

# Music and change the Rowley Way

Ian Florance talks to **Charlie Alcock** about psychology in the community with hard-to-reach groups

'Some people call the Music and Change project a Trojan horse,' says Charlie Alcock, clinical psychologist. The Rowley Way Estate in Camden, north London, doesn't resemble the fabled city of Troy: stacked concrete flats; dark stairwells; ramps leading down to a car park, off which is the door to Charlie's office. She founded the project last year, aiming to develop innovative community-based ways of addressing the complex social, emotional and occupational needs of some of the UK's most challenging and marginalised young people, many of whom are at risk of either offending or engaging in highly antisocial and/or gang-related activities.

Since the project is rooted so deeply in Charlie's experiences and training, we started from there.

## From Cheltenham to New York

'I grew up in a little Gloucestershire village and went to school in Cheltenham. My mum used to drive me to school through St Pauls, an area with significant social deprivation and a high crime rate. At the age of 12 I started to wonder why people broke the law and lived in different ways. My training and work address those rather precocious questions.'

Charlie did a first degree in sociology then took a conversion course at Oxford Brookes and qualified as a clinical psychologist in October 2007 after taking her doctorate at Salomons. Why this transition? 'It seems to me that sociology explains how society's structures, legislation and the state arbitrate people's behaviour and activities. But this isn't the whole story. You cannot ignore the individual. Salomons had very good community psychology training and my aim had always been to bring about changes in communities. So my training armed me with two perspectives which can be summed up in a question: "How far do the difficulties we treat start in society's structures, how

much within the individual?" For me, community psychology brings the two together.'

Several experiences during her training were important in developing Music and Change. 'Working in the NHS, I thought one-to-one work in a clinic was ineffective with certain groups. The people you work with will go back to the environment where their problems developed. And in the case of gang cultures, which I'm interested in, you may well be causing the client problems with other gang members who by their nature are paranoid.'

Experience of gang culture in New York was another influence on Music and Change. 'Salomons supported me to spend eight weeks there working at the DOME (Development of Meaningful Education) Juvenile Justice Project where I came into contact with young people attached to New York gangs, including the most famous ones – the Bloods and the Crips. I feel that more traditional therapies have a key role with particular client groups but that we need a different approach to engage some of our hardest-to-reach young people. I learnt in New York that doing one-to-one work with a young person in a gang can actually put them at physical risk from their gang peers.'

## Making connections

So, how did Music and Change start in Rowley Way? 'I found the estate via Google! Groundwork had funding for a project here but hadn't got a subject. My dissertation was about an intergenerational study using photography. So they funded it.'

Charlie says that Rowley Way is a 1960s estate that is listed – and therefore difficult to change – but in need of urban regeneration. It contains 2000 units and



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has big Somali and eastern European communities. 'Probably 95 per cent of the flats are council owned. There were two youth stabbings here last year.'

'While I was working on my dissertation project I went to New York and came back with a DVD I'd made with some of the young people there. There were a number on the estate who had slipped through the net and had no connection with services. When I came back from New York, they approached me. They'd heard where I'd been, asked me to tell them about it and I showed them the DVD, hung around with them and then asked them what they wanted to do. They said "We want to do a project based on hip hop." I needed an organisation to get funding so I founded MAC-UK. Music and Change is its pilot project. That, rather breathlessly, is how it all came about.'

So, music wasn't the point of the project as such. 'No. I hadn't thought of that. It's a tool for engagement and it also gives a way for young people to express themselves. Young people's lyrics describe their experiences and emotions. I don't ask them to talk about themselves, they tell me what they want to. Their lyrics and music can be part of this material. But music happens to be the key here. In another group it might be a different focus – street art for instance, or football.'

According to Charlie, 'young people lead what we do. They chose music and it became the reason they decided to learn other more conventional psychology-based skills. People were very shy about getting up on a stage and performing, so I suggested courses in self-confidence and self-esteem. Anger affects life here so we introduced anger management workshops.'

'There's another central point. I don't say "I'm the psychologist – you need to learn this, I'm going to teach you". They say what they need and I co-lead workshops with them. In New York I saw that peer-to-peer training, development and coaching works. It defuses power issues; it helps overcome innate fear of services and authority. It also prevents me making a fool of myself by trying to use the latest slang and ending up looking out of touch and condescending. The work is mutual. I help train them and they help train me. When they went on a music production course, I was a student too – and not a particularly knowledgeable one. This is all essential to working with these young people.'

### The Music and Change crew

The police told Charlie that the estate

## FEATURED JOB

**Job Title:** Chair in Health Behaviour Change

**Employer:** University of Exeter

**'We're looking for someone with an existing or potential international reputation in health behaviour change to contribute to the growth of a first-class medical school,' says Nicky Britten, Professor of Applied Healthcare Research at the Peninsula Medical School.**

'The starting point for this job is University of Exeter's Translational Medicine Science Strategy theme. We're seeking to build on already productive collaborations between the Schools of Psychology and Sport and Health Sciences, and the fast-growing Peninsula Medical School, which has the highest research rating of all the new medical schools. We're advertising for three strongly related jobs, including the Chair, and would consider applications from existing teams that meet this profile.'

At the moment the school's research clusters around four themes: diabetes, cardiovascular risk and ageing; neuroscience; environment and human health; health services research. The successful applicant will have research interests that link with these. Nicky expands on what the role entails.

'The management and prevention of chronic disease is part of our core business. Research must feed into effective interventions to facilitate behaviour change and create health gain, so one of the core skills must be the ability to take clinical problems articulated by medical staff and reframe them. The person must have high-level research expertise and will drive the health behaviour change research agenda within and outside the School. They will be used to raising the public profile of research, and the ability to enthuse people about the value of health behaviour change, and to use the right language, is critical.'

'The post is open to academics in any clinical area, although it will be of particular interest to researchers in clinical or health psychology. The person must care about building up a team – and we're looking to grow our research funding substantially. There will be some teaching, but no more than 20 per cent of the time, and we can accommodate clinical sessions if a particular candidate wants that.'

'The potential of this job is hugely exciting. Not only will the successful applicant have access to high-class research infrastructure and expertise, they'll also enter an environment in which collaborative research is firmly established. They'll have access to clinicians in many different environments, which is often a problem in this sort of research. And they'll be entering an institution where growth is absolutely necessary, where they can contribute to the move from a small, well-respected medical school to a much larger one with an increasing reputation, working in an area where there is huge and enduring interest.'

**You can find this job on p.1074, and with many others on [www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk).**

"The post...will be of particular interest to researchers in clinical or health psychology"

houses some of the most challenging young people in Camden. A significant majority of her Music and Change team grew up in care, were on a child protection order or were homeless in hostels. Most had a serious substance abuse habit; by the age of 13 most of them had been thrown out of full-time education and several had started on offending careers.

'And as one would suspect, many have psychological issues: self-harm and attempted suicide are examples. I'm not keen on DSM-IV labels and prefer looking

at and working with symptoms. One young man hadn't left his flat for eight months so I talked to him through his letter box. He's now our technical guru.'

There's also the issue of territories. 'An invisible map overlies many inner-city areas. Members of one gang can't move out of their territory without risking attack from the gang that controls the new area. This is a powerful influence. The founder of the Global Music Foundation invited us to a concert at Ronnie Scott's. Quite apart from it being the first experience that some of them

have had of seeing real instruments played live – two of them have since had drum lessons – it was also the first time some of them had left the area. One of them said “Now, I feel like a normal human being”.

Where is Music and Change now? ‘There are 25 young people on the books and a wider group of 40 who want to join. We don’t take referrals: young people refer each other. Everyone involved as a young person also has a role and a job title. Some of them have even had cards printed. Having a job title might seem a minor point, but it changes the dynamics. If asked what’s going on, they don’t say “I’m getting help”; they answer “I’m helping Charlie”. So, we used to have tutors from outside the estate to get the music workshops started but now two DJs from the estate run them. The project only has two paid employees – me and Carolyn Martino our Mental Health Consultant. Everyone else listed on our website is a volunteer and many of them are young people – we have two young people from Rowley Way on our Board of Trustees.’

All staff and volunteers get mental

health training. ‘They choose the topics themselves, and we’ve done sessions on building on strengths and anger which are of huge interest to them. I also insist on a staff support group once a month. Youth workers are not used to this, but it’s hugely important.’

The project is currently funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Social Justice Programme, but Charlie is constantly

looking for funding from sponsors and from the project’s own activities. ‘We sell Music and Change hoodies which are getting pretty popular!’

“We can influence other peoples’ practice and they can improve ours”

Insofar as there is such a thing, what’s a typical day like? ‘I can talk to you on a Monday because it’s an administration day. This afternoon I’m meeting an organisation to discuss new opportunities. Tuesday and Wednesday involves Mini Macs – people from the main Music and Change passing things on to a younger group in schools and colleges. Thursday is a big day. Drop-in sessions in the morning; ‘street’ sessions carried out around the estate. From 3.30 we run workshops on a variety of issues and at

5.30 we start the main music workshop. Friday involves processing what’s happened; planning; getting involved in evaluation. I also meet people who are interested in funding or volunteering.’

### Working as a psychologist in the community

News of the project has spread, Charlie says. ‘Many psychologists have offered to work here – a lot have agreed with my reservations about the standard model of traditional therapies with this hard-to-reach group. But I’d love to work with conventional psychological services, to have NHS clinical psychologists working one or two days a week on secondment with us. We can influence other people’s practice and they can improve ours. We work with clients on their terms, and one of the things we do is to explore the advantages and disadvantages of linking into a statutory service. This approach – doing counselling sat on an estate stairwell – is designed for a particular group. By focusing too much on within-person factors we might ignore society’s role in creating problems.

‘It’s curious to me that most multidisciplinary teams working with

## Working in Bahrain

**Elizabeth Richards Moir** describes the multifaceted and fascinating role of an educational psychologist in Bahrain

It was a long way, in every sense, from my native, drizzly Wales to the 33 hot, sunny islands of Bahrain off the coast of Saudi Arabia.

I had qualified as a teacher of English and drama in 1971, then taught and lectured in all sections of education for 30 years. I entered special education with a counselling degree in 1984, then went on to teach the first statemented dyslexic children in Wales, gaining my RSA Diploma in 1987. I finally completed a psychology degree and worked as an assistant educational psychologist, before leaving Wales for warmer climes.

I first visited Bahrain in 2000. I returned in 2001 to

marry and, as I then believed, to retire, a little prematurely perhaps at 50. After six weeks of sunbathing by the pool Bahrainis and ex-pats started to ask me for help and advice with their children.

Bahrain’s system of education is two-tiered, with both government and private schools. The government schools are free, and cater mainly for the local Arabic-speaking population. The schools in the private sector are fee-paying, and the curriculum, either British or American, is delivered bilingually in Arabic and English. Schools operating a British curriculum tend to use English as the language of instruction with Arabic taught

as a second language. These schools cater largely for the expat community. Special needs has been a much-neglected area of the curriculum in all sectors of education in Bahrain. This was largely due to a lack of public awareness and expertise in the field. Bahrain has made rapid development in every area of modern life over the past eight or nine years. Special education and psychology have matched this progress.

To give some examples, psychology is now recognised as distinct from psychiatry. The term ‘Children with special or additional needs’ has replaced the label ‘mental retardation’. Psychology is now being taught at the Arabian Gulf University, in Arabic so, *inshalla*, knowledge and awareness will spread in the local community.

I have had to learn to apply all my skills and past experience in several fields of education, psychology and counselling, sometimes wearing several hats at a time. My work involves the assessment of individual needs; counselling for troubled teenagers and adults; language and literacy teaching to dyslexic and dyspraxic pupils; giving behavioural support to those with ADHD and EBD; providing advice and support to schools; and delivering staff development programmes to teachers and parenting courses to new parents of young families.

Two months after arriving I was planning, with Dr Zahra Al Zeera of the Arabian Gulf University, to set up of the first bilingual assessment and

young people do not involve youth workers. I train youth workers on the estate and I've been accused of giving skills away. I'm not – I'm trying to support young people and those that work with them.'

I tell Charlie that it seems as though she's running a project that has nothing overtly to do with psychology, but that is underpinned by psychological knowledge and techniques – hence the Trojan Horse comparison. This must be a challenge as a professional psychologist? 'Yes. For instance, a lot of my young people don't want written records kept. Some of them may be involved in illegal activities. It's crucial that you're helping and not colluding. I work alongside other agencies, but there's a delicate line if you're going to win the trust of the young people. These sorts of issues challenge you. And that's why Dr Peter Fuggle, my clinical supervisor, is such a critical figure. He's available to guide me and to help me to reflect. We're creating our own clinical, organisational and managerial systems from scratch.'

This unusual way of working must make the project difficult to evaluate. 'Yes, but evaluation is critical. Dr Chris Barker of UCL – who's also on our Board of

Trustees – is helping us to wrestle with this now. Given clients' suspicion of records and photos you can imagine it's not an easy task.'

### The future

What are your future plans? 'In the short term we're going to the studio to record tracks, and some of the girls are interested in dance so we'll make a dance DVD. It's very exciting. In the longer term, I'd like to spread the approach. Maybe in five to six years I'll be on the Board of Trustees and other people will be running specific projects. We're actively planning this with help from a business consultant. I need to get my idea out of my head and into the heads of others. And, of course, it's going to be fascinating to watch young people from this project move on to other projects as paid employees of MAC with a wide range of social, psychological, counselling and musical skills.'

Two obvious questions remained. Charlie is a young, white, middle-class girl from rural Gloucestershire with an accent to match. Is she really accepted? And given where she works, has she ever been in physical danger? 'I think I'm accepted because I took the time to go to

young people, learn and work with them rather than expect them to come to me. Obviously I have to be very aware of my environment at all times. I do take advice regarding personal safety. But this is where I want to be – it's my dream to be doing this work in the community.'

Before I left, Charlie asked if she could see a draft of this article since she's recently had 'a bad experience with a local journalist. The article talked about problems in a way which I thought clients might object to, though I'd specifically asked the journalist not to. As it happens the young people thought it was great, but you have to be very careful not to abuse trust.' This is good advice for any psychologist talking about sensitive projects where trust is a critical component in young person relationships.

Walking back to the tube, the estate looked slightly more welcoming thanks to Charlie's enthusiasm. And her reply to an e-mail next day only confirmed what the interview had displayed. 'I love talking about Music and Change to anyone who will listen' she wrote.

**I** To find out more about the project see [www.musicandchange.com](http://www.musicandchange.com)

specialist teaching centre for children with learning difficulties in Bahrain. The Bahrain Institute for Special Education (BISE) was born in a coffee shop, progressed to a villa and now occupies a brand-new purpose-built six-storey building. We now have specialist centres for autistic children, a brand-new school for children with moderate to severe learning difficulties and family centres focusing on child abuse.

Since Bahrain hosted an international conference on 'Inclusion' last year, some of the larger private schools have begun to develop their own specialist in-school resources to support pupils with learning difficulties. Some now employ counsellors to offer behaviour management programmes. One such prestigious, mainstream school has recently offered a place to a Down's syndrome child. This was unheard-of only a couple of years ago. Even local government schools are now

more aware of differences in pupils and have introduced their own Down's syndrome integration programme, though this is underresourced.

These children are no longer an object of shame to local families, and efforts are being made to cater for their education here in Bahrain, as opposed to sending them to care homes or to specialist provision abroad. Still, all children are not accepted in some private schools, as candidates as young as four years of age are required to sit an entrance test, and parents must attend an interview. Inclusion is by no means universally embraced.

Perhaps the most significant personal contribution I feel I have made to Bahrain's

progress in the educational arena is in my relationships with parents and young families from all nations. Parents call at all

hours for advice: they need to share their burden of a having a 'special' child and trying to cope in a new situation, country, culture and education system.

Local Arabic-speaking children experience

problems from bilingual and English-language teaching. Children from mixed race and cultural backgrounds often experience more difficulties than most in terms of adjustment to home and social issues.

It is extremely satisfying to see pupils whose problems

were originally totally misunderstood by their teachers and schools, progress well in a changing system that has come to appreciate the individual children and their varying needs. To witness attitudinal shifts over time and feel part of that ongoing process, is still exciting and challenging. I recently had the thrill of seeing my first pupils successfully through the educational system. They will do VSO overseas in their gap year before taking up places in colleges and universities in Europe and the States. It's also satisfying to see some of my counselling clients relaxed and happy with their lives at various social functions.

I plan to leave Bahrain, to retire to Europe next year, in the knowledge that special education can only continue to develop as awareness and expertise spreads amongst the local population.

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