

In perfect harmony

A nursery inspired by the Kodály approach to education is using music as a 'vehicle for learning'. *Meredith Jones Russell* finds out more

Do re mi, which opened in January, is the first nursery in Durham with a focus on the Kodály approach to education.

Owner Jane Todd had been introduced to the Kodály music concept while working as director of music at a primary school, and after giving birth to her son she began to consider setting up her own nursery based on the approach.

'I was on maternity leave and I was just sitting there breastfeeding with my head going at 100 miles per hour, thinking, "Do I really want to be driving an hour to work a day? What's my passion?" I realised it was two things: music and watching children develop.'

She decided to combine her two interests by opening a nursery near her home based on the teachings of Hungarian music educator Zoltán Kodály, which uses rhythms, hand signs and singing rather than instruments, and is based on the idea that 'music should belong to everyone'.

Ms Todd was particularly inspired by Kodály's emphasis on music education starting not only nine months before the birth of the child, but 'nine months before the birth of the mother'.

She says, 'There was a nursery at the school I was working at, but it only took children from three years old, and after having Reuben I realised the importance of music pre-birth. It was like the first piece of the jigsaw was missing otherwise. I was starting to see the benefits and I wanted to see it in other children.'

Before the nursery officially opened, Ms Todd started to run music classes in September 2013. Among these were 'Bumps' lessons, aimed at



teaching mothers-to-be about how a baby reacts to music before it is born.

Since the nursery opened, the number of music classes on offer – which cater to children up to primary school age – have doubled due to demand and are currently attended by about 60 children.

FOCUSING ON DEVELOPMENT

However, music is not the only focus at the 39-place nursery. The day begins with teacher-led time on the carpet, when all the children sing a welcome song together using their names and learn rhymes with simple pitches, but then attention turns to other areas of development.

Ms Todd explains, 'The children can then bring what they have done in music into the rest of the day themselves. The use of music is not

Owner Jane Todd realised the importance of pre-birth music after having her own child

just a token gesture to the Early Years Foundation Stage, but a vehicle for learning.'

In an art class, children were asked to draw pictures of rainbows. 'One boy was using the crayon to draw from left to right in a rhythmic way, not dots or scribbles but with a natural beat, feeling the pulse,' says Ms Todd. 'He had carried that skill across. That was very much a child-led moment.'

Do re mi nursery currently employs six members of staff, none of whom come from a musical background. 'People assume if you're a musician you can teach music, but I wanted creative, practical people who were happy to get down on the floor and do silly activities, who wanted it and were open to it,' she says. 'Staff can be trained. I didn't want someone to sit on a chair and talk down to the children about quavers and crotchets. The main thing for my staff is that they be responsive practitioners and use music as a tool.'

Although Kodály encourages the use of voices rather than instruments or recorded music, Ms Todd says that Do re mi does occasionally use CDs and instruments such as egg shakers. 'We don't use a totally pure Kodály approach, because there is a lot from my own experience too. If the focus isn't on pitch then we might use instruments too for rhythm or volume. It's important for the children to understand they are instruments, not toys. We have lots of baskets with small-scale instruments in them and they do pick them up carefully.'

A MUSICAL JOURNEY

Ms Todd rejects criticism of the Kodály approach as restrictive. The nursery has been deliberately designed as a flexible space, with an 'open-door' policy allowing the children to choose where they would like to spend time regardless of age.

She said, 'It's not music school; we're not creating mini Mozarts. The children should just go home and think they had fun. I don't want to be too prescriptive. I want to help the children on their musical journey.'

She adds, 'The early days have been so exciting, seeing it taking shape. Hopefully people will understand that this is a long-term commitment with long-term benefits.' ■

- www.britishkodalyacademy.org/kodaly_approach.htm
- www.doremidaynursery.com