

Executive summary of report dated 25th August 2022: Music Therapy in two early learning centres situated in a community affected by a methamphetamine crisis

Context: The project was based in two early learning centres situated in a severely disadvantaged community which was, at the time of the project, dealing with a methamphetamine crisis. The centres provide a wide range of supports for their whānau, including comprehensive meals and basic medical support for tamariki, setting up appointments for whānau, and private bus transport to day care for whānau living in cars or emergency housing. Eighty per cent of the tamariki have significant communication delays, and many experience challenges with impulse control and attention, executive function, communication, and motor development. Kaiako are therefore involved with supporting tamariki to develop foundational skills that those in a different community would learn within their whānau environment.

Many of the tamariki often arrived at the centre in highly dysregulated states; and some days managing the volume level within the centres would be a huge challenge, as several tamariki were in states of high distress simultaneously. This naturally impacted on the tamariki who might appear to be ‘managing better’ too, as the kaiako were often absorbed with settling/co-regulating with the tamariki demonstrating higher needs and did not always have the capacity to engage with others. Some of the kaiako were living in stressful situations themselves, so working in a demanding environment with many tamariki became even more challenging for them. Supporting kaiako to understand their own need for nervous system regulation and develop strategies to do so was an important part of the mahi.

Programme: The overarching aim of the mahi was to improve staff and child wellbeing by supporting kaiako to develop confidence in using musical approaches and strategies with the tamariki. The music therapist collaborated with centre managers to design a project that would keep the demand on kaiako low, while resourcing them as much as possible. The central focus was to engage the kaiako in musical experiences with the tamariki while highlighting what they noticed and experienced, and encouraging them to consider how they might weave music-making into their day to support their community.

Over a three-month period, the music therapist facilitated 12 sessions and two staff hui. A community, play-based and child-led music therapy approach was employed, with the music therapist spending approximately 50% of her time working flexibly with the tamariki in a variety of spaces, and 50% facilitating a large group musical ‘mat time’. The structure/s of group work gave the kaiako an opportunity to observe specific music therapy strategies and allowed the tamariki to participate in activities that would support their development, wellbeing, and social skills.

Evaluation: The programme was evaluated using observation and Kaiako self-report. While each kaiako varied in their capacity to join the ‘fluid’ sessions, with some more often observing while others were more actively involved, findings indicate that overall the community gained information and understanding of music therapy approaches that they might be able to employ; began to develop and implement their own ideas for music-making in their centre; expanded their existing group rituals of music-making such as their existing mat times; developed an understanding of their own need for nervous system regulation, and gained tools to support themselves in this way; appreciated the nourishment and awahi that music making provided them on hard/busy/exhausting days; and developed deeper kōrero and collaboration as a team about how to support specific tamariki with high needs.

Conclusion: An ecological and flexible music therapy approach supported kaiako working with tamariki within a community experiencing crisis, to develop new understandings and gain skills in the use of musical approaches and strategies to improve staff and child wellbeing.