Sounds of Change Academy:
Music and its effects on children in Dutch refugee centres

Impact Report

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September 2022

Acknowledgements

This impact report is based on data gained during my master's research in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology. The data has been compiled through the generous cooperation of the workshop leaders from the Sounds of Change Academy and the employees from De Vrolijkheid. I am grateful for all participants, who shared their experiences and thoughts, and by doing so helped me in giving an overview of the effects of the pilot version of the Sounds of Change Academy. The data collection, analysis and writing of the research and the impact report were done by myself, Floortje de la Fosse. The report shows results on various concepts and raises questions which might be interesting for future purposes.

To read a more thorough description of the effects of the Sounds of Change Academy, I would like to refer to the full version of my master's research via the QR-code below.

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Abstract

Community music is a way of making music within a group of people, by letting everyone participate in the process in their unique way. Sounds of Change (SoC) brings community music to refugee centres in order to establish social change. But how do they use social change in order to pursue social change and what social change are they seeking for? This report shows the effects of community music and creative collaborative processes on children in Dutch refugee centres. After having conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I suggest that, in order to establish a sense of communal belonging, creativity and connection among the participants of the workshops, a safe space is required. Whenever children feel safe, they dare to share their ideas. A common language is not required for this; music can often speak for itself.

Summary

SoC is an organization that is invested in community music and inviting people to participate in making music together. Founded in 2017 by Lucas Dols, this organization puts its focus on the power of music in order to improve the quality of life where it is needed. The organization reaches out to people who live in challenging surroundings; the work of SoC takes place in refugee camps and marginalized communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Palestine and the Netherlands. The aim of SoC is to train people from the country itself into becoming Changemakers (workshop leaders) through the use of music, in order to stimulate creativity, expression, strengthening coping mechanisms, empowerment among people and achieving social change. They train people from the country itself, because they argue that those people know the language and habits of the community best and are better equipped to work withing their own communities. This leads to communities becoming sustainable and independent from SoC. Workshop leaders are trained to create music together with a group of people and let all members participate. “Music changes the world, because it changes people”; this is what SoC stands for. SoC sees music as a way of bonding people and a powerful tool to express yourself in a safe way.

For this report, workshop leaders from the SoC Academy were followed. The SoC Academy was a new initiative, in which eight people with a variety of backgrounds, including musicians, non-musicians, status holders, were trained to become workshop leaders according to the SoC approach, in four weekends from October 2021 until December 2021. They learned how SoC argues that the power of music can be used to move people and how music can encourage collaboration within groups. After the training sessions, the participants were paired and put their learnt skills into practice in weekly sessions for six weeks from January on in different refugee centres in the Netherlands; Almelo, Amersfoort, Delfzijl and Den Helder, where they worked in close contact with people from De Vrolijkheid, an organization that arranges art projects in many refugee centres. The impact of the SoC approach was measured on the workshop leaders themselves as well as the impact of

their work on the people in the refugee centres. Their musical workshops took place among two groups of children; one group aged 4 until 7, the other group aged 8 until 12. In Delfzijl there was a group aged 12+ as well. In practice, the age groups would overlap in all centres.

Methodology

Data has been gained through ethnography, which is a way of studying people in their everyday lives (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Data was compiled through several qualitative methods; literature research, fieldnotes, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. These methods focused on gaining data on the creation of a safe space and how this affected the creativity of children and the sense of communal belonging in a diverse group. An inductive approach was used, which means that a theory is generated out of the research (Bryman, 2016:375). This gave space to producing many ideas, issues, topics and themes (Emerson et al., 1995), based on what the refugees in the refugee centres and the workshop leaders were doing and thinking in the field. I have observed and participated in the workshops and even lead some, and conducted interviews among the workshop leaders, the employees from De Vrolijkheid and, when possible, asked some questions to the parents of the participants.

Fieldnotes are descriptions and observations that are written down during observations (Emerson et al., 1995). Participant observation gives opportunity to observe behaviour, by being present at the same activities as the participants (Bryman, 2016:493) and gave way to immerse among the participants, which gave a chance to get to know their opinions, thought processes and behaviour. Semi-structured interviews distinguish from other types of interviews in a way that it gives the opportunity to dive deeper into the reply of a participant, and deviate from the researcher's beforehand written down questions (Bryman, 2016:468, 696). After consent was given, the interviews were recorded, to be able to be transcribed at a later time. Combining these methods gave an overview as complete as possible on the effects of musical activities of the SoC Academy in the refugee centres. Doing this amongst four different refugee centres, made it possible to compare diverse happenings in the different refugee centres. It gave insight in the effects on the participants as well as on the workshop leaders.

Conducting research among refugees is associated with many complex ethical challenges (Jacobsen & Landeau, 2003:187), and should be conducted with much care, as refugees are considered a marginalized group. Moreover, the group that is described as 'refugees' is a rather broad term and includes a very diverse group of people, in which each individual has their own story and background that needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, in practice, it was not possible to conduct many interviews among refugees, due to COVID-19 and organizational measurements. During the interviews I did conduct among refugees, I had to be aware that some questions were maybe sensitive in regards to their histories, which is in line with the ethical obligation of "do no harm" (AAA Code of Ethics, 2012).

In order to maintain anonymity, all workshop leaders chose their own pseudonyms for the research. Some residents of the centres and employees of De Vrolijkheid preferred a pseudonym as well.

Description

Workshop leaders

Thirty people applied for the Academy; eight were chosen in the end by the trainers of SoC to take part in the Academy, based on number of spots available, personal learning objectives and diversity in background and gender. They were aged between 26 and 35. Six of the eight workshop leaders were interviewed for this report. The interviewed workshop leaders had different backgrounds; Syrian, Irish and Dutch. All of the workshop leaders were doing social jobs; all of them are involved with working with several groups of people. Professions ranged from music teacher and pedagogical employee to staying-at-home parent and music therapist. The majority of workshop leaders were professionally trained in music. However, this was not a prerequisite to participate in the Academy; some were not musically trained, but nevertheless had a connection to music in some way. I asked the participants why they wanted to join the Academy:

> Celtic Knight (SoC): "SoC mostly gives the workshops to people who really came from war or bad situations. And I know how important it is to draw a smile on the faces, especially for the people who suffer from the memories of war. Yes, because I am one of them."

> Salma (SoC): "The video that was shared online was in Lebanon, and since the war in Syria was of course still going on at the time, the cheerfulness that splashed from it spoke to me. Happy children that do not own a lot, but were participating in a happy way. I was completely impressed with the work they did."

These participants showed very personal reasons. All participants had an interest in working with other people and creating things together. Reasons for joining were: "*increasing the resilience and the connection and interaction between people*", "*using music to help people*" and "*letting people express themselves, whether children or adults*".

Refugee centres

Many refugees suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), according to UNHCR (2002:233). Research by Marsh has shown how music can be a tool to, among other things, contribute to stress relief and integration (2016:61). Moreover, studies by Koelsch have shown how music can affect the part in the brain which is connected to emotional regulation (2014:175, 178), as well as how music can help to reduce stress and increase emotions as joy, calmness and peacefulness (2014:173). Music can be a tool in helping to express traumatic experiences (Degmečić, Požgain & Filaković, 2005:288). Therefore, musical workshops from SoC in refugee centres seem to be very valuable. The practical part of the SoC Academy was carried out in four different

refugee centres in the Netherlands; Almelo, Amersfoort, Delfzijl and Den Helder. These refugee centres were chosen, because, after consultation with De Vrolijkheid, it appeared that not many activities were happening at these centres. Refugee centre Almelo used to be a custodial institution for girls with behavioural problems. Some of the residents were staying in the former isolation cells. This centre was a temporal overflow centre for Ter Apel, the refugee centre in The Netherlands where all refugees first arrive when entering the country. Alex, employee of De Vrolijkheid, explained the situation in refugee centre Amersfoort.

> Alex (De Vrolijkheid): "This refugee centre is especially for families. It is also an *uitzetlocatie*, which means that we are the last 'station' before people get deported back to their country of origin, or that they end up being status holder anyway and get to integrate in the Netherlands. (…) This certainly has an impact. It causes restlessness and despondency. Not wanting to participate in social activities, because "it makes no sense", is something that is often said here."

Even though there might be a feeling of despondency among residents, many children kept on coming back each week for the musical workshops of SoC. At refugee centre Delfzijl, many brothers and sisters would join together in the workshops. Due to COVID-19, not all children could join in all the workshops, as the groups had to be divided into smaller ones. Refugee centre Den Helder used to be a youth prison. Here again, like in Almelo, families would stay in former prison cells.

<u>Construction of the workshops</u>

The SoC approach uses the power of music to achieve goals such as developing emotional awareness, facilitating a space for improvisation and composition, working together and expressing oneself. In order to achieve goals like this, SoC designed a method of six steps to use during musical workshops.

> Salma (SoC): "The method of SoC has clear structure, which contributes to letting the children feel safe. It is also very open and flexible; you can grasp what is necessary at that specific moment."

> Zahara (SoC): "I think the method differs because it is really based on connecting. Getting this trust is the base layer. (…) So, you can develop your musicality, but along with that, something else is being developed. I think it is not just based on music, it is more based on people-to-people connection and really trying to get everybody to have their role in the group."

It is important to note how music is used during the workshops; it is not something that is worked towards to as an end result, which was explained to me as "*music is used as a tool in the workshops, not as an outcome*". Outcomes such as a certain freedom of expression of who you are and collaboration and connection between people, are more desirable. Starting the workshop with a 'check-in' is "*a moment of seeing each other*" and is about "*grounding yourself in the group*". Singing a song together in which every child gets to say their name and in which all individuals get attention, make it feel like everyone is seen. Moreover, doing this while sitting

in a circle creates already a feeling of a group. During the workshops different activities would happen; freeze game (dancing on music and when the music stops everyone freezes), mirroring (one makes a sound or movement and everyone copies) or pass the clap (each individual claps once and passes it to someone else). These exercises all needed collaboration from the whole group, otherwise they would not work. Children also got the chance to come up with their own ideas. It was important for children to feel like everything they come up with was good, and nothing was weird or wrong. This would contribute in a feeling of safety. Workshops would be ended with a 'check-out':

> Hans Ultralord (SoC): "We were taught to end it together as a group."

> Salma (SoC): "It can be about "how was today?" or something like that. This is an important moment, to close the workshop together and telling the children that the workshop is finished, and that they are welcome to come next time."

In one way, the SoC method is a clear structured method, but at the same time it can deviate from this structure and still work out well. It requires a certain kind of flexibility from the workshop leaders; to be able to adapt in the moment to the atmosphere and needs of the group.

Findings

Safe space

As already mentioned above, a safe space is necessary and important to establish in order for participants to be able to dare to express themselves and their thoughts and ideas. It is about daring to be vulnerable in a group without being judged by other participants. Participants need to feel like they can take risks and make mistakes (Renshaw, 2011:23, 70), because there is a presence of shared trust within the group (2011:19), which can contribute to people gaining confidence (Higgins, 2012:98). We cannot assume that we know in advance what a safe space is, although Renshaw frequently mentions some indicators; the presence of shared trust (2011:19), collaboration (2011:7, 18, 19) and a space free of judgment (2011:22). Some participants described what a safe space means to them:

> Mariska (SoC): "For me a safe space is a space in which you can say 'yes' and 'no', and in which both are completely fine. Actually, it is a space where you can be completely yourself."

> Julia (SoC): "The safe space is of course very much part of the method of SoC, but weirdly enough, it is not something I actively have been trying to create. In the preparations of the musical workshops as well, we have not been actively thinking about this. (…) I experienced it as something that, together with the contact between me

and Salma was something that went without saying and came naturally, just as making contact with the children came naturally as well."

Zahara (SoC): "Usually, in the SoC workshops, they put a flower or something monumental in the middle just to show like "Okay, here is the middle of the circle and we have created this nice space and you can look at this and we welcome you here". I think already that makes people feel included that they are invited in to the room. And also, the aspect of having a circle is already something that just naturally creates this nice group dynamic as well."

Hans Ultralord (SoC): "Making a circle is just sacred. As long as everyone stays in the circle, it is possible to create beautiful things within this circle. (...) The more the children are going along with being in the space and being in the now, the more a safe space becomes important. Outside of this circle is where their traumas or problems are. But within the circle it is just about the now and the musical game you are playing at that specific moment. I think one of the key components is definitely this circle."

Some children seemed to develop a sense of safety as the weeks passed by. One girl did not dare to look anywhere else but the ground in the first workshop, whereas three weeks after she dared to sing a song for everyone who was there. SoC gives great value to the creation of a safe space by incorporating it as an important goal to achieve in the workshops.

Non-verbal interpersonal communication

Stokes has argued how community music can sometimes do more than spoken language only (2004:67). According to Bithell, music can even serve as an overarching function to a sense of communal belonging, even with people who do not speak the same language, but who are bonded through music (2014:288). In the workshops I attended, it was not always possible for the workshop leaders and the participants to speak the same language or to understand each other through verbal language only. I asked what they thought of this phenomenon:

Eline (De Vrolijkheid): "It is very easy to translate the workshops to a very large group of children. By applying non- verbal communication in workshops and also creating something out of nothing. So, actually, if we did not have the suitcase full of instruments, for example, valuable musical activities could still be happening here, which are very accessible for everyone."

Julia (SoC): "That is very nice of the SoC method, that we have learned to work non-verbally. So, I have noticed several times that it is not necessary at all to speak a common language. (…) You don't need a lot of words to be able to do something with each other."

> Mariska (SoC): "I think we are used to communicating through verbal language a lot, because it is an easy way of communicating, but there are many things you can do through body language, or because music speaks for itself; that words are not necessary."

> Zahara (SoC): "You bring them all together through music, so that they don't have to speak the same language."

Not speaking a common language did not seem to cause any difficulties for the workshops. This was confirmed by one of the mothers of a participating girl:

> Mother (resident): "These places are important places, there are a lot of feelings out there. They can connect with others in the workshops. They can meet other cultures. There are not a lot of Spanish speaking people here. Through these workshops it is possible to interact with other cultures. Because it is also possible to do it without words. Afterwards she is feeling happy and calm."

Creativity

As mentioned in Veblen, practitioners of community music often highlight the power of music that brings people together, and how it can provide for a sense of an individual as well as a collective identity (2007:2). To bring out this identity, workshop leaders are taught to use creative music processes in their communities. 'Creative music processes' relate to the theory of 'creative collaborative music practices' by Renshaw (2011). This theory is about exploring new possibilities through creative imagination, in which creativity is seen as a shared process, not as a personal one, and which is stimulated by other people (Renshaw, 2011:17). In the musical workshops of SoC, creativity is searched in everything; from making instruments from random materials in the room to improvising a certain rhythm on the spot, and by combining those and interacting with each other creating new musical patterns as a group.

> Salma (SoC): "The fact that we taught them to use material that is completely free, that they can also drum on a bucket, that they could play trumpet through a straw, just making more possible."

> Gertie (De Vrolijkheid): "I think they can enjoy the fact of (...) thinking of your own musical games and that you can be a part of that and you are mentioned personally. (...) The first time is of course a little bit tensive. Then slowly they get this feeling of safety and there are of course the recurring elements of the workshop. (…) You could see them grow. They slowly became more and more owner of the workshops. (...) They quickly understand things, and make it their own."

Communal belonging

Renshaw argues that creative music making gives energy and constructs a sense of belonging (2011:17); something that people might have lost during a period of conflict in their country. Moreover, Renshaw contends

that collaboration in the group is encouraged, as it opens up to and makes space for creative and innovative ideas (2011:7, 18, 19). Achieving shared creativity seems important for the creation of the feeling of communal belonging. It shows how music can bring people together and how it can provide for a sense of collective identity (Veblen, 2007:2) as well as how it can strive for sensing a communal 'we' (Koelsch, 2014:174).

> Kevyn (resident): "It does not matter if they [the children] know each other or they don't know each other. But in this workshop, they can meet each other. They can be good friends. (...) I hope that COVID finishes soon. Then we can have a bigger group and more time. (…) We are all humans. That is the good part in the activities [from these workshops]. From every nationality, from everywhere, we have children here. So, they can be friends with each other."

In the first place, the workshops seemed a good opportunity for children to come together. This was also visible in Almelo, where it was explained to me by an employee from Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA) how "*most people here are Turkish or Arabic; most of the times these two groups are like camps against each other, but here, the children from both backgrounds come together during the workshops*". Some children were aware of differences of cultures between them. One of the participants told me a story about a Syrian girl coming to him asking why there were Turkish children joining:

> Celtic Knight (SoC): "I told her: "No, this workshop is not only for Syrian children, this workshop is for children who live in the camp. (...) If it is just for Syrian people, why do we speak Dutch? Why do we speak English? (...) It's for all children." (...) They [the children] have to know that the Netherlands has a lot of nationalities. (...) We have to accept the others. Maybe in Syria, we didn't use to deal with people from Surinam or people from Turkey. But here, we have to live together. We have to respect each other. We know maybe everyone has their mentality, or religion. But all of us, we live under the law. We have to understand and respect and accept each other."

Apart from bringing the children together, the communal belonging was also stimulated during workshops. For example, by starting each week with the same song: "*The children are connected through the songs that they know together*".

> Julia (SoC): "We did activities with a bit more commitment to each other. That you are really part of something bigger, namely, a big group of children. So, the music is used to touch something bigger, that is to say, the connection with each other and that connection within yourself and that you are invited to give expression to yourself. (…) It is funny to see how little you have to do to make children interact with each other. (…) And then indeed by going around the circle asking everyone's name, all singing the same song, I think that is already enough."

Next to connecting with other children and collaborating together in a group to stimulate a sense of communal belonging, the workshops also had other outcomes:

Züleyxa (resident): “Children have very limited daily activities here. But making music, this project, makes them very happy. It is something new for them. They know each other more because of this. They want to do fun things together. (...) It makes friendship. Every child comes from another country, there are many different cultures and stories. But music makes one. I find this the most beautiful part. (...) Yes, and a positive feeling. I am a resident here. In general, you don’t see people smiling here often, because of their history. But when we talk to the children about this musical project, they smile, they say “Oh music, we will play music”. It gives people a positive feeling. Children as well as their parents. If the child is happy, then the parents are happy as well.”

Afsaneh (De Vrolijkheid): “Children are having fun. Making contact with each other. Coming out of their isolation.”

Mother (resident): “They are meeting new cultures and new children. (…) They are learning cultural rhythms from other cultures.”

Züleyxa (resident): “We have a teenager, he is from Iran, under 18 and is mostly in his room. He has been here for two months. He didn’t want to do anything, but now he wanted to volunteer with this project. He wants to be here every week. That is also an advantage of this project. He knows more people from his own age now. (...) He told me he wants to fight for his life and go to school. (...) This project makes us all live under the same roof.”
Afsaneh (De Vrolijkheid): “It offers a future perspective for their life, I think. He is also not going to talk only about the sad stories. Of course, we should also tell and express those, but not only. Other things too.”
Züleyxa (resident): “He feels that someone gives him a helping hand. And, we say, music is for the whole world, not just for a particular country. That is an advantage for me, this project.”

Discussion and conclusion

This report has examined how SoC uses community music to promote social changes in Dutch refugee centres. In order to explore that, several aspects have been looked at during these workshops; connection, collaboration, a sense of communal belonging, the creation of a safe space, creativity and non-verbal communication. While doing that, I have kept in mind constantly how the participants as well as the workshop leaders all have different backgrounds and histories.

The overarching concept that needed to be created and present is the feeling of a safe space. If a child did not feel safe, there was no possibility for them to express in a creative way or to connect with other children. Shared trust within a group made space for the feeling of safety (Renshaw, 2011:19). The structure of the method of SoC provided a sense of safety as well; children would know more or less what to expect when participating in the workshops.

It has shown how community music can bring people together, in which collective identity is as important as individual identity (Veblen, 2007:2). By recognizing all individuals and letting them contribute each in their own unique way, creative collaborative music practices can exist. These processes explore the creative imagination, which is seen as a shared process and stimulated by others (Renshaw, 2011:17). In the Netherlands, individualism is seen as a way of individual expression (De Bony, 2005:8), which goes together with the group respecting the individual (De Bony, 2005:9) and equalizing everyone (De Bony, 2005:7), which is constructed during the workshops. Moreover, collaboration within a group was necessary at times, in order for the musical games to work out.

This research has made clear how a common verbal language within a group is not a prerequisite in order for workshops to work. As one of the mothers of a participant mentioned "Through these workshops it is possible to interact with other cultures, because it is possible to do it without words." Music is a powerful tool to bond when there is no common language (Bithell, 2014:288), and community music can unify a group of people (Veblen, 2007:2).

Other outcomes were friendships among children outside of the workshops and a general feeling of happiness. Although some children seemed to be aware of their different backgrounds, this did not result in less collaboration or connection, as far as I could observe. However, not being able to ask them directly raises the question of to which extent the connection can actually be established. Diversity in cultural backgrounds is very much present during workshops of SoC.

There are some limitations to this research, which could be elaborated on in future research. Firstly, due to the fact that almost no parents would come to the workshop space, I could not ask for consent for interviewing their children. Conclusions about the sense of communal belonging and feeling safe are therefore based on my observations and interviews with the workshop leaders and employees of De Vrolijkheid. Second, I have not looked into whether the different compositions of pairing of the workshop leaders had any effect on the outcomes of this research. Third, the fact that music can be *haram* in some cultures is something that I did not look into. Some research about, for example, music among Jordanian girls (Adely, 2007) and in Iraq (D'Cruz, 2012) has been done and showed how some forms and practices of music are prohibited. How did this affect the children in the refugee centres who came from these countries and participated in the workshops? Fourth, I did not elaborate on the possible outcome of distress on children which might have been caused by a six-weeks course in which the children might get attached to certain people, and then would be left alone after this period. This is what Berlant calls 'cruel optimism', when something "you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011:1). What does it do to the attachment of children? How do they cope with this when the course is over? And fifthly, knowing more about different habits in cultures beforehand would be worthwhile in understanding certain patterns in workshops.

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