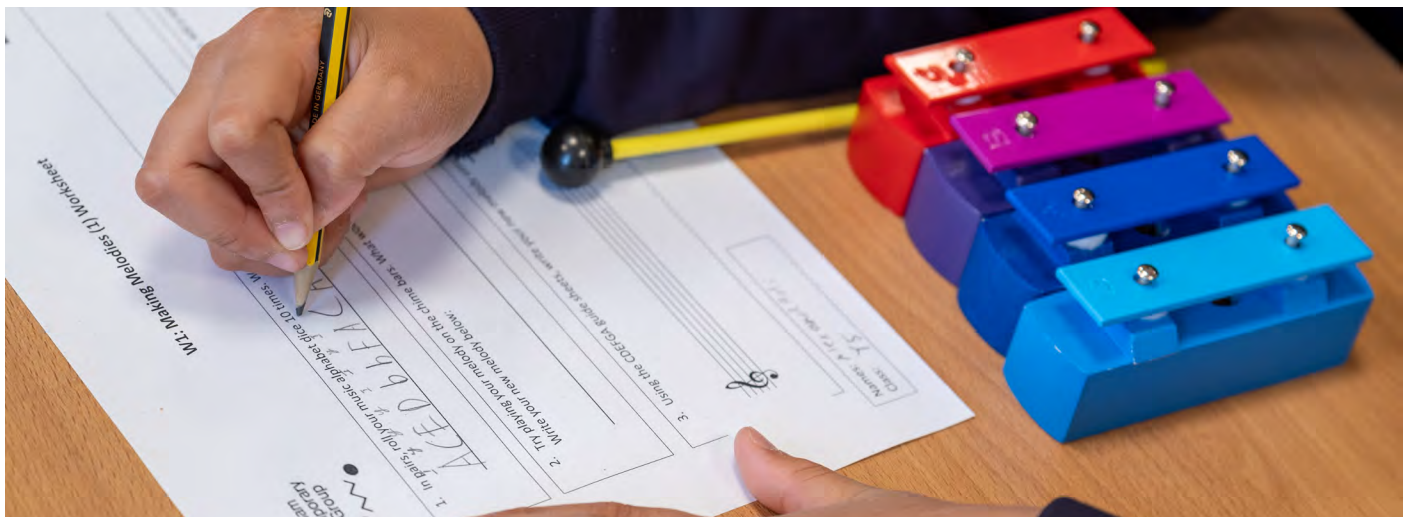
- Classroom Teacher:** *They'll all have a composition at the end, they'll all have a piece of music.*
- Researcher:** *What if they don't? Because the composer said, 'If you haven't finished it doesn't matter.' What do you think about that?*
- Classroom Teacher:** *It comes down to the perceived quality of the piece. Children work at their own pace, and they've made progress.*
- Researcher:** *Did they make progress today?*
- Classroom Teacher:** *I think they all did – yes!*

Teachers (and composers) were therefore moving away from the goal of 'composition' as a finished and completed artefact, towards understanding composing as an ongoing process, not easily contained in a timeframe, but which was understood in terms of the development of the individual child. The teachers began to compare the composing process to other subject areas in the curriculum, where development might not be easily captured in a final outcome:

*"In any other lesson, in literacy if it's writing a piece of narrative and you asked each of the children to write two pages and someone's written half a page and it's really good quality – it's still a work in progress. In maths you wouldn't give them, 'Well you haven't quite met your learning objective,' for them it's very good – you've made progress."* [Classroom Teacher]

The composers were often very clear that the outcome of a completed composition was not part of their aims:

*"In my scheme of work, what I've suggested with the success criteria is: working with sound, understanding differences in sound, timbre, duration speed...Generating ideas – children can generate multiple ideas from a single stimulus...working with sound, choosing sounds with intention, selecting and organising ideas, creating their own structures to organise musical ideas...Those are the outcomes. There's nothing about that that says that composition is a finished product."* [Composer]



## RQ4: WHAT PEDAGOGIES SUPPORT CHILDREN LEARNING AND PROGRESSING AS COMPOSERS?

This research question explored the pedagogies that teachers, composers and other adults use when working with children to enable them to compose. It considered how children learn through these pedagogies and how they make progress as a consequence.

**1. Composers using children's previous work and the sounds they make as starting points.** Composers used a wide range of stimuli and starting points but also used music the children had created (and recorded) in previous sessions as springboards for moving forward. This gave increased value to the children's ideas, gave permission for, and normalised borrowing musical ideas from others. It also demonstrated to the children the musical and compositional potential of any sound. Composers also chose existing recorded music to play at the end of sessions which contained similar ideas to those the children had used, again giving validity to the music the children were creating.

*"The composer shows a sequencing program where they have put the recording from last time and created a song texture using them. The children love this, there are smiles and glances all round. This is their song."* [Fieldnotes, 24/11/22]

*"The composer says to the class: "I think it might be worth us working as a team to start with – is that okay? Pupil A, could you show Pupil B what you did last time and just share some of your sounds?"* [Fieldnotes, 8/12/22]

*"Lovely discussion of the yawn, both in terms of pitch and dynamics. This begins with the pupil and is then given voice by the composer, who loudly demonstrates it so that the class can then engage in discussion."* [Fieldnotes, 16/11/22]

*"Dropping the pencil sharpener was then followed by two strikes of a metal water bottle. These ideas came from the children. The composer asked: "How can we develop it? How can we make it even better?" The children quickly suggested the use of two water bottles. Composing using these expanded media then followed, together with lots of discussion of the effects of these developments."* [Fieldnotes, 16/11/22]

*"I think texture is really noticeable [in] how the children's thinking has developed. [The Composer] showed the example of [Pupil's] piece, where that really highlighted to the children it's really important because certain sounds get hidden. The children at the end were really highlighting this and you can see their work changing."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"At the very end of the composing session the composer plays an audio track that uses many of the features the children have been working on during the session. Structure of the composing lesson may differ from other ways of teaching, where the stimulus may begin the session. This reversed pedagogy had a real impact, because all the kids responded with a disappointed "aww" when the composer stopped playing the recording."* [Fieldnotes, 23/22/22]

**2. Composer questioning and feedback as an important pedagogic tool.** Composers used questioning for a variety of reasons: to develop children's awareness of sound; to help them clarify intentions and justify choices; to support the children evaluating their music; to help the children think what next? Through doing this they supported the children to develop their own internal questioning, critical and 'composerly' thinking. The composers often involved the whole class in these discussions, inviting children to comment on each other's work, which helped cultivate a supportive and collaborative community of young composers.

*"During and in-between playing clips, the composer asks questions such as: "What kind of sounds was it making? Was it a smooth sound or a jagged sound? What was happening at the end? Were there any other sounds that we heard?". [Fieldnotes, 9/3/22]*

**Composer:** *Why did you say 'erh!' when you listened to your piece?*

**Pupil:** *I think I used too many silences*

**Composer:** *That's a really good reflection [Fieldnotes, 23/11/22]*

*"Let's listen again because you might think there's an idea and you might want to use that in your piece." [Composer]*

**Conversation between composer and pupil [Fieldnotes, 2/2/23]:**

**Composer:** *Did it feel like a conversation?*

**Pupil:** *Yes, it had that really strong note, like 'no'.*

**Composer:** *Do you think if we hadn't told the audience what was going on they might have been able to work it out?*

*"I really liked the way you repeated the first idea – you know it was like somebody saying, 'Oh come on!'" [Composer in fieldnotes, 2/2/23]*

*The class teacher supports and restates a question from the composer: What could you do to add to the sound? Would you change the pitches, the rhythm? [Fieldnotes, 23/11/22]*

*"There's something that's really beautiful here – did anyone notice what happened there?" [Composer in fieldnotes, 24/3/22]*

*"Are you happy with this sound? Are you playing as well or is it me?" [Visiting Musician in fieldnotes, 8/6/23]*

*"I think [the composer] [was] an amazing teacher, the formative assessment for me is the most powerful means for assessing where the children are [. . .]. It's that ability for you to have that interaction with them and you to sort of talk through things [that they] then take on and then move forward." [Classroom Teacher]*



### 3. Teachers and composers worked collaboratively to find effective pedagogies.

The teachers help the composers understanding the learning processes of children, bringing in their primary pedagogies from other areas of the curriculum. Together they discuss modelling, framing tasks, scaffolding, thinking out loud and the need for recapping and revisiting.

**Composer:** *With this group there's just so much creative thinking. I get the sense that there's so many ideas and it's a bit overwhelming. I think a lot of the thinking is giving them the form and the structure and the discipline to bring it into something. Would you agree?*

**Teacher:** *In a way, it's training them to do it, while still allowing them to be creative – you're mediating. It took time and practice to get them trained into this habit, but now this is what we do. Now, as at any other teaching time, we can go to a point, and we all think – 'ah – this is what we do and that's okay – it's not silly or embarrassing'.*

**Composer:** *Some pupils really struggled to get the wheels turning with their imagination and to go with creating stories to set to music.*

**Teacher:** *I had to recap some of the learning that we did and once I'd done that, I think they were able to get their own stories and create the music with it. What normally works well with them is to just quickly model a story and think out loud what you are doing – that might get them a bit more inspired.*

**Teacher 1:** *With my class, it was the going over and the building and the tweaking and the adapting and editing it.*

**Teacher 2:** *Yes, perfecting it.*

**Teacher 1:** *When you're not here, they do sometimes read through that song, or they will sometimes talk about the song. My class really knew their own individual songs. I think by the time it came to putting the musical instruments to it, they knew it inside out.*

**Teacher 2:** *They thought about it so much.*

**Teacher 1:** *If we gave them a different song to compose each week, you wouldn't have had this, because they would have said, 'I don't really know it', or 'I don't like that', or 'Can I do the one that I did a couple of weeks ago?'*

*"The composers gave the teachers that freedom to let them be properly creative and let them explore their own ideas and run with it, and to say that it was fine to do that. The composers that we were working with have those skills and this helped us to relax a little bit and to think, 'Yeah, that's okay, we can go with that.' This allowed us as teachers to watch that creativity happen. Seeing what the children could then achieve, where we took down some of those parameters, I think was really valuable."* [Classroom Teacher]

#### 4. Modelling ideas was an important pedagogy but needs to be done with thought.

Composers acknowledged the tension between modelling ideas and allowing them to become overly dominant. Composers wanted to inspire children's composing, without limiting and restricting their creative responses. They also modelled making mistakes as a pedagogic strategy to avoid notions of correct and incorrect composing approaches which, where evident, created undue pressure and barriers to participation.

*"I've been really struck with what you need to give [the pupils] and model for them, in order for them to have enough of a framework, versus what they need in order to be able to free them up to imagine something". [Composer]*

*"At that age, they are sponges. They're so receptive and as soon as you say, 'Oh, you could do something like this', they will immediately do it because they're so attuned to copying. So, it's kind of giving them enough to soak it up and enough variety that they will go in different ways and have the language." [Composer]*

*"The hardest thing to overcome is modelling something and then them copying it exactly. I don't want to model, because I know they'll likely copy me, but if I don't model, then what are they going to do? It's finding that really fine balance between modelling something and modelling an idea; sharing ideas and allowing them space..." [Composer]*

*"I felt this barrier, particularly with a couple of girls where this sense of wrong or right was really hard...It made me think about what 8-year-olds are already experiencing in their lessons and other subjects...I purposely made a few mistakes. I tried to normalise being a bit more human and that seemed to help, but it took a real gentle touch to overcome some of that." [Composer]*

#### 5. Composing for professional musicians as a pedagogic intervention. Access to visiting professional musicians helped to dissolve barriers of instrumental proficiency in composing and gave the children clear purpose and context to their composing. The visiting musicians supported the children in developing their compositions and provided compelling learning experiences by performing the children's compositions. These opportunities were particularly valued by the teachers.

*"Seeing the saxophonist, there was context to what we're doing, which was really good. [The children] could see the end goal of what they were working towards." [Classroom Teacher]*

*"There's that dialogue: they find out what a cello can do. They were really excited by pizz and arco, for example, and then they were writing that in, where they know that they can't do that themselves. So being able to have that dialogue with what this instrument can do and then put it in their piece, I think it opens up beyond yourself, doesn't it, which is why we all like composing! Because we can then write pieces for things we cannot play." [Composer]*

*"It was...wonderful when things were slightly unexpected; for the child who had done a composition and they thought it was one thing, and then they heard it being played and suddenly it was something else. And that was amazing!" [Classroom Teacher]*

*"Some of the moments when the instrumentalists played were really special moments." "...the value and the magic of having real professional musicians in school." [Classroom Teacher]*

**6. Using music technology enabled progress and equity.** Technology served as a bridge to composing, allowing children to interact with the music they were creating without needing to achieve instrumental proficiency first. Children who had not engaged so much previously became excited by the possibilities. Teachers with digital skills, who had maybe felt unsure about their musical knowledge, felt confident to utilise their expertise and imagine how they might compose with the children in the future.

**Classroom Teacher:** *Having the technology there did bring out the best in the kids in the sense that they were able to lead their own learning. It was a gateway in to composing. You could see how it built from a simple composition into something much more complex.*

**Composer:** *There's so much independent learning, isn't there?*

**Classroom Teacher:** *They were all given exactly the same resources, but they used it in different ways. Once they knew what the task was, they could be totally independent.*

*This has helped to promote questioning and curiosity, where exploration is welcomed. For example, while [the composer] is guiding children through the music technology and effects such as delay and reverb, the children ask questions like: "Can you play this bit?", "What happens if...?", "What does that mean?" [Fieldnotes, 11/7/23]*



# SUMMARY DISCUSSION

LICP aimed to bring teachers and composers together to develop meaningful and relevant composing activity for children, and to better understand children's composing and their progress as composers. Composing was defined in the LICP Toolkit as 'the playful organisation and manipulation of sound to express and communicate ideas with intention' and its purpose 'a way of reflecting on, reinterpreting and/or expressing the world through sound' (Evans & Fautley 2024, p8).

Previous research and reports have shown us that within the music curriculum, composing is the part teachers struggle with most (Berkley, 2001; Ofsted, 2021), and we know primary initial teacher education (ITE) allows little time for music input. This has sometimes resulted in poorly structured approaches to composing, with children repeating the same composerly thinking and doing throughout their primary school life, and an over-reliance on external music schemes, delivered without deeper understanding of how children learn and progress as composers.

Since 2017, there has been a strong emphasis from government (Gibb, 2017) on 'knowledge-rich education'. Relevant here are arguments that tend to run along the lines of "children can't be creative until they have accumulated a considerable degree of domain-specific knowledge"; in other words, until they know lots about music (whatever that means!) they can't, and shouldn't compose.

This was at odds with what had happened in the previous decade where creativity had been celebrated and formed a core plank of education policy. In 1998 Sir Ken Robinson led a commission on creativity for the Blair government, and the commission's report, *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*, was a key driver that led to the Creative Partnerships programme (2002 – 2011). However, throughout both periods, music learning was frequently conflated, and still is, with learning an instrument or singing, both in terms of policy, initiatives and allocation of resources. Though NPME2 (2022) mentions composing a number of times, NPME1 (2011) made only a few references to it. In addition, composing has suffered from the perception that it is something only gifted people can do.

## **Key finding 1: All children can compose. Giving ownership and making space for children's ideas is important.**

The research shows us that in facilitating circumstances, such as those of LICP, all children can compose. The children involved in LICP were full of musical ideas, and their ideas came from a range of reference points and musical experiences. Teachers and composers were often surprised by what the children could do and by unexpected 'out of the box' responses to given stimuli. This is at odds with the idea, and prevailing deficit model, that children should have acquired certain musical knowledge before being able to be musically creative. Though children in LICP mostly composed from starting points given to them by the composers and teachers, they were given extensive agency over how they responded to these, how they developed their musical ideas, and over the composing process.



The research revealed that many children had not recognised that some of their activities, both in and outside of school, could be described as composing. This highlighted a disconnect between their spontaneous creative music-making and the concept of composing as it is understood in the classroom and the wider world. Throughout the project, researchers observed the composers affirming the children's identities as composers. This, along with the children's growing understanding of composing, empowered the children to take ownership of and claim their identity as composers.

**Key finding 2: Dialogic conversation is one of the most important pedagogic tools for children learning to compose and make progress in their composing.**

Dialogic conversation, meaning a conversation in which two or more individuals explore the meaning of something, was revealed by the research as one of the most powerful composing pedagogies for supporting children to make progress in their composing. These conversations happened between adults and the children, between adults and the children's musical ideas, between children and children, and between the children's music and that of more established composers.

The research showed that open questioning and discussion that delved into the children's composing intentions, and giving specific feedback using rich vocabulary, were important for helping children to make progress as composers. When done well, this questioning and feedback became an internal critical composerly voice which the children carried from one composing task to the next. By asking the children to justify choices and describing what was happening, the children's aesthetic decision-making and awareness of the composing process was nurtured. It was also a key factor in the children's increased willingness and ability to further refine their music. Throughout the project there were many instances when these conversations included the whole class commenting on each other's music. This built a supportive community of young composers in the class where learning from each other and borrowing ideas was encouraged and normalised.

*"I think [the composer] [was] an amazing teacher, the formative assessment for me is the most powerful means for assessing where the children are [. . .]. It's that ability for you to have that interaction with them and you to sort of talk through things [that they] then take on and then move forward." (Classroom Teacher)*

When done skilfully, a dialogic conversation can also mean using the children's recorded musical ideas as springboards for next steps and connecting the music children created with that of established composers, for example, in choosing to share music which contains similar ideas to those of the children.

**Key finding 3: When children are engaged in composerly thinking and doing, their overall musical understanding grows.**

LICP researchers observed that when the children were composing, they were continuously engaged in conversations about, experimentation with and exploration of sound. They were constantly making decisions about sound - how an instrument should be played, what sound should go where and why - whether it should be high, low, fast, slow, loud, quiet, spiky, smooth - among other things. This developed children's understanding and awareness of sound and its properties as a medium for musical expression. This benefitted children's overall musical understanding and learning, not just their composing. The adults constantly affirmed the children's own vocabulary for talking about sounds and music, as well as using rich descriptive language. This gave children ownership over what language can be used to talk about music. The children's increasing ability to talk about sound and music allowed them to work more effectively with each other and with visiting musicians.



**Key finding 4: Composers and teachers planning and teaching together helped to develop effective composing pedagogies and practices, and facilitated curriculum change.**

LICP was set up in a way that acknowledged the expertise of both composers and teachers and practically enabled reciprocal learning through reflective tools. This included: reflection sessions after each of workshops, whole project seminar days, time for the composer to visit the school prior to activity, and designated time for discussion between the school music lead and composer.

The LICP researchers observed rich pedagogic and practice discussions between composers and teachers about framing activity (balancing limitations and freedoms), the use of modelling, and planning for the use of instruments in the classroom. One consequence of these pedagogic conversations was a greater concentration on composing thinking, rather than composing activity alone, which enabled composers to slow down and do more of less through observing and listening to what the children did and responding to it.

Reflective discussions enabled teachers to connect composing pedagogies with wider school pedagogies used in other areas of the curriculum, providing teachers with tools for future composing with their classes, as well as supporting the composers with the immediate project workshops.

It is also clear from the research that the project has facilitated rethinking of the music curriculum in the schools:

*"We follow a scheme, which does incorporate some composing, but it's quite rigid. I think as a result of [LICP] we've got the tools as teachers to expand within that scheme now where the children can go with it. So that's probably where I'm going to take it next."* [Classroom Teacher]

*"LICP 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."* [School Music Lead]



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Agency:

Children need more open-ended opportunities to compose and/or more agency and creative space within given composing briefs or tasks. In addition, there needs to be better recognition and appreciation of children's existing musical knowledge and experiences, and their ability to develop ideas.

## 2. Curriculum and Progression:

Composing activity in the curriculum needs to meet the needs of children in different schools and to be planned with this in mind. Children need time to understand, develop, and inhabit the different stages of the composing process. One way to do this would be to do allow compositions to develop over a number of lessons with plenty of opportunities for children to share and discuss their work in progress. When schools use external schemes, they need to ensure that composerly thinking and doing are taking place, that the activity is relevant to the children, and to consider how children make progress in composing beyond an accumulation of new knowledge and musical content.

## 3. Pedagogy:

There needs to be a better understanding of the composing pedagogies that support children to learn and progress in their composing, and increased understanding in what it is to make progress as a composer. This includes scaffolding, modelling, questioning and feedback, and framing activity as well as imaginative ways of designing activity and teaching composing. Further research is needed as this is still an underdeveloped area.

## 4. Profile:

Composing needs to have a higher profile within the music curriculum in primary schools. There needs to be recognition that composing is something all children can do regardless of previous instrumental learning and that it supports children's musical learning and development across the music curriculum. This needs to be reflected in local and national policy, programmes and initiatives, and allocation of resources.

## 5. Workforce Development - Composers:

More experienced composer-educators are needed, and we need to ensure that being a composer-educator is a sustainable and viable career option.

Composers need professional development courses, mentoring and extended and regular opportunities to work in primary schools. They need to understand how schools work, how the curriculum and learning are planned, as well as being skilful with the specific composing pedagogies as outlined above.

## 6. Music Services and Music Hubs:

Music Services and Music Hubs should be encouraged to employ composers and develop and support them as educators, enabling them to work in schools. Weekly composing sessions in schools could be an alternative offer to Whole Class Ensemble Teaching (WCET). In this model, composers would work with class teachers, for instance supporting one or two-year groups per term, and gradually moving around the school. Music services and Music Hubs should also consider supporting instrumental staff to regularly include composing in their WCET.

## 7. Workforce Development - Teachers:

Classroom teachers need to be supported to recognise and translate pedagogies they use in other areas of the curriculum to the teaching of composing. One way to support teachers is to pair them alongside composer-educators in the classroom over the long term, with frequent opportunities to reflect together and with other teachers. Music Services could also to employ specialist staff to support non-specialist teachers with composing (see recommendation 6).

## 8. Future Activity:

There needs to be sustained long-term opportunities for composers to work alongside teachers where the focus is on composing by children, and on the process of composing rather than the final product.





## 9. Out of School:

Locally, regionally, and nationally, there needs to be better progression routes and signposting for young people who want to compose and the opportunity for them to meet with other young composers – ranging from the classroom to afterschool clubs, and regular local or regional opportunities. There needs to be opportunities for young people to compose for a range of sound resources from professional musicians to DAWS. Music Services and Music Hubs need to develop composing strategies to support children to compose in and out of school.

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