A brief update on Daphne’s research leave

This is a brief update on my report from Scotland in March, written from our cosy apartment as the snow fell around us. That already feels a long time ago! We have experienced the warmth of Japan – in cherry blossom time (!) and are now well settled back in New Zealand. While it was fantastic to be away, it’s good to be home too and to be able to crack on with some more writing.

The International Symposium of Music Therapy for Adults with Learning Disabilities to be held at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh in March, but cancelled because of snow, has now been rescheduled for September. Unfortunately I won’t be able to pop on the plane to return to present my paper in person, and I’m not sure how I would go presenting late at night online, so I’ve been working on producing a recording of my presentation that can be played in absentia. I then hope to join the presenters panel live in the early hours of our morning, as they come to the end of their day.

Giorgos Tsiris and I have continued to work on our research exploring therapeutic songwriting with young adults living with a life-limiting illness, gathering data from interviews with the music therapist and the young people themselves. Together with music therapist Jo Edgar we have written a chapter for a book focusing on music therapy in children’s palliative care which is due to be published later this year (Edgar, Tsiris & Rickson, 2018). Giorgos is also going to present a paper on behalf of the team at the 2018 ISME commission seminar on Special Music Education and Music Therapy (Music across the lifespan: the role of special music education and music therapy) to be held in Salzburg, Austria, in July.

My team’s project investigating the relationship between participation in singing programmes and student well-being in a Christchurch primary school severely affected by earthquake, is now complete. The full report is online at http://www.tlri.org.nz/tlri-research/research-completed/school-sector/relationship-between-participation-singing-programmes, a journal article based on the work has been accepted for publication in the New Zealand Journal of Teachers’ work, and two others are in the review pipeline. After leaving the UK I travelled to Kumamoto in Japan to share our findings, and to learn about music therapists’ response to the earthquake they experienced in 2014. In addition to exploring the potential for research collaborations with Japanese colleagues, I was able to share and supervise the work of music therapists in Kumamoto. The picture is of me with my host and dear friend, Hiroko Kimura.

First I attended a graduation ceremony for students at Kurokami Elementary School. This was a wonderful occasion and I felt very privileged to witness it. It was
especially interesting to see Dr Takikawa from Kumamoto University working with the student's voices during warm-up rehearsals prior to the ceremony. I was impressed with the way he was encouraging the children to enjoy and appreciate each other and the singing. The quality of the singing was excellent and I was surprised to learn that the students were all graduates, not a particular choir that had resulted from an audition process. It was also interesting to learn that Dr Takikawa had only supported the choir for a few hours, and that the regular classroom teachers had worked to bring the singing to such a high standard. The ceremony itself was very beautiful to watch too. It was moving for me to watch the way in which the students moved across the stage and received their certificates from the Principal in a beautifully coordinated and graceful way while Pachelbel's Canon sounded in the background. It was like a choreographed dance. While everyone was clearly appreciative of the students' work, and showed their congratulations by clapping at the beginning and end of the ceremony, regular periods of stillness and silence added to a very peaceful atmosphere. It was lovely to be present.

I met Dr Takikawa again at the University, where we discussed the different approaches that New Zealand and Japanese educators took following the earthquakes in our respective countries. Specifically, schools in Christchurch were allowed time to respond to the specific needs of their communities in flexible ways, which could of course include the use of the arts to enhance wellbeing. In contrast, in Kumamoto in the months following the 2014 earthquake, school holidays were cancelled and arts programmes ‘axed’ to ensure that children could ‘catch up’ on their studies. Dr Takikawa was extremely interested in the potential for singing to support wellbeing in a post-disaster environment and is keen to develop further collaborations.

The Kumamoto earthquakes, on April 14 and 16, 2014, killed 211 and injured thousands more. Both quakes registered the highest on Japan’s intensity scale of 7 and hit a prefecture where people had scarcely experienced earthquakes before. In 2017 there were still 10,986 people living in 4,179 temporary dwellings, while another 31,247 live in commercial apartments and other housing that has been rented by municipalities and offered to quake victims for free, but temporary, use. I went with music therapists to some of the temporary housing – very reminiscent of a Christchurch container village – where we worked with mostly older people, as young members of the community were at work or school. We also worked with older people at the Musashi-Ohzu Total Support Centre on the premises of Musashigaoko Hospital. Musashi-Ohzu is a community wellness centre providing preventative and social support for earthquake survivors. Finally, we went to the Poluto Child Development Centre where I was able to join the music therapy sessions for preschool children. It was exciting and inspiring to see how these Japanese music therapy pioneers had established their work, how much we had in common, but also how aspects of the therapeutic process remained unique in response to contextual and cultural difference.
Back in New Zealand music therapists and children involved in Daphne's music therapy an autism project now have their programmes well established. I have been able to recruit an amazing team of expert evaluators to look at their case studies when they come in, and each of these very experienced researchers and teachers are very excited about the work. Having ten new case studies to analyse, to determine how helpful music therapy might be for children who have ASD, is a stimulating prospect. Everyone is looking forward to reading the stories about the work, seeing video and/or listening to audio clips from sessions, when the data comes in towards the end of the year.

Daphne Rickson, June 2018

References

