working as an early childhood music specialist across a variety of settings in the UK, I have become increas-ingly troubled by the recorded music that is being played in the settings I have visited.

When the framework for an early years curriculum was first introduced in 1996, the way we accessed record-ed music was very different from how we do it today. In 1998, we were largely dependent on CDs; today, anyone can access thousands of recordings of music of all styles, from all parts of the world, via the click of a button.

I wanted to establish if early child-hood education recognises how easy it is to access music to provide young children with a range of listening opportunities. I also wanted to deter-mine if we are encouraging young children to listen and how carefully we think about the audio environ-ments we are creating for young ears.

As part of my MA in Early Child-hood Music Studies (see www.crec.co.uk/MA-in-education-early-years-music-module), I decided to conduct some research into this area and it soon became apparent that this had not been researched before.

My research involved a written questionnaire and a small amount of telephone interviews. I wanted to dis-cover what styles of music early childhood prac-titioners use and for what purposes they make use of them. There were some common themes regard-ing how and when music was used and some shared thoughts from prac-titioners regarding music, with some styles considered ‘inappropriate’ for young children to hear.

All the respondents indicated that they used recorded music in their set-tings. To ensure I obtained a broad spectrum of views, the respondents represented all types of settings, including children’s centres, primary schools, childminders, before- and after-school clubs, pre-schools, day nurseries, nursery schools and pri-vate music classes.

TOP FIVE

What emerged from my research was an overwhelmingly clear top five styles of music: nursery rhymes, clas-sical, pop, Christmas and relaxing music.

It is, of course, not surprising that nursery rhymes were the most com-monly indicated. This material is pro-dced specifically for young children and it seems that it would make sense to be playing this style of music within-settings.

Classical music ranked second and one interviewee said that classical music is used because it is considered ‘high art’. Pop music ranked number three, but there were some contrast-ing opinions about the use of it in set-tings. Some respondents felt that pop music was inappropriate for young children to hear so it was never used within their setting, while others said that they used it regularly.

Of course, we have to be careful about the lyrical content of songs played to children; some pop music does contain explicit and sexual content. However, we also have to ask: is all pop music inappropriate for young children? It appears there is little in the way of discussion regarding styles of music used. Some respondents were not really sure why they did not use a wider range. Rock music was not indicated and perhaps some think this style of music is inappropriate for young ears – but what is relaxing will not necessarily be the same as another.

From my personal experience, I know there is certain music I find relaxing but others find irritating.

Is children’s music making affected by the music being played in the background?

There was a strong line of thought about use of music for atmospher, mood and for the influence on emo-tional states – for example, to calm and relax children. Relaxing music was most often used as a style and was in the top five indicated within the completed questionnaire.

It was, however, clear what was meant by ‘relaxing’ music. This is interesting as it appears that there is an assumption that many children will respond to styles of music in a similar way. Are we aware of the styles of music that individual chil-dren find relaxing? What one child finds relaxing will not necessarily be the same as another.

From my personal experience, I know there is certain music I find relaxing but others find irritating.

AUDIOWALLPAPER

The largest indication from respond-ents of how music was used was for movemen-t again, not a particular surprising finding as music and movement are so intrinsically related. The second most indicated use of music was for use in the background. Sims (1990) suggested that there is a real danger in today’s society that ‘children are learning not to listen’ and referred to the term ‘audiosensory bana’. This is a term created by the Foundation for the Advancement of Education in Music, referring to a ‘disease’ whose primary symptom is numbness to music. This is due to music being so pervasive in everyday life. If music is played in the back-ground, are children aware that it is there? Does it become audio wallpa-per? Is it having a positive impact?

Consider the following question – do you prefer to have music on in the background while you are concen-trating? Some of you will answer yes, while others will say no. When young children are playing they are exploring, learning and thinking and are, of course, often concentrating. Back-ground music may well be hindering their learning experience. We are sur-rounded by music and sound in every-day environments, so how much silence do we offer young children not only in early childhood environ-ments but in everyday environments?

A surprising finding was that recorded music was rarely used for or musical purposes other than singing; actual music listening was not men-tioned at all. There was little use of recorded music specifically for or within musical activities, which begs the question: why is there such little music listening in music activities?

HOW CAN WE USE MUSIC EFFECTIVELY?

Consider the following:

• What music are you playing in your setting? Who are you playing it for?
• Observe the responses of children when music is being played – are the children aware that music is being played?
• Experiment with different styles of music for specific activities.

Encourage children to move freely to the music that they are listening to.

Encourage children to talk about the music that they are listening to.

Within your staff team discuss what you feel is appropriate and inappropriate music to play.

Play music while children have access to instruments and observe how they play – is their music making affected by the music they are listening to?

Do they play differently to different styles?