“FIRST OF ALL, BE FRIENDS”:
Rock music, social connection, inclusion and mobility in Kosovo and North Macedonia

An evaluation of Music Connects, a project using culture as a driver for social innovation in former Yugoslavia

Gillian Howell, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, Jane W. Davidson and Jill Pope

To Musicians Without Borders and their funders, Mitrovica Rock School, Roma Rock School, Music School Enterprise, and Fontys Rockacademie
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**SUGGESTED CITATION**


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**COVER PHOTO**

Ritual Wave performing in Skopje, August 2019
(Stefan Rajhl & Anton Lazareski)
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The research team who conducted this evaluation have expertise that spans music, peacebuilding and reconciliation, health and well-being, cultural development, arts-based research, and program evaluation. The team includes Research Fellow Dr Gillian Howell, Dean’s Research Fellow at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, and Project Co-Leaders Professor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, Director of the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (QCRC), Griffith University, and Professor Jane Davidson, Chair of the Creativity and Wellbeing Initiative at the University of Melbourne.

This research has been co-funded by Musicians Without Borders (via Creative Twinning, a funding program of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, implemented by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency RvO), Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre Griffith University and The University of Melbourne.
Music Connects aims to activate youth (ages 15-24) through state-of-the-art rock music education, production, and promotion programs in Kosovo and North Macedonia. Music Connects features a carefully developed approach that seeks to build sustainable social inclusion and participation opportunities with young musicians leading the way. This evaluation has examined the social difference that this program makes to participating youth and their communities. This evaluation has investigated the extent to which inclusion and connection among divided youth in Kosovo and North Macedonia have been achieved in the programs delivered in three rock schools. Specifically, it has considered the outcomes of Music Connects in relation to social connections, inclusion, changing of perspectives and mobility, and the practices, values, and strategies that facilitate these. This report identifies factors that influence the depth of bonds that may be created, and it foregrounds the voices and perspectives of the young musicians involved, who are the frontline beneficiaries of the program.
**Key findings**

1. The students in these rock schools recognise their shared musical interests and desire a connection with one another. The music engagements lead to inclusion and connections including socialising outside language groups and school cohorts, social media connections, and organising to meet up independently in mixed groups. The long-term work in the Mitrovica Rock School revealed the strongest inclusion and connections, though these were nonetheless expressed in the other two schools studied.

2. Connections between young people from the same city and between cities are manifested through the convergence and mutual interplay of four factors: unstructured social time for hanging out; the intensity of shared creative tasks; the sense of living together in a ‘bubble’ of safety that facilitates social experimentation; and values and norms of acceptance and openness.

3. While the data did not indicate a significant change in perspectives on interaction and cooperation with people from other ethno-linguistic or cultural backgrounds (because Music Connects attracts a cohort of people already open to inter-ethnic mixing and cooperation), there were promising indications that participants could play a role in encouraging their friends towards cooperative activities and reduced prejudice. The evaluation found that Music Connects functioned as an incubator in which alternative perspectives may grow; or where existing perspectives can be ‘lived’ as if they are the norm. These perspectives continue to have salience for the individuals after they leave the program. Additionally, many participants reported increased personal confidence and agency as a result of their Music Connects experiences.

4. There are many pathways to positive perspectives on connection and inclusion across ethno-linguistic divisions, and increased independent and confident mobility. Three practices in particular came to the fore as playing an important role in facilitating these outcomes: concerts and public-facing programs and outputs; a continuous commitment to expanding what is considered ‘normal’ in terms of inter-ethnic cooperation and mixing; and the fun and enjoyment that Music Connects participants report.

More broadly, the findings indicate that by approaching each other as likely friends, music-making becomes a rehearsal space for skills – such as negotiation, compromise, self-acceptance, and collaboration – that have immediate application beyond the ‘bubble’ of Music Connects. These skills are also peacebuilding competencies, which is an important acknowledgment given the ongoing policy imperatives (regionally and internationally) to create lasting peace and stability in the region.

At the same time, the music-making must be authentic as music. This evaluation has found that Music Connects’ effectiveness is in the program’s capacity to maintain this authenticity while also creating safe space for alternative social relationships and imaginaries to form. Consistently over time, Music Connects helps to normalise friendly, positive, cooperative encounters with others, making deeper friendships possible.

For these reasons, and when compared with other music programs in conflict-affected areas with similar social goals, we consider Music Connects an exemplary program that combines strong social benefits with cultural development. It is successful in connecting young people, building a culture of inclusion in its programs, and normalising the idea of cooperation across ethnic division. The program’s decision-making is grounded in local knowledge and is highly responsive to subtle changes in local dynamics. Most importantly, Music Connects is trusted, innovative and inspirational, with strong potential to be a model for similar programs in other sites of entrenched social division.
Summary of findings

Music Connects has supported youth in Kosovo and North Macedonia to build connections and ties, with some going on to form independent friendships.

Unstructured time to hang out plus shared creative tasks create a bubble of safety that incubates norms and perspectives of inclusion and connection across ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

Concerts and recordings bring new people to the program and spread its message of connection.

Incrementally and increasingly, connecting, cooperating, and collaborating across difference becomes a normal part of life for participants.

These values and norms remain even after people leave the program.

Summary of findings

Music Connects has supported youth in Kosovo and North Macedonia to build connections and ties, with some going on to form independent friendships.

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These values and norms remain even after people leave the program.
Commendations

Music Connects:

- **Is novel and innovative.** It is original and one of only a very small number (in the region) of settings where this kind of social education is made available and accessible to diverse participants (in terms of educational background). Students have valued the international and local links they have been able to engage in their musical activity that is, for most if not all, a strong passion.

- **Is authentic and high quality in the rock music training it offers.** The quality and knowledgeability of the teachers is recognised. The pedagogical approach gives students creative agency and responsibility, and the scaffolded, supportive way this happens, is also valued.

- **Is trusted by the young people.** The young participants do not approach it with the scepticism with which they may view other non-governmental organisation (NGO) activities. They engage in Music Connects because they believe in the mission and the commitment to the stated goals. Teachers and facilitators are trusted and admired. Some young people cite their tutors as among their most trusted adult relationships.

- **Is fun, and creates a distinctive sense of enjoyment, that is enhanced through friendships.** Unlike other NGO programs, participation in Music Connects engenders an intrinsic type of pleasure that enables young people to be their most relaxed, secure selves.

- **Has integrity in its overarching goals of regional music development** (creating infrastructure, skills, and supports) and its message (music is a cultural strength that we all share, and has long been a site for connection, rather than division).

Recommendations

1. Develop training and opportunities for Rock School graduates to stay connected through alumni programs.
2. Develop the brand to increase the quantity of schools and types of engagement that can be made available.
3. Aim for the ideology and connectivity it affords to bridge from the Rock School to other key institutions with which people engage post school education.
4. Explore potential for expanding the musical offering towards electronic dance music, or similar, in order to engage young people whose interests align more closely with mainstream culture, and who therefore might be less pre-disposed to inclusion, connection, and cooperation across ethnic boundary lines.
5. Increase participation of Roma musicians as students and teachers in Mitrovica (already flagged as a priority by MRS staff).
6. Increase opportunities for young musicians to collaborate between different schools.
7. Have all students participating in Summer School stay in the same accommodation for the week, in order to maximise inter-school as well as cross-community connections.
Part 1: Evaluation Context

In ethnically divided cities in Kosovo and Macedonia, two Dutch and three local cultural organisations have been working together in the Music Connects project to actively engage youth (ages 15–24) in bringing back a shared urban youth culture.

Who’s involved?
- Musicians Without Borders (international NGO)
- Fontys Rockacademie (Netherlands)
- Mitrovica Rock School (Kosovo)
- Music School Enterprise (North Macedonia)
- Roma Rock School (North Macedonia)

The Music Connects project brings educational innovation and specific training in band coaching, song writing and sound engineering. Their approach aims to activate youth and build sustainable alternatives for social inclusion and participation using state-of-the-art rock music education, production, and promotion, with young musicians leading the way. The partners have established a recording studio in Mitrovica and have been training sound engineers in Mitrovica and Skopje, with the aim of boosting the pop and rock music scenes in both Kosovo and North Macedonia, increasing cultural participation among youth, and lowering the barrier for young bands to enter the market.

The context in which Music Connects takes place is complex. Post-war and economic transitions (from socialist state to market economy), entrenched ethno-nationalist tensions, and the long-term presence of international aid actors sit alongside deeply rooted patterns of government corruption, organised crime and patronage networks. These ensure the majority of the population feels insufficiently positioned to influence the socio-political status quo. This section gives a brief introduction to each setting (Kosovo and...
North Macedonia), focusing on information that helps to contextualise the current inter-ethnic divisions. It considers the history of conflict; factors that enable or maintain division (such as schooling); and the status of the NGO / civil society organisation (CSO) sector and its capacity to support social change and transformation.

Divided youth in Kosovo

Whilst constitutionally Kosovo is a multi-ethnic state, with provisions for minority communities enshrined in law (Youth Initiative for Human Rights Kosovo, 2020; Republic of Kosovo, 2008), recent research shows that inter-ethnic divisions, particularly between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, remain entrenched at the political level and also shape the everyday practices of Kosovars from both of the major ethnic groups (Teokarević et al., 2015; United Nations Development Programme and Folke Bernadette Association, 2019; Maloku et al., 2017; Ramet et al., 2015). These divisions are a legacy from the bloody territorial conflict in Kosovo during the 1990s following the collapse of Yugoslavia.

Inter-ethnic tensions are particularly marked in the city of Mitrovica/Mitrovica (Mitrovica) located in Northern Kosovo near the Serbian border. The city is divided into North and South, split geographically by the Ibar River and effectively run as parallel administrative systems – Serbian in Mitrovica North and (predominantly Albanian) Kosovar in the South (Pavlović, 2015; Gusic, 2020). These divisions are a legacy from the bloody territorial conflict in Kosovo during the 1990s following the collapse of Yugoslavia.

The parallel systems operational in Mitrovica shape everyday life and reinforce divisions (Gusic, 2020; Janjić, 2015). In Mitrovica North, the Serbian government funds a range of essential services including healthcare, education and utilities, effectively paying many of the working population’s wages and pensions. The Euro is the official currency of Kosovo and used in Mitrovica South, but Mitrovica North uses the Serbian Dinar as currency. Country phone codes and licence plates are different (Pavlović, 2015). Movement between sides happens, but does not take place freely; rather, there is constant awareness and vigilance, and strategies adopted to avoid bringing attention to oneself. The perceived risks associated with moving between the sides include the risk of violence from the ‘other’ community, but ostracization and exclusion from systems of employment patronage and other alliances in your own community are also risk factors (Gusic, 2020).

Parallel systems of education exist across all schooling levels, and Serbian-Albanian bilingualism is rare among the post-war generations, making potential mixing and diversity across the different ethnic groups unlikely. Division may be further reinforced through the teaching of biased content in relation to the conflict. With Belgrade funding the Serbian language institutions, many end up not covered by existing legislation governing the recognition of qualifications (European Centre for Minority Issues Kosovo, 2018b).

Some scholars point out that Mitrovica does contain spaces where contact between ethnic groups occurs, where citizens undertake acts of ‘everyday peace’ across ethnic lines (Pavlović, 2015; Jarstad & Segall, 2019). One of these is the Bosnian neighbourhood (Bošnjačka

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1 Here ‘everyday peace’ refers to a variety of peace that tends to prevail in settings where there is entrenched division and where local people have limited capacity to change the political status quo. Everyday Peace describes a set of mutually-agreed, reciprocal social practices that people adopt in order to get through everyday life without conflict in a politically-tense environment. These practices include avoiding contentious topics, systems of manners, and deferring blame for the continuation of the conflict to outsiders or outliers (Mac Ginty, 2014). The idea of music programs outside mainstream education as sites of everyday peace was explored further in Howell (2021).
Mahala, a shopping and residential precinct that is known for having low prices and higher tolerance for ethnic diversity and mixing. As a neighbourhood where many Bosnians live and trade, it is considered to be less affiliated with a particular side in the Kosovan conflict. These spaces enable the maintenance of everyday practices in Mitrovica that challenge the entrenched divisions of the city (Pavlović, 2015).

Given the political stalemate, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) play a central role in promoting and facilitating constructive inter-ethnic relations and peacebuilding. The NGO sector in Kosovo is large, with over 7000 organisations being established since 1999 (Visoka, 2017, p. 148). The involvement of young people in the sector is minimal; recent studies have shown that youth have low levels of interest in volunteering and harbour scepticism towards civil society organisations (Rrumbullaku, 2019). There are widespread perceptions that NGO staff are susceptible to corruption and interested more in money than the values of the programs they facilitate (Borch, 2017; Sampson, 2002). This scepticism, along with the fear of community repercussions, is a factor in whether citizens participate in NGO activities designed to promote inter-ethnic relations.

Ultimately, while moments of interaction clearly exist in certain contexts, NGO reports and academic research indicate that until the ongoing conflicts over mutual (non) recognition and legitimacy at the state level are resolved, it is difficult to imagine inter-ethnic relations improving in any substantive way (Gusic, 2020; United Nations Development Programme and Folke Bernadette Association, 2019).

Divided youth in North Macedonia

North Macedonia’s population is highly diverse. It is sometimes depicted as a ‘cultural mosaic’, a metaphor for the patchwork distribution of different ethnic minorities around the territory (Pajaziti et al., 2017). Albanians are by far the largest minority community (in the 2002 census they comprised a quarter of the population) (Demjaha, 2017; Rossos, 2013). Other minority groups include Turks, Serbians, Vlachs, and Roma. Inter-ethnic relations have thus been an enduring influence on the country’s political and cultural landscape (Mattioli, 2014; Demjaha, 2017; Piacentini, 2019), and there is low trust in the government due to endemic corruption and history of state capture (Zivetz, 2019).

Ten years after independence (2001), ethnic conflict between Albanians and Macedonians in the North-West of the country erupted, and international organisations stepped in to broker the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). The OFA established constitutional reforms addressing minority rights and representation (Rossos, 2013). Nineteen years on from the OFA, sizeable divisions still exist in North Macedonian society, particularly between Macedonian and Albanian populations, as well as other minority groups including Roma (Demjaha, 2017; Kimov et al., 2019; Spitálszky, 2018; Topuzovska Latkovic et al., 2019). However, such divisions are often ambiguous, and more subtle than in a divided city like Mitrovica. Segregation is maintained through custom and small daily practices and choices, making it a nebulous target difficult to identify and address (Bloodworth, 2020). Among more educated classes, integration and interethnic friendships may be more common; however, upon closer examination, most reported examples are revealed as exceptional, rather than the norm (Bloodworth, 2020).
A contributing factor to the intransigence of inter-ethnic divisions was the period between 2006-2016, where the Republic of Macedonia was governed by the right-wing, ultra-nationalist Macedonian coalition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary – Democratic Party for National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) (Crowther, 2017). The division and marginalisation resulting from the ethno-nationalist politics of this period are still being felt (Crowther, 2017; Gjuzelov & Hadjievska, 2020). Ultimately, mass civilian protests (what is referred to as the ‘Colourful Revolution’) enabled a new, more moderate government— the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)—to take power in 2017 (Gjuzelov & Hadjievska, 2020; Ceka 2018; Draško et al., 2020). The SDSM government has delivered progress on a number of key political and international relations issues, including resolution of the long-standing name dispute with Greece, joining NATO, and formally opening accession with the European Union (European Commission, 2020).

As in other parts of former Yugoslavia, parallel systems of service provision and governance ensure ethnic segregation persists in terms of language, education and geography (Crowther, 2017). Language policy allows schools to teach in the majority language (Macedonian, Albanian, or Romani) of its population, but while some minorities choose to complete their education in Macedonian (thus becoming bilingual), most Macedonians (the majority group) do not speak or study Albanian or another minority language (Bloodworth, 2020). Relatedly, there is a sizeable proportion of the minority population that does not speak or read/write Macedonian sufficiently fluently for professional interactions. North Macedonian youth identify language as one of the major barriers to developing relationships with other ethnicities (Pajaziti et al., 2017).

Recent surveys and reports document widespread discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and political affiliation, between Macedonian and Albanian populations but also increased marginalisation for Roma communities, who struggle to access quality education, housing and economic opportunities (Kimov et al., 2019; Spitálszky, 2018). Roma people experience many forms of social exclusion including limited economic and employment opportunities and sub-standard housing conditions (Spitálszky, 2018). They are often victims of racism, segregation and discrimination by both Macedonian and Albanian populations, and Roma children are especially at risk (Kimov et al., 2019; European Commission, 2020). Roma youth experience compounded forms of marginalisation within the North Macedonian education system as well (Bozinovski, 2020; Spitálszky, 2018). Roma children are segregated into separate schools or classes, and even sometimes within classes (for example being made to sit in the back row) and there is a reported shortfall of Romani language teachers (Ananiev, 2019; United States Department of State, 2019; Spitálszky, 2018).

Segregated education, language barriers, minimal civic engagement, combined with their distrust of political institutions and disenchantment with prospect of future change, mean scant opportunities or motivations for mixing with inter-ethnic groups amongst North Macedonian youth (Topuzovska Latkovic et al., 2019; Bozinovski, 2020; Zivetz, 2019). Unsurprisingly then, an overwhelming majority of young people (85%) tend to socialise only within their own ethnic group (Zivetz, 2019, pp. 44–45). Inter-ethnic relations are hampered by segregated education system, language barriers and geographic separation, with little to no serious institutional support for extra-curricular mixing (Crowther, 2017).

International organisations have had a continuous presence in North Macedonia from the early days of post-socialist transition, but particularly since 2001, when they assisted in diffusing the ethnic conflict and have since played a major role supervising the implementation of the OFA (Ceka, 2018). The NGO and civil society sector were greatly undermined during the period of VMRO-DPMNE’s governance; those perceived to be antithetic to the ethno-nationalist agenda of the government were attacked and discredited (Gjuzelov & Hadjievska, 2020; Crowther, 2017). The depleted state of this sector might explain why youth in North Macedonia express low levels of interest in participating in civil society and/or volunteering, with this tendency being even more pronounced amongst Roma youth (Flere et al., 2015; Topuzovska Latkovic et al., 2019; Bozinovski, 2020), even though their trust in international organisations (e.g., EU and NATO) and support for EU accession was relatively high (Flere et al., 2015). North Macedonian youth do not feel that they are represented in politics or that they are a priority for politicians, and Roma youth feel particularly marginalised from political system and decisions (Zivetz, 2019, p. 35).
Aims in Context

The evaluation has sought to understand the work of Music Connects in a wider context in which political actions and ethnicised institutions have entrenched ethnic divisions, creating social landscapes where most young people’s friendships are within their own ethnic group. While in Kosovo divisions are spatial and institutionalised, in North Macedonia the situation is far more nebulous and difficult to generalise. In both settings, participation in NGO-led activities that seek to build connections and cohesion between ethnic groups is an indicator of (likely) more diverse friendship groups. But in both settings, there is also a pervasive doubt that such efforts could lead to any material change in the socio-political lived experience without an accompanying shift in political will at the state level. This leads to scepticism about the value of playing a more active civic role.

Music Connects builds on ten years of learning and incremental change in the Mitrovica Rock School and transfers this knowledge to two other schools—one well-established, one a relative newcomer—in North Macedonia. Bringing students, practices, and external specialists together across several strands of collaborative activity, it seeks to strengthen connections (in the form of ties and friendships of varying durability and intensity) between young people, establish norms of inclusion and diversity within the schools and bands, and revitalise the rock music scene and the infrastructure that supports it in the southern Balkans region.

With this overarching aim, the evaluation was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent, and in which ways, does Music Connects contribute towards inclusion and connection among divided youth in Kosovo and North Macedonia?
2. How are these connections manifested?
3. To what extent do participants in the three music schools demonstrate changed perspectives on members of the other community? In Mitrovica, to what extent do friends and parents of Music Connects participants demonstrate similarly changed perspectives towards the other community?
4. Are there particular activities or pathways that are strongly associated with more positive perspectives and increased mobility among the participants?
Part 2: Rocks Schools, Participants, and Activities

The evaluation team was able to observe, enquire and explore work with three schools: Mitrovica Rock School in Kosovo, the Roma Rock School in North Macedonia and Music School Enterprise in North Macedonia.

Figure 2 (Right) – Map indicating the location of the three rock schools
The Schools

Mitrovica Rock School [MRS]
This sits at the heart of Music Connects, operating a daily program of activities out of branches on both sides of divided Mitrovica. This school has been running for over a decade, drawing young people into mixed bands that rehearse, write songs, record and perform in Mitrovica and Skopje. Mixed bands first performed in Mitrovica during Music Connects (October 2018); before this time, it was not considered safe. Prior to the commencement of Music Connects, concerts in Kosovo were held mostly in Pristina and Gracanica. When it first began, ethnically mixed activities could only take place safely in neighbouring North Macedonia, and so the annual Skopje Summer School began, becoming a central feature of the annual MRS program. Music Connects draws on the lessons learned within the MRS’s first decade to inform practices at the other two rock schools and to boost the impact of the work.

Within Music Connects, the MRS aims to expand its programs for mixed bands and mixed workshops, as well as to establish a recording studio in its premises, in order to further boost cooperation between ethnically Albanian and Serb youth and invest in the city’s cultural infrastructure.

Roma Rock School [RRS]
This began in 2017 with a 6-piece band. It draws its students from the municipality of Šuto Orizari, notable as North Macedonia’s only Roma-majority municipality (Roma people are 80% of the population), and the only local government area with Romani as an official language. In 2020 it opened a branch in the town of Kriva Palanka, 100km from Skopje near the Bulgarian-North Macedonian border. The Roma people remain the most marginalised group in the region and face discriminatory behaviours and attitudes in many aspects of daily life. Roma Rock School’s goals include creating opportunities for its students to work outside Šuto Orizari and to connect with young musicians outside their own community. They also engage Roma students in structured music learning, including solfège and music theory, thus equipping them with the knowledge they need to enrol in formal music institutions at high school and university level, should they wish.

RRS is a relatively young enterprise, and in Music Connects the goal is to increase its non-Roma participation to 25% of enrolments, while also continuing to expand the options for Roma students to connect with musicians from different schools and social groups, including non-Roma youth.

Music School Enterprise [MSE]
This is a prestigious, fee-paying school where some of Macedonia’s best rock musicians provide tuition to mainly Macedonian youth. It offers instrumental lessons and opportunities for students to play in casual informal bands in weekend ‘jam sessions’. At the time that Music Connects began, the curriculum was focused on cover songs. It has since begun to include song-writing and band coaching pedagogies.

Music Connects has created scholarships for indigent youth, with the goal of seeing MSE increase the number of Albanian students enrolled in the school. Across a projected enrolment of 120 students, the MSE Music Connects goal is to have 70-75 Macedonian, 30-40 Albanian, 10 others.

As this brief overview of the three schools in the Music Connects program highlights, each is at a different stage of integrating their activities to include all ethnic groups, and they therefore have different goals. From an evaluation perspective, this has made it challenging to generalise across the three schools, and as such, the results of the evaluation are presented separately for each school. While the same research questions applied to each of the three schools, it is useful to note at the outset the differences between the three schools, their contexts, and their engagement with the social goals of Music Connects.
The interviewees

Across two periods of fieldwork (in person in Skopje and Mitrovica, August 2019, and online, April 2021) interviews were conducted with the following people:

- From MRS North: 7 current students, 3 former students, and 1 staff
- From MRS South: 3 current students, 5 former students, 1 parent and 2 staff
- From MSE: 12 current students, and 2 staff
- From RRS: 4 current students and 1 staff

Of these, 3 MRS students, 2 MRS staff, 4 MSE students, 1 MSE staff and 1 RRS staff were interviewed twice (in 2019 and 2021). The remainder were interviewed once only, in either 2019 or 2021. Originally, the evaluation team had planned to conduct both periods of fieldwork in-person. However, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the second stage had to take place online.

These interviews and focus groups amounted to 20 hours of audio, which was then transcribed in full and coded inductively using NVivo 12 software. The first fieldwork trip also yielded observational data and informal conversations that were recorded in Howell’s fieldwork journal. These data were also coded inductively.

Ethical considerations

The study received full clearance from Griffith University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref. 2019/030). Informed consent was obtained via a two-step protocol. First, participant information sheets were shared with students and their parents from the three schools prior to Summer School 2019. Griffith University’s ethical clearance allowed young people aged 18 and over to be primary consenting agents, while parental consent was required for those under 18. Then, the research was explained at the outset of all interviews and focus groups, ensuring that participants understood the context and scope of questioning before it began. Research participants were free to choose whether they wished to take part in an interview or not and understood that they could withdraw their participation at any time. The fieldwork researcher endeavoured to include roughly equal representation of different ethno-linguistic backgrounds in the interviews and focus groups. In addition, Mitrovica Rock School staff facilitated the researcher’s contact with former MRS students and one parent of a current MRS student. All student quotations have been anonymised and attributed only with the school affiliation, role, and status (current or former) of the informant, and the year in which the quotation was collected (2019 or 2021).

Music Connects Activities and impact of COVID-19 pandemic

Music Connects had many strands of planned activities for all three schools, including the Skopje Summer School (taking place in August each year and involving local staff and Fontys Rockacademie staff and students), International Training Weeks (a week of intensive activities every second month that alternate sites between Kosovo and North Macedonia involving local staff and Fontys Rockacademie staff and students), weekly workshops focused on particular instrumental and vocal skills in each school, capacity-building and teacher professional development workshops, sound engineer training courses, band recording sessions, photo shoots, and music videos. These were in addition to the individual and group instrumental and vocal lessons, band coaching sessions for each band, and concerts (usually incorporated within Activity Weeks and Skopje Summer School).

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought all face-to-face activities to a halt in March 2020. Kosovo
and North Mitrovica then experienced successive
periods of lockdown and partial re-openings. Strict
social distancing measures and the closure of services
deemed non-essential (including schools) have been
maintained with some variations in intensity since that
time. The restrictions have included increased policing
of the bridge crossing points between North and South
Mitrovica, at times making movement between the two
sides impossible in that city.

This placed significant constraints on the continuation
of the Music Connects activities as they had been planned.
Summer School in August 2020 was cancelled. Alternative
dates were proposed for April 2021 but the continued
restrictions on gathering and rates of infection saw this
cancelled as well. Teaching activities moved online, but
band rehearsals proved challenging (if not impossible) in
the online space due to time lag and the sophisticated
equipment and knowledge required to work around
this. There was also considerable inequity in access to
instruments and equipment that the three schools and
MWB worked hard to address, providing instruments for
students to use at home, and internet access and devices
for those that needed them.

Innovations during the pandemic included: workshops
and training sessions led by Fontys Rockacademie staff
and students; group assignments coached by local staff;
a music video project in which students from all three
schools contributed individual videos of their part; studio
concerts by solo artists and duos filmed in the Mitrovica
Rock School studio and shared online (these included
local professional artists not necessarily affiliated with
MRS); installation and opening of the MRS Recording
Studio; and an impressive 2-hour online concert to mark
the official end of the Music Connects project in its first
iteration. The completion of the MRS Recording Studio
project is a notable achievement (not least because there
were many challenges with the acquisition of equipment
that took time to resolve), as this is a significant addition
to the infrastructure supporting rock music in the region
and will be used by non-MRS musicians as well as those
affiliated with the school.

Overall, however, those interviewed in 2021 gave the
greatest emphasis to their pre-pandemic experiences,
and thus, much of what follows refers to activities that
took place before March 2020.
Part 3: Findings

Inclusion and connection in Music Connects

This section seeks to answer Research Question 1:

To what extent, and in which ways, does Music Connects contribute towards inclusion and connection among divided youth in Kosovo and Northern Macedonia?

In order to evaluate the experiences of connection and inclusion in Music Connects using relevant indicators, Howell took inspiration from the Everyday Peace Indicators methodology (Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2017). Prior to the fieldwork, Howell asked the MRS co-directors to share their thoughts about the kinds of shifts and changes in interpersonal behaviours and attitudes that can take place over time for MRS students. Their responses led to the development of the following framework of deepening levels of connection across ethnic divisions, beyond the initial, entry-level, facilitated meeting:

Level 1: Establishing cross-community social media connections and friendships. Liking, commenting on, and sharing each other’s social media posts. This is one of the ways through which they realise how much they have in common (e.g., humour, interests).

Level 2: Socialising outside language groups (e.g., within the branches, or hanging out after rehearsals, classes, etc.) or outside school groups (in the case of MSE and RRS). Sharing more personal stories or experiences within bands, inviting other’s advice or perspectives.

Level 3: Organising to meet up independently of a scheduled activity; also organising new mixed bands independently. Having more unrestrained disagreements and debates within the mixed bands. Developing a crush on someone from the other side.
Level 4: Development of more personal, close, or entwined relationships, e.g., sleeping over at a friend’s house on ‘the other side’, meeting each other’s friends.

Level 5: Maintaining closeness (e.g., regular contact, personal information) after leaving the school.

In answering the research question, we have used this framework as the main analytical tool for all three schools, as it is specific to the project goals and is nuanced in its recognition of the small and sometimes fleeting ways in which young musicians’ social relationships may be observed to deepen.

Mitrovica Rock School

The MRS students are part of what is now a 13-year project. They know its history and recognise themselves as part of a longer trajectory. For them, the key difference in the Music Connects experience is the participation of students from two other schools, RRS and MSE.

A characteristic of the Skopje Summer School is the immediate adoption of ‘Level 2’ experiences of interaction, inclusion, and connection. This applies for new MRS students participating in their first Summer School as well as the ‘old hands’ students who have several Summer School experiences under their belts.

Who have I met that I hadn’t met before? Well, a lot of people from South Branch and some people from Enterprise and Roma Rock School because we’re basically living together for seven days. So, we just have all been hanging out in front of the hotel, during lunch, dinner and breakfast, whatever. So, basically everyone. (New MRS North student, 2019)

The experience of inclusion can often go against what the individuals may expect. One former student (MRS South focus group), described how

If I was hanging out alone near the hotel, [other students] invited me [to join them] and . . . I was the only Albanian . . . they didn’t care that much if I was Albanian. They just invited me and hanged out with me, maybe even more than Albanians did. (MRS South former student, 2019)

These kinds of Level 2 and 3 invitations are impromptu (e.g., to join a group going to a nearby café or shopping precinct, or to jam together in the hotel basement), and part of the culture of the Skopje week.

“if I was hanging out alone near the hotel, [other students] invited me [to join them] and . . . I was the only Albanian . . . they didn’t care that much if I was Albanian. They just invited me and hanged out with me, maybe even more than Albanians did.”

One former student recalled how, on learning the names of her band members before meeting them for the first time in Skopje, she looked at their Facebook profiles, checking out their music interests and building up her positive anticipation of these new connections. Social media has enabled Level 1 connections to begin even before the first in-person meeting of a new band (MRS North former student, 2019).

Level 3 connections were often associated with the post-Summer School period. One MRS South student who had been part of the school for many years, described the way that the intensity of the Skopje Summer School week enabled young people to take more risks with maintaining the friendship in Mitrovica, defying the mainstream rules about not meeting. Level 3 interactions (of independent organising of group socialising) became possible because the young people wanted to be able to continue the trajectory of these new social lives.

In the after-party [at the end of the Skopje week] everyone is always like, “Oh, I’m going to miss you. We’re going to call each other, we are going to text each other” And we do. We got friends in Facebook and stuff and we have some occasion that we met also. In Bošnjačka Mahala [the Bosnian Neighbourhood – see Introduction]. It’s a shopping mall and stuff and they have like a little restaurant and we meet there and we talk about our time in Skopje and stuff. (MRS South student, 2019).
As if aware that this might not sound like that big a deal to an outsider, this informant emphasised, “The point [is] that all our life is changed. Because in Mitrovica you cannot do anything. It’s a small town. There are no cultural events. You cannot go anywhere to watch a movie or watch a theatre show or anything like that.”

In other words, while to an external observer the extent to which Music Connects contributes to inclusion and connection might not seem particularly radical, for young people from Mitrovica, it is life-changing. Milizza (co-Director of MRS) agreed. She pointed out that socialising at what the schema categorises as ‘Level 3’ intensity is not an automatic or assumed progression; it is significant when it happens. She recalled one group of MRS friends—“two of them were Serb, one Albanian”—who felt comfortable declaring their friendship more publicly.

We just saw on Facebook. They were in [the] North. And they were just having beers and they just posted a picture on Facebook and they tagged the place, that they are in North. It happens sometimes. Not really everyone will do that. But all of them, they were in the school for years and they were really friends with each other. (Milizza, MRS co-Director, 2019)

Level 3 connections could also be music collaborations. In 2021, while both Kosovo and North Macedonia were living under restrictions for in-person gatherings, a musician from MRS South and a singer from MSE created a series of online music duets. These were pre-recorded cover songs that were shared on social media and are an example of independent connection and organising between students from two different schools as well as from two different language communities.

“Before I didn’t have the kind of friendship that I can go in the North with Serbian friends. So this is really nice.”

Some students are clearly eager and open to make these connections, and that personal stance sees them move to the third level of connection quite quickly. One new MRS South student described how Mitrovica Rock School had given him a new opportunity to spend “a lot of time with new friends”, building trust and closeness in a relatively short space of time. He talked about time spent “hanging out with girls [from the North] in the centre of town” in Skopje (examples of Level 2 and 3). Furthermore, he described the plans this group had made to meet up in Mitrovica, where the girls would take him to the North (Level 3).

They are going to come and [meet me at] the bridge... and then we’re going to go to a coffee, have a conversation, share ideas . . . Yeah, we’ve made a plan to do that. Before I didn’t have the kind of friendship where I can go in the North with Serbian friends. So this is really nice. (MRS South student, 2019)

In the Mitrovica context, examples of Level 4 and Level 5 connections have happened (which is how they come to be identified and included in the schema) but they are more infrequent, given the many attitudes and norms in the wider environment that can inhibit or prohibit these from evolving. Interviews with former MRS students (i.e., those who have now left the school) revealed that it is challenging to sustain the close ties that form during a young person’s time in Rock School once people have left the school. While the friendliness remains, actual friendships (characterised by mutual efforts to remain connected to each other’s lives) are less likely, due to environmental realities in which places of work, study, and social life remain divided.

Making friends isn’t that hard, but keeping the friendship alive is much harder. Because most of the time these people were always great to me and we were always cool, and I enjoyed their company. But it [happens only] from Skopje to Skopje, and from rehearsal to rehearsal. (MRS North former student, 2019)

Another former student explained the patterns of post-school contact: “It’s not like we are sending messages or [asking] how are you, what are you doing and where are
you now? But we do see each other, say “hello”, speak a little bit and that’s all” (MRS North former student, 2019). Other former students stated that the bonds formed within their band had not necessarily been that close, so that when the bands broke up, or band members left the school to go to university out of town, the connection would naturally come to an end (MRS South former students, 2019).

Regardless of the reason, all of those interviewed felt there was still tremendous value in having made connections in the first place. “At least you have new friends,” one pointed out. “If nothing else happens, you have new friends” (MRS North former student, 2019). In a context where such friendships can be almost impossible to forge, the existence of ‘new friends’ is significant, even if the opportunities to nurture and maintain the friendship are limited and the wider political environment and reality of divided daily lives offer scant opportunities to cross paths. Furthermore, all former students interviewed expressed openness to seeking out and investing in similar inter-ethnic relationships in the future (MRS North and South former students, 2019). For those interviewed, the Rock School experience lights a flame that keeps the possibility of future inter-ethnic connections, cooperation and friendship open.

**Roma Rock School**

RRS students speak about Music Connects with optimism and positivity. One student described his experience as “awesome”. Asked to elaborate on this, he explained it in terms of friendships across and through music: “It is awesome because you have a band to make songs with, to meet the people that you didn’t know about that existed and those people are awesome and very nice to talk about music and be together with” (RRS student, 2021).

Those interviewed in 2019 were attending their second Summer School and had also been part of an Activity Week and concert in Mitrovica earlier in 2019 at the time of their interviews. Of those interviewed in 2021, one had attended his first Summer School in 2019, while the other had only joined the school in 2020, during the global pandemic. Across these different experiences, a theme of the importance of building new connections through new learning and new geographies came strongly to the fore. Those with experience of both the 2018 and 2019 Summer Schools emphasised the friendships they’d made. One recalled “we had the opportunity to spend time together and be together, so [when I think back on that experience] mostly I remember the spending time together and the friendship.” Another considered his Summer School highlight to have been “the opportunity to spend time together, to joke around and hang out. For everyone who was here [in 2018] also, I got to know them. There are new ones, but the ones from last year, I know them” (RRS students, 2019).

Those interviewed in 2021 also highlighted the friendships made within their own school. For example, one had joined the Kriva Palanka branch of the school (opened in 2020 in a town 100 km from Skopje, close to the Bulgarian border). For him, joining during the time of the pandemic and its associated lockdowns and restrictions made the opportunities the RRS experience gave him to connect with other musicians additionally significant. His band included musicians from both Skopje and Kriva Palanka, and he travelled to Skopje “four or five times” to rehearse, record with his band and make a video for the April 2021 Online Concert.

We arrived I think it was like 12pm or 11am, and we were filming the whole trip and everything. It was awesome. And when we went there, the first group that were before us, they were playing and we listened to their songs. They were awesome. And then we go and we practice a little bit, and then we started filming. It was very awesome ... and we were hanging around there a bit and we went home. (RRS student, 2021)

Observational data from the August 2019 fieldwork suggested that shyness and language barriers were factors that reduced the possibility of connections moving beyond casual, opportunistic contact; interviews with other RRS students in 2021 confirmed that shyness was a significant inhibiting factor, particularly in the days prior to the excursion day, which functioned as an important ice-breaker. As one explained, “I was very shy
at the beginning [at 2019 Summer School]. But then I learn, and I met other people and I loved that pretty much, because I am meeting new people and it’s a really good [experience] for me” (RRS student, 2021).

However, another possible barrier goes right to the heart of the social challenges that Music Connects aims to address: negative perceptions of another group based on wider entrenched prejudices and generalisations. In 2019 some of the students from other schools engaged with a discourse of ‘difference’ when talking about the RRS. For example: ‘They have a different music taste and you know, they play different styles. We are different—like I mean in music, we are different. We play rock music, they mix their folk music with rock and some stuff” (MRS and MSE students, 2019).

You have a band to make songs with, to meet the people that you didn’t know about that existed and those people are awesome and very nice to talk about music and be together with

This limiting discourse was considerably less prevalent in the 2021 interviews. One MRS interviewee smiled broadly when he talked about the connection he had made with “the students from Roma”:

Of course, we are all friends on Facebook or Instagram or something, because they are very cool guys. We [naming himself and another MRS South friend] like them very much. We comment and we ‘like’ their pictures all the time. (MRS South student, 2021).

Facebook connections have long been an important mechanism for people in mixed bands to remain connected. This evaluation also found that it was an important platform through which shyer people could establish and maintain connections when face-to-face connections were not possible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has emerged as an essential tool for maintaining connections and building rapport, as the comment above about ‘liking’ and ‘commenting’ on RRS students’ posts indicates.²

This initial emphasis among some students on ‘difference’ notwithstanding, the data also suggested that the RRS students’ musicianship and the originality of the RRS sound generated much admiration and curiosity among the young musicians from other schools in 2019. It was creating an entry point for the students to get to know each other, first through the music, and then through conversations with the potential to move naturally towards other shared topics of interest.

Overall, Roma Rock School students experienced both Level 1 and Level 2 connections across schools, and within the two branches of their own school. While the more autonomous and independently-planned connections characteristic of Level 3 did not appear in the data of this evaluation, the indications were that these might have happened had the Music Connects program been able to roll out as planned, rather than having to move online. The outcomes of Level 1 and 2 connections for RRS should therefore be seen as appropriate outcomes in what are still early days in the collaborative relationship between the three schools.

Music School Enterprise

As with RRS, Music School Enterprise (MSE) students began to take part in Music Connects activities in the 2018 Summer School. For the 2019 Summer School, three new MSE bands took part, each having been convened specifically for the Summer School and each included band members from different ethno-linguistic communities. Two of those three bands continued to work together through the remainder of the Music Connects timeframe. In addition, a singer from MSE became the vocalist in an MRS band, travelling to Mitrovica to rehearse with them in 2018-2019 and recording an album with them.

A key difference in the MSE student experience in 2019 was that while they took part in all the scheduled activities in the Summer School, they did not stay in the hotel with the RRS and MRS students. They also did their recordings in the MSE recording studio, while the other bands used the RRS recording studio. The MSE bands ate lunch in the hotel each day and travelled on the bus to and from the Summer School premises in Suto Orizari. This amounted to a lesser immersion in the social world of Music Connects than that experienced by students from other schools.

² Even outside of pandemic times, social media has been an important platform for the maintenance of Level 1 connections among MRS students.
Perhaps because of this, the MSE students interviewed in Skopje in 2019 expressed a degree of ambivalence about the social goals of the project. One band member stated, “I wouldn’t say [connecting with others is] a priority [for us] . . . it’s not a bad thing, it’s not a good thing, it’s like, whatever” (MSE band focus group, 2019). This was at least in part because they felt that inter-ethnic tensions had not been a particular problem in their musical and social lives in Skopje thus far (a sentiment expressed in other MSE interviews as well). Further into the same interview, however, a more nuanced assessment emerged:

About this project I think the best thing is that we connect with people. At the moment, we are new here, right, so it’s not easy to immediately start conversation or to come in with them. [But] maybe next year we’ll be closer with that. (MSE band focus group, 2019)

Interviewed again in 2021, members of the same band gave the social goals equal importance to the musical goals and outcomes. One said, "I think it worked [as a way to connect people]. Because we still talk with some of those from who we met in the Summer School two years ago. Some members of the band, we are friends on Instagram and Facebook. I think it worked pretty well.” Thus, while it may have been musical goals that drew them to Music Connects in the first place, the social possibilities came to the fore over time.

While all of those interviewed in 2021 stated that they preferred staying in their own homes to staying in the hotel (it was "more comfortable", they agreed), they also agreed that not staying in the hotel had limited their social experience. One group thought there should be more scheduled meetings, suggesting for example, "We should just organise someplace that we could meet after they [the other students in the hotel] eat. After that at 8, for example, everybody, every band, lets meet at the park for example. So everybody will go there and we can talk." This suggests that there was interest in building stronger connections but that barriers related to time, place, and personal inhibitions were in place for the MSE students in 2019.

Another MSE musician felt that it was the combination of shyness, personal motivations, and a limited timeframe that limited the forming of connections.

It’s a bit controversial, but we can’t connect in a week . . . It’s not going to be rainbows all the time, but it’s pretty good. There are some people that like to connect, there are some people that just want to play and that’s okay. (MSE musician, 2019)

Individual personalities were also a factor in inhibiting connections, with the situation favouring more outgoing personality types. A focus group with members from two MSE bands in 2019 said that they had “met a lot of people from other music schools, and they’re all really nice.” However, they also admitted they felt reluctant to initiate conversations with new people, so during meals and other less structured activities they "didn’t move around [and] just stuck with our friends” (MSE bands focus group, 2019).

In follow-up interviews in 2021, one MSE musician pointed out that for her, just getting to know other MSE musicians had been an important social outcome. “I was fairly new to Enterprise then and I didn’t know many students . . . I made friends with a lot of students from Enterprise [during Summer School]” (MSE student, 2021).
Having repeated opportunities to connect helps to mitigate these constraints. Performing at the Krim Club, Mitrovica, in December 2019 allowed one MSE band to reinvigorate connections with MRS and RRS musicians that had been started during the Summer School (“we didn’t recognise them because it was dark, but they remembered us because we’d played”). Their experience underlines the importance of repeated—rather than one-off—opportunities to connect if these kinds of social-musical goals are to be met (MSE band, 2021).

It’s not going to be rainbows all the time, but it’s pretty good. There are some people that like to connect, there are some people that just want to play and that’s okay.

Repeated opportunities for the same students to meet and interact were central to the original Music Connects plans. These plans were the victim of the global pandemic and resultant curtailment of all face-to-face and border-crossing activities. Many of the training and skills development activities moved online. While MSE students valued the opportunities to continue their musical development through online Music Connects activities, the interviewees in 2021 did not feel they had been able to continue developing their inter-school connections through online platforms, and so the fleeting connections made during Summer School 2019 did not flourish.

Thus, across the Music Connects timeframe, MSE students’ interactions with musicians from other schools corresponded with predominantly Level 1 of the ‘connections’ schema, with Level 2 connections experienced by a minority. They described initial conversations during Summer School (during meals, while waiting for the bus, and at the pool on the excursion day) and later connections on social media. Language facilitated initial inter-school connections. For example, for one MSE singer, connecting with Albanians from Kosovo had been easier “because I’m Albanian and they are Albanian” (MSE student, 2019). Overall, however, among those interviewed in 2021 (5 students), only two admitted to having ongoing connection with musicians they had met through Music Connects through social media, with fairly passive engagement on the part of the interviewees. Beyond the interview participants, a Level 3 connection between a MSE student and a MRS South student developed in 2021. Based on the data generated in this evaluation, that particular connection is exceptional; however, it does offer a reminder that the differences between each student experience can be subtle or overt. While this evaluation has sought to draw conclusions from multiple perspectives, there are many factors at play that make up a student’s experience, as the answer to Research Question 2 will show.

Evaluation summary

Using a bespoke schema that captures the trajectory of initial connections and friendliness towards friendship and deeper bonds, the evaluation found that connection and emerging friendships were common across all three participating schools. MRS informants report connections that spanned Level 1 (general recognition of shared interests and desire for connection; social media connections), Level 2 (socialising outside language groups and school cohorts) and Level 3 (organising to meet up independently in mixed groups). Connections for MSE and RRS students were limited to Levels 1 and 2 in 2019, with some indications of independently-maintained connections (Level 3) emerging in the follow-up interviews in 2021, including an independently-instigated online collaboration between a MRS student and MSE student.

This foregrounds the contrasting stages that each school was at in its efforts towards integration of diverse students, and the way that the different student cohorts engaged with the broader social goals of Music Connects. These have been internalised within MRS, given the longevity of the program and the intensity of social division in Mitrovica. For MSE and RRS, still relatively new to the Summer School experience and the intensity of the musical and social opportunities, the social goals were embraced but the practices that were necessary for realising them were still being absorbed. This, along with shyness and feelings of reservation towards unfamiliar new people (a fairly commonplace trait in human social life) may help to explain the slower pace of connections for MSE and RRS participants at the time of the first
fieldwork period in 2019. Shared interest in music can help to override some of these feelings but it is only one factor among many.

The next section interrogates more deeply the factors that facilitated or enabled these connections to form and flourish. Contact and proximity are obviously key starting points, but what more specifically within the Music Connects program supports the formation of connections, bonds, and friendship? Research Question 2 addresses this by asking about how connections and inclusion are manifested in Music Connects, and it is to this that the report now turns.

The mechanisms of connection and inclusion

This section examines Research Question 2: How are these connections manifested?

This question relates to the specific practices, contextual factors, and values that facilitate the manifestation (i.e., establishment and maintenance) of connections between youth that would otherwise be likely to remain divided. We can think about these as ‘mechanisms’ and the role that different factors have played as ‘mechanisms’ of connection and inclusion.

Understanding the mechanisms through which social connections can be changed is particularly important in deeply divided contexts, where the wider environment actively inhibits, stymies, and stigmatises cross-community ties, as in Mitrovica. Even in less overtly divided settings, research suggests that language barriers and the ethnic homogeneity of schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods can work against the creation of cross-community ties.

This evaluation found that connection and inclusion were manifested through the constant interplay and mutual reinforcement of four factors: the regular inclusion of unstructured, informal social time; the focus on shared creative tasks; the sense of being in a ‘bubble’ of safety; and the underpinning values of acceptance and openness that permeated the program.

Unstructured, informal hanging out

Activities throughout Music Connects (such as the Skopje Summer School and Activity Weeks) had unstructured, informal ‘hang out’ time built into them. Having repeated opportunities to chat, joke, ask questions and exchange information with new people was a critical factor in the manifestation of connections.

During the 2019 Skopje Summer School, the hotel was the primary site for hanging out. Following meals, Summer School participants would gather at the table and chairs in front of the hotel to smoke, converse, and listen to music.

The social time in front of the hotel [is the best place to meet new people] because everybody just talks about stuff that they like, so it’s the easiest way to meet people and realize what kind of music they like, what do they like to create, how they play and stuff like that. So, it’s the best. (MRS North student, 2019)

This informal, unstructured activity could extend from the evening into the early hours of the morning. Music Connects Program Manager Wendy Hassler-Forest noted that the front-of-hotel gathering space was also encouraged by the Summer School organisers. They
recognised that without this easily accessible informal space for socialising, people would wander off into town or nearby bars for their socialising, and those impromptu groups would invariably form along ethno-linguistic lines (Howell fieldwork journal, 2019).

Along with the hotel accommodation, and the various opportunities for socialising that this presented through the week, the Summer School excursion day to a restaurant and swimming pool out of town, was an important site for new connections. Participants from all three schools nominated the excursion as a highlight of the week. They described it as giving the best opportunity for meeting people from other schools in a relaxed way. Recalling that day, one RRS student described the voucher system (everyone was given the same number of vouchers for soft drink and ice-cream at the bar) and the way that people started to share these: “I liked that we were exchanging those tickets for everyone to be satisfied. So, if someone was hungry, someone else would offer him a ticket” (RRS student, 2021).

For that young person, who described himself as “very shy” when communicating with strangers, the excursion was the place where new social connections were first forged. The excursion was the ice-breaker that enabled further conversations to happen back at the hotel.

The MSE student experience provides an important comparison. All Skopje locals continued to live in their homes and only came to the hotel for lunch each day. Those interviewed from MSE described more limited social connections and fewer opportunities for interaction, as their Music Connects experience consisted predominantly of the scheduled, structured activities.

It’s kind of hard to meet people because, we’re usually just playing . . . The only time we kinda got to get together was when we went to the restaurant, the pool place, that was the only time we kind of interacted with each other. (MSE band focus group, 2019)

Another MSE participant observed that new connections were more likely through unstructured hangout time when there was a random-ness in the way that people assembled. Conversations with new people were more likely when people were moving around or waiting together without a particular formation imposed upon them (such as sitting down for a meal in the restaurant or choosing where to sit on the bus). The more structure imposed upon an encounter, the greater the likelihood that people would choose to sit with people they already knew.

The thing that was different [about the excursion] was that everyone could move around and talk to each other. When we are in the [Summer] school, everyone is in their own room and the only way you can socialize with other people is if you go accidentally on a break at the same time, or in the bus. But even in bus, one group was at the back of the bus, the other group was in the middle and there was not much meshing. (MSE musician, 2019)

This musician’s mention of ‘not much meshing’ during the daily bus trips flags another factor that inhibited the formation of new connections and friendships: shyness. Across all age groups, it is not unusual to feel shy when confronted with a large group of new people. Another of the MSE bands were candid in acknowledging the role that shyness had played in limiting their connections with musicians from the other schools:

MSE 1: Because I didn’t talk to many people.
MSE 2: Maybe we were a bit too shy to start to talk to people we have never met before.
MSE 3: Maybe it hasn’t happened yet . . . I hope I’ll meet someone from another place. (MSE band, August 2019)

Therefore, people with more extrovert personalities or greater social confidence play an important role in breaking the ice and initiating new conversations. For example, when asked how his friendship with a particular person had been initiated, a RRS musician said, “He came up and spoke to me at the excursion. I didn’t approach him. He asked me a question about our band. Then we spoke again at the hotel, and then we kept talking” (RRS musician via interpreter, 2021). A musician from MSE described the way that she had met musicians from Mitrovica at lunch because “there were empty seats at our table and they came and sat with us” (MSE musician, 2019).

Similarly, we can speculate that musicians who are returning for their second or subsequent Summer School have greater social confidence, and thus play a role in initiating new conversations and helping new connections to get started. Two returners from MRS, when asked about their goals for the remainder of the week, said, “Have as
much fun as possible!", as if in recognition that the opportunities for fun of this kind would be far more limited once Summer School was over. When you know that time is limited, and that the rewards of connecting with people will outweigh the initial discomfort of feeling a little socially awkward, you are perhaps more likely to approach new people and have some good opening questions ready. In this way, Summer School returners ‘modelled’ how relaxed and friendly the Summer School’s social dynamic was for the newcomers, helping to ‘break the ice’.

**Connection through shared creative tasks**

The second factor that this evaluation found to play a critical role in the manifestation of connections was the focus on shared creative tasks, in particular the expectation that each Music Connects band would compose and record original songs. The process of creating new songs required teamwork and commitment, and negotiations around different musical ideas. The creative process helped connections to manifest through intensifying the experience within bands, and through creating a shared experience across all of the bands and thus a common entry-point for conversations and appreciation. The process was often challenging but appears to be one of the ways that new bands started to feel like a band.

When you create something with somebody, you are basically connected. You have something that you made together and that’s how it is... So when band members with different identities, different personalities, different tastes, different everything get together, they create something completely new. So a band becomes a whole new identity by itself. It’s like sharing the ideas, sharing your energy first and foremost, which is really important. (MRS North former student, 2019)

This evaluation found that each band’s shared creative obligations created pressures that could help to fast-track intra-group connections and trust. Initially, shyness and a lack of confidence on their instruments could inhibit new bands’ efforts to write songs collaboratively. But the short timeframe of the Summer School and the fact that recording sessions were sometimes scheduled early in the week forced the young bands to find their way through uncertainty.

**When band members with different identities, different personalities, different tastes, different everything get together, they create something completely new. So a band becomes a whole new identity by itself.**

In one of the newly-formed bands that Howell followed, an unproductive song writing session the day before their allocated studio time created a sense of urgency. Two of the bandmates—one Albanian, one Serbian—were also roommates. They agreed together (in English) that their band needed to find a way through the creative impasse before their studio session, so they brought their band together and worked in the evening, writing lyrics and figuring out a musical form. The pressure to deliver a new song in a very short timeframe compelled them to cooperate and find a solution, which in the process helped them forge stronger connections (Howell fieldwork journal).

Of course, this kind of pressure could have the opposite effect, producing tensions and stress that pull a band apart. The pedagogical approach adopted by Music Connects, under the guidance of mentors from the Fontys Rockacademie in the Netherlands, helps to create a working environment in which young people feel sufficiently supported to undertake creative risks together.

It is a pedagogical philosophy that Fontys calls ‘demand-driven learning’, and it shares many traits with community music pedagogy (Howell et al., 2017) and student-centred approaches to learning and teaching. Band coaches take on roles as facilitators rather than teachers. They help to arbitrate difficult decisions within bands, but most often provide pedagogical scaffolding that encourage the young musicians to be the primary decision-makers in their song-writing. Former MRS students described this pedagogical approach as very ‘chill’, noting that it did...
not place pressure on the students to be perfect in the way that formal music schools did (MRS South former students, 2019; MRS North former student, 2019).

A feature of Music Connects has been introducing this band coaching model to the teaching staff of RRS and MSE. The Directors of both those schools expressed initial doubts about the model, particularly the strategy of transferring creative control of the original songs from teachers to students. Yet as Music Connects drew to a close in April 2021, both directors were enthusiastic about what they had learned from Fontys and through the Music Connects experience. Valentino, Director of MSE, reflected,

[Initially] I was confused. How can a kid compose their own song? [And] how can it function with a whole band of young kids? It looked really impossible to me. Then we discovered that it’s really possible and the kids can do it and that they are really, really successful in that. . . . We never were aware that the kids are so capable and so talented. And it’s a fantastic experience. It’s something new and for sure, we will continue to do that. (Valentino, Director MSE, 2021)

The pedagogical approach also facilitates easy relationships between learners and band coaches, so that connections are also formed between the two groups despite the age differences. According to two long-time MRS North students, “age boundaries don’t exist” in their school (MRS North students, 2019). A number of interviewees from MRS described band coaches and students from Fontys as significant and trusted connections.

Shared creative tasks therefore played a role in manifesting connections both within bands, between bands and schools, and between band members and band coaches. They functioned as a purposeful task that compelled individuals to work together cooperatively, and they also were a common experience for all of the bands, something that could be a starting point for conversations and connection.

The bubble of safety

The rationale underpinning this pedagogical approach recognises that musical creativity flows most easily when people are working in an accepting, supportive social space. Emir (MRS Co-Director) described the way that the band coaching approach aims to “to make a safe space for everybody. Not only physically safe, but safe all around.” Safety helps to build individual confidence; it can be seen when a shyer person offers an idea and “everybody likes it and accept it. Or just try it out and if it doesn’t really sound good or doesn’t make sense, but they try it together” (Emir, MRS Co-Director, 2019).

This combination of creative risk and flow alongside psychological and emotional safety has seen Music Connects come to be recognised by its participants as a ‘bubble’: a space bounded by time, activities, and environment that is experienced as somewhat separate to the outside world. This evaluation found that maintenance of and commitment to this ‘bubble’ was the third significant factor in the manifestation of connections.

Bubbles can enable a person to develop aspects of their identity that are constrained in normal life. For those from Mitrovica, there are many constraints—geographical, ideological, psychological—on forming inter-ethnic friendships, including the approbation and scrutiny of those in their own ethnic community that are hostile towards cross-community friendships and cooperation. Meanwhile, current research about young people’s lives in North Macedonia indicates that most young people’s friendship groups are relatively homogenous, reflecting their own ethnic group (Zivetz, 2019, pp. 44-45). In both Mitrovica and North Macedonia, the rules about who one may or may not be friends with are not necessarily spoken aloud but are certainly internalised through the experience of growing up in a society with
many entrenched social cleavages. One MRS musician described the rules around friendships as follows:

There is no way I could even look at or think of dating [someone from the other side]. If I did, I’d be dead. Playing in the mixed band is okay, but there is a family resistance to anything beyond this. For me, this resistance is foolish but it’s something that the older generation is attached to, because they went through the war. For us, the new generation, we didn’t, and we are more open. (Conversation with MRS student recounted in Howell’s fieldwork journal)

Music Connects offered freedom from this kind of pressure and scrutiny (MRS participants, August 2019). It provided temporary space for experimenting with different ways of being and interacting, and space for imagining and living temporarily within a new social world. This functioned as an experience of temporary distance from the normal environment (with its norms, rules, regulations, and watchful eyes). The fact that the creative, musical space was similarly open and experimental helped to foster a supportive environment in which new possibilities – musical and social – could be explored, tentatively, rebelliously, or strategically.

Therefore, the Music Connects bubble of safety offered an alternative social life to ‘normal life’, in which the young musicians were able to live temporarily. They had time to experiment with and rehearse social interactions that might one day be able to be transferred to the outside world, the non-bubble world. Put simply, “they feel safe and so they bond more,” according to a former MRS South student (2019). And through repetition, they come to see their cross-community bonds as normal, a part of their musical lives within their rock school and beyond it.

Values of acceptance and openness

Each of these factors is strengthened by the values that underpin the work of Music Connects, in particular values of acceptance of difference, and openness. According to Emir, “we try to keep that place as open minded and as accepting of everyone”, in particular “people who are not accepted by others, like all kinds of different people. Not only about ethnicity or something” (Emir, Co-Director, 2019).

A former MRS student described the MRS and the Skopje Summer School thus:

[They are] safe places basically for kids who want to make music. And while you’re there, while you’re with [the other students], you don’t care about them in any way other than, “Hey, I like this person, I liked their music taste. I like how they look, how they’re dressed. They’re nice, they’re cool. I can talk with them.” The nationality and everything is forgotten like this (MRS North former student, 2019).

Importantly, the bubble was not a one-off experience, but something that could be repeated across different activities, and a path that others before you had already forged. For example, a former North student, responding to a question about her first time going to the South branch for an Activity Week, admitted,

I was little scared because I never went there [before]. But I knew people [from North] who were always going there. . . [and] when I went there everything was cool and there were no problems. Now I can go [i.e. feel confident to go] anytime I want. (Former MRS North student, 2019)
MRS, 2019). This could include anyone who self-identifies as belonging outside mainstream, dominant culture, including as a goth or a punk or a metalhead, or who is marginalised due to sexual orientation or disability.

Many MRS research participants described Mitrovica as a closed-minded and conservative place, where mainstream popular culture was more aligned with folk-inflected electronic dance music (which in former Yugoslavia is often linked to ethno-nationalist politics) than with rock music. There is a lot of stigma attached to identifying with a cultural or sexual identity that is not the hegemonic, mainstream identity. Several MRS informants described bullying and teasing in their schools for those branded as ‘misfits’, even from teachers (MRS North students, 2019). Even those that do not attract negative attention may nevertheless feel not quite comfortable, not quite able to embrace their ‘full self’.5

At school I wear a bit of a mask. People are not very accepting of me. They know I play bass guitar and they call me ‘narco’ – like I’m a drug addict – or they think that rock music is like joining a cult. All the stereotypes. They are just into pop music and gossip and that kind of thing. But in Rock School it is completely different. There, they just welcome you with wide open arms. The students and also the teachers. This is where my really good friends are. (MRS North musician, conversation recounted in Howell’s fieldwork journal, 2019)

Acceptance of difference is enacted within the band coaching approach, and also within the eclectic approach to music genre that can be found across the three schools. Roma Rock School bands make a feature of integrating idiomatic elements from Roma music with rock’n’roll; and many of the bands described how they had found creative ways to feature elements of the various genres that different band members might favour in their song-writing. Former students from MRS South observed that “It was just called Rock School, but we didn’t do, like, really, rock music.” “No, it includes many genres”; “You can do everything, yeah” (crosstalk from former students focus group, 2019). This eclecticism also produces creative challenges: interviews with former students highlighted the tensions that could arise when negotiating genre when writing songs within a band. Genre preference is a highly individual thing. Many people associate their musical preferences with their identity, seeing it as signalling important information about their personality, and a way to introduce themselves to others or a way to bond with others that share their preferences (Frith, 1981). Thus, negotiating across genre can be personally confronting, but also open up new musical discoveries and innovations.

Openness to others is also a philosophy for learning that prioritises cooperation over competition.

I always tell my students, first of all, be friends. If you can learn from someone who is a better player, ask them how to collaborate, learn something new. Or if someone asks you, explain how. Share this knowledge. First, get to know each other; became friends. And if you achieve this, to become friends, then everything is easier. (Alvin, RRS Director, 2021)

Perhaps as a result of the broader values framework, young musicians described what they had learned about song-writing in social terms as much as musical terms. This included the need to relinquish personal control over the song (e.g., two students from MSE, 2021); find a compromise between conflicting musical ideas (former MRS South students, 2019; also current MRS students, 2021).
and how the song-writing began to flow when the chemistry between the band members was strong (MRS North band, 2019). In these considerations, compromise was often idealised, as was the idea that difference and diversity are strengths and assets in a social environment.

MSE 1: We all had different ideas, but in the end we made it good for everyone.

MSE 2: Yes, because we are a band.

Gillian: What does that mean?

MSE 2: Well, we have great ideas separately, but together we are better. (2019)

The young people’s stated learning outcomes indicate the way that they internalised and made sense of the social goals of Music Connects, suggesting that negotiations within the song-writing process might also function as a low-stakes way to hone their skills of compromise and cooperation across difference in other aspects of social life.

The effect of these underpinning values of acceptance, openness and inclusion is a general recognition among the students that they need to work together and focus on what connects them (music). Through both explicit rules and unspoken but understood rules of conviviality and community, what Mac Ginty has identified as practices of everyday peace (Mac Ginty, 2014), cooperative working relationships are fostered, and potential conflicts are avoided.

Evaluation summary

Connections between young people from the same city and between cities are manifested through the convergence and mutual interplay of four factors: unstructured social time for hanging out; the intensity of shared creative tasks; the sense of living together in a bubble of safety that facilitates social experimentation; and values and norms of acceptance and openness.

These four are intertwined and somewhat indivisible. The intensity of the creative experience of Summer School or Activity Weeks is balanced by the experience of living together in an intense musical world for a week, with expectations of new creative outputs; the pedagogical approach supports feelings of safety, which helps the flow of aesthetic and social freedom; the sense of existing in a bubble—distanced from the norms and pressures of daily life—creates the mental freedom to experiment and explore identity and connection more boldly, discovering new aspects of oneself in the process. The underpinning values ensure participants feel valued, accepted and safe, amplifying the sense of possibility and potential for wider social transformation.

Changes in community perspectives

This section answers Research Question 3:

To what extent do participants in the three music schools demonstrate changed perspectives on members of the other community? In Mitrovica, to what extent do friends and parents of Music Connects participants demonstrate similarly changed perspectives towards the other community?

For young people living in a deeply divided setting, negative perspectives on the ‘other’ community can become normalised. Successive generations participate in schooling, leisure, and work activities under ethnically- and spatially segregated conditions, with few or no opportunities to meet. Even in contexts where there is political support for multiculturalism or inter-ethnic mixing, a desire to protect linguistic, religious and cultural practices can lead to schooling, socialising and workplaces that are relatively homogenous.

6 Mac Ginty defines this as ‘a society in which there is a significant cleavage that goes beyond the political institutions and party politics. Thus it may manifest itself in residential segregation, media and cultural consumption, language, and access to public goods. It may sometimes involve direct violence and will certainly contain a good deal of indirect violence in the form of threats or identity-based discrimination’ (Mac Ginty 2014, p. 549, citing Guelke, 2012; Lustick, 1979).
Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2011) proposes that when contact between groups occurs where unfamiliarity or hostility towards the outgroup already exists, negative perceptions and prejudices may be reduced, particularly if certain conditions are met. Furthermore, it is possible that, as contact occurs and recurs, those new or changed perspectives towards the ‘other’ may be adopted by secondary contacts, that is, the friends or family of those engaging in intergroup contact. This is a case where ‘the friend of my friend can become my friend’.

This third research question was posed with this potential for reconsidered perspectives in mind. For the MSE and RRS students, the question probed changed perspectives among the participant group. For MRS students, it also probed the extent to which the Mitrovica Rock School might be helping to change negative perspectives on ‘the other’ among friends and relatives of MRS musicians.

Gauging the extent to which a prejudice or negative perception of another group has shifted following intergroup contact is challenging. In the context of former Yugoslavia, rock music is already outside the mainstream, including a low tolerance of expressions of prejudice. In any case, the admission of such prejudices to an unfamiliar researcher could create feelings of shame, self-consciousness, or defensiveness. Furthermore, the stated mission of Music Connects is to use music as a connector across social divisions such as ethno-linguistic divisions. It is therefore possible that those that sign up are already open to the possibility of working cooperatively with members of the outgroup, and thus do not hold strongly negative perspectives at the outset.

Recognising these possibilities, this evaluation instead employs the following indicators:

1. Interviewees were asked if they had participated in other cross-community projects in the past, as this would indicate openness to cooperation and collaboration. Note though, that the primary driver of participation in this kind of program might be related to a particular benefit, such as having the opportunity to travel or stay for free in a nice hotel. Also, many NGO programs are regarded with a degree of wariness in Kosovo and North Macedonia (as explained in the Introduction), and this could inhibit someone from participating, regardless of their perspectives on inter-ethnic mixing and inclusion.

2. A question was asked about parental attitudes to their participation in this program. Parental guidance and observation of parent interactions are an influence on young people’s public behaviours, codes and social norms (Mac Ginty, 2014), making it a potential measure of initial perspectives.

3. In addition, interviewees answered questions about how their friends responded to them playing in a mixed band (as a way of gauging the openness towards mixing among their main friendship group).

These were in addition to direct questions about whether the interviewee felt his/her/their perspectives on other ethnic groups had changed at all.

Mitrovica Rock School

None of those interviewed felt that their perspectives on cooperation with people from the ‘other side’ of Mitrovica had changed since joining the Mitrovica Rock School, as they had already been quite open to the idea of connecting, and curious to get to know other young musicians with a shared interest in rock and alternative music. Just over half the MRS students (56%) interviewed had been involved in other inter-ethnic NGO activities, indicating a majority cohort that was open to mixing and cooperation from the outset. Asked if they had experienced any significant personal changes since joining MRS and Music Connects, several highlighted changes in personal confidence:
I’m more open minded. I don’t have stage fright. I’m not afraid to speak my mind and that really has helped me a lot . . . I really don’t care what anybody else thinks if I’m having fun. (MRS North student, 2021)

While these comments relate most directly to issues of performance anxiety, they also flow through to other aspects of this musician’s life. At school for example:

If I knew the right answer, I wouldn’t answer it. I wouldn’t even try because I was afraid of my body language, my way of speaking, and how will others react. But now I freely give an answer and my mind is at peace. (MRS North student, 2021)

Another MRS North student described a similar increase of social confidence:

Before I started going to Mitrovica Rock School, I was a little bit more of a closed person. Then I started going and became a little bit more social and free in the public eye . . . I used to be a shy speaker, and I couldn’t really talk in public or like this, in a call with people . . . And it’s been easier for me to communicate as well. It’s been a fun development of a character in a certain way. (MRS North student, 2021)

While this personal change does not indicate a change in perspective, it does suggest that the experience of facing one’s insecurities about performance and being in the public eye help to create confidence in one’s voice. Having the courage of one’s convictions and the confidence to express a minority view are important preconditions for challenging social injustices, and therefore are a relevant outcome for the social goals of Music Connects.

When asked about their parents’ attitudes towards their participation in a mixed band, MRS students described their parents as having some concerns and apprehension initially. However, they emphasised that this came from a place of concern about the security risks arising from travelling between the two sides of the city (‘will my child be safe?’) rather than ethnic prejudice or nationalism.

I was always interested in meeting, and also visiting the north part, because my family never let me cross the bridge, because they always decided it was too dangerous for a kid to go there. And I would not know the language and anything. But I always wanted to know what it is like, because we live in the same city. (MRS South former students’ focus group, 2019)

Security fears are normal at the beginning, given that ‘the situation in Mitrovica is very under pressure. You never know what is going to happen’ (MRS North student, 2019). However, MRS co-Director Emir pointed out that thus far, these fears have always been assuaged by the young people’s positive experiences: “Once they hear from their kids what the experience is like and if it’s a good experience, something good, they’re really excited to be really supportive. This is true of most parents” (Emir, MRS Co-Director, 2019).

Some parents are actively supportive. A current MRS South student followed his older brother to the Mitrovica Rock School. Their parents were adamant that participating in such projects could only be a good thing. ‘Like, you should go more to these activities, and you should know more people. To know more people is better for you’ (MRS South student, 2019). Another pointed out that for the older generation of Yugoslavs, rock bands that featured musicians from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds were the norm. They support programs like the MRS because “it was completely normal back then”, and they continue to enjoy listening to those “ex-YU bands” (MRS South student, 2021).

Other parents might hold a more ambivalent stance. Support for their children’s music participation and education does not necessarily equate to support for inter-ethnic cooperation and collaboration. A current MRS North student “couldn’t say” that her relatives supported her participation in mixed activities.

They are [generally supportive], but they don’t like me being that friendly with Albanians, because you know, the past, they remember the past, and they experienced the past. So that’s why I couldn’t argue with them, because they know better than me. But I’m the new generation. I can make things better between us. (MRS North student, 2019)

Reflecting this ambivalence, it is not unusual for a young person in Mitrovica to be surrounded by quite contrasting perspectives, even in one’s own family. Some students talked about fathers who were “quite patriotic” or engaged with nationalist politics (remembering how
closely the employment situation in Mitrovica is tied to the ethnicity politics) and therefore not enthusiastic about their friendships and ties with people from the other side. But the same students’ mothers and siblings could be supportive, coming to gigs and being enthusiastic about their participation and friendships (MRS students, 2019).

Friendship groups are similarly ambiguous sources of support or enthusiasm, in no small part because open discussion of the political situation is avoided by many. Some of the current MRS students recognised that some among their wider cohort of schoolmates had little interest in connecting with youths from the other side. A 2019 MRS North student admitted, I have a few friends that really support this program, but not all of my classmates do . . . I don’t know. I haven’t really talked about it with them because I know it’s not a subject that they like to talk about. (MRS North student, 2019)

For others, the Rock School’s ‘cool factor’ was the persuasive element for their friends. One relatively new MRS North student noted that some school friends decided to enrol in the Rock School after seeing her perform with her band (MRS North student, 2019).

In general, the young people Howell spoke with paid little attention to those that opposed the social goals of the program. “The people who are close to me, they support me, and that’s all I care about. If anybody doesn’t like what I do or something, that’s their problem.” Or as one current student said (quoting Jack Nicholson), “I am who I am. Your approval is not needed” (MRS students, 2019).

Most MRS students do not see themselves as having a particular capacity to change the perspectives of others. One former MRS South student, who described himself as not having a particularly wide circle of friends, but as someone who has always had Serbian friends, didn’t think [he had] made a big impact, but a [maybe] little impact.” He offered the following reflection:

I think when someone has an opinion, it is very hard to change that opinion. If they don’t experience something themselves, then they are not going to change what they think. But I [told my Albanian friends] about when my Serbian friends invited me to hang out with them, I think that may have changed their mind a little bit [towards Serbians]. We didn’t really talk [about it] much though, so I can’t be sure. (MRS South former student, 2019)

Another MRS South student considered that his ‘influence’ on others could be something quite small, like a nudge, or a sharing of new information that might open his friends’ minds to new possibilities. It is useful to consider his reflection in full, as it offers insights into both the potential and the limitations of influence among friendship groups.

I didn’t have any issues, not from my family or my friends, except for some advice, like, “Just be careful, you never know what is going to happen. You don’t know who they are” and stuff like that from my friends . . . And it was interesting to see my friends cared that much. They didn’t have an experience with other nationalities, and maybe that made them say those things. But they never made it a problem for me. (MRS South former student, 2019)
I share all my experience with my friends that are not in Mitrovica Rock School. I share every type of experience. Especially sometimes they don’t want to hear me talking about Skopje, because I talk about Skopje [all the time] I told them, “I had so much fun. We did this, we did that”, and they’re telling me, “Oh my God, I’m going to come to Rock School, I’m going to play drums”, and things like that.

But it’s something with the phases. I have my best friend here. He told me since, like, two years ago, “I’m going to Rock School to play drums or bass”, but he didn’t. I’m always reminding him, I don’t know if he’s lazy or doesn’t love it. And also there are other friends, every time they maybe just want to come to visit Rock School. Or for example, there are students in IBCM that come from other cities and I tell them [about MRS], or they see my [Music Connects] t-shirt or something from Mitrovica Rock School, and they immediately ask me, “Can we come just to look around there?” And I tell them, “Of course, you are more than welcome”.

I consider this a type of influence, because even if they are only interested to know something or to come and look, for me, it’s a type of interest. It’s not an interest for me [that they should] come there, because I gain only maybe friendship, but it’s important for Mitrovica Rock School that it’s [known about], in Kosovo and [further afield]. But I think that’s a type of influence from me. (MRS South student, 2021).

For some, the idea that they might influence their friends’ perspectives is complicated by the fact that they feel they are already an outlier in their social group. Quite a few MRS students described themselves as having only a small friendship circle, or as feeling like an outsider in their school cohort, with different interests and preferences to the majority. Because of this, they considered their field of personal influence to be negligible at best.

One important finding came from interviews with former MRS students. These revealed that, while many had found it difficult to sustain friendships with former bandmates from the other MRS branch (South or North) once they had left the school and moved on to university or fulltime employment, their attitudes continued to be open to the idea of cooperation and reducing divisions. In other words, positive and open perspectives on intergroup cooperation were maintained even after regular inter-ethnic cooperation has ceased.

“If anybody doesn’t like what I do or something, that’s their problem.” “I am who I am. Your approval is not needed.”

Overall, changed perspectives (from holding more negative or wary perspectives on the outgroup) were not strongly in evidence among the MRS participants. The data indicated that most of those that enrolled in the school were already fairly open in their outlook, eager for new experiences, including new friendships. Families were in general supportive of young people getting involved in music learning, developing skills and creative agency; parents who had reservations about their participation in inter-ethnic activities were concerned about security issues rather than rejecting the social goals of the program.

The comments from the small number of interviewees that felt they had perhaps had some influence in changing the perspectives of friends (or at least opening them to new possibilities) suggest that the most promising route for positive influence is among MRS students’ friendships outside the MRS.

For both RRS and MSE, this research considered changed perspectives among students only (rather than among students and their wider circle of family and friends).

As with MRS, students at RRS expressed a general openness and desire towards connecting and collaborating with people from other ethnic backgrounds. Shyness in new social situations was the most likely reason a RRS student might feel uncomfortable in Music Connects, rather than wariness towards someone because of their ethno-linguistic identity. Asked if there were any challenges when playing in a band with people from other language groups or ethnic backgrounds, one RRS student said he found it challenging in general to

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7 This was true of the majority of students, but anecdotal evidence suggests there are exceptions.
play with and meet new people because he was already a shy person. However, “once I get to talk with them and we are exchanging experiences, I feel less shy” (RRS student, 2021). Another RRS student from a non-Roma background admitted that he didn’t know who in his band was Roma and who was not. “I don’t care about if someone is Roma or not. It’s all about the people and if you have a good heart” (RRS student, 2021).

For all of the RRS students interviewed for this evaluation, Music Connects was their first experience of a NGO-led program. None of the four RRS students interviewed had been part of other NGO-led projects concerned with inter-ethnic cooperation. One had been part of another music project (a choir), but this was at his school, rather than an extra-curricular program.

The RRS musicians’ sense of themselves as influencing the minds of others was grounded in their music and the way that it blends musical styles. They seem themselves playing a role in bringing diverse sounds into their own community.

We talked about the ways we can help other people because in Šutka we have our particular way that we have all grown up playing and so when we go and listen to the other groups and listen to how they’re playing in a different style, sometimes you think ‘oh I don’t know that’, or ‘I’d like to know that’. (RRS student, 2019)

That student went on to express the hope that their music, and the way it bridges different musical styles and cultures, might also open audience members’ minds to Roma people more generally, helping them to discard the stereotypical viewpoints.

I think that all the people [Roma and non-Roma] that see us playing at concerts, they’re used to more having an idea of how Roma music and musicians will be played. But then when we play our music, then they have the chance to change their minds a little bit. (RRS student, 2019)

Another student expressed pride in the way that his band was reviving the retro sound and vibe of ‘ex-YU’ (former Yugoslavian) rock bands (RRS student, 2021). These bands and their sounds conjure for many listeners nostalgia for the pre-war past and hopes for a more pluralistic and cooperative future (Palmberger, 2008), suggesting that this too, is another potential route for changing perspectives.

Thus, the main change agent in the RRS bands was the music itself. The hybrid style of music that integrated Roma and rock music idioms symbolically modelled a more syncretic cultural standpoint and an openness to cooperation, while retro rock’n’roll could function as an index for an earlier era when ethnically-mixed bands were the norm and the Federation of Yugoslav states was cooperative and peaceful. As with the MRS, increased confidence was the dominant ‘change of perspective’ that RRS students had experienced personally.

**Music School Enterprise**

Prior to its participation in Music Connects, MSE did not have social goals attached to its music education provision. This meant that the possible social benefits that could occur as a by-product of making music together were not necessarily in the foreground, and therefore “not a priority” for the young musicians (as one group stated in 2019), in relation to their Summer School goals and interests in 2019. They signed up for the Summer School with musical goals in mind. The three bands that were part of the 2019 Summer School were all new bands (i.e., only recently formed, and including members that were meeting for the first time) and at the time of the first interviews, were primarily concerned with the new musical opportunities they were having. Many seemed to feel like outsiders in the social ‘scene’ of the Summer School, with fewer opportunities for unscheduled ‘hang out’ time.

But the Summer School experience also raised the possibility that their music-making could be a way to broaden their networks and find common ground with
people they might not otherwise meet. In the follow-up interviews in 2021, this potential was expressed more fully, suggesting an increased positive engagement among participants with the social potential of music participation.

Members of one of the younger bands (all of school age) highlighted this potential:

Music Connects is a program where you connect with musicians, not just locally, but from different countries as well. And I think that’s very good because you can make friends that you couldn’t have made if it weren’t for that program. (MSE student, April 2021)

And while they acknowledged that they hadn’t made a larger number of connections with musicians from other schools, they expressed the desire for that to happen in the future.

MSE student: I would love to make some songs also with different people together as a band and for maybe a bigger band or something. That would be fun.

Gillian: Why do you think that didn’t happen?

MSE student: Well, we stayed focused on our band because everyone was new with having a band and so we didn’t connect as much with the other bands. (MSE student, 2021)

For this cohort, the curb on face-to-face activities that the coronavirus pandemic imposed also halted their opportunities to connect more widely. The arrival of the pandemic coincided with the point in the program where they would get to be among the ‘returners’ and ‘old hands’ at Summer School and Activity Weeks. In 2019, all of the MSE bands interviewed recognised that their newness had inhibited their socialising but expressed hope that this would change once those feelings of newness wore off. Reflecting on this in 2021, another said:

I wish we had spent more time making friends. I mean, yes, the music that’s been made was very important, but I think the project’s more about making friends from all over the world. And not just playing with your current friends. (MSE student, 2021)

During the research period, other changes took place within the school and within bands. One of the bands from the 2019 Summer School disbanded (two of the members had flagged this as a likelihood at that time). New members with different ethno-linguistic backgrounds joined the other two bands. For one band, this meant shifting their in-band conversations to English rather than Macedonian, which was ‘not a problem because all of us know English’ but simply a difference in the band’s modus operandi that reflects the wider project goals. As we shall see in the next section of this report, small changes such as these can work as an incremental recalibration of ‘normal’, which is an important factor in supporting the adoption of new perspectives on cooperation, and personal mobility in terms of moving freely between neighbourhoods and across de facto and actual borders and boundary lines.

**Evaluation summary**

Across the three schools, the data did not indicate a significant change in perspectives on interaction and cooperation with people from other ethno-linguistic or cultural backgrounds. The main reason for this was that the Music Connects cohort across all three participating schools is one that is already open to the idea of cross-community connections and the possibility of friendships and increased cooperation.
The dominant change was one of increased personal confidence and self-acceptance, including the willingness to speak up, and recognition of the importance of living according to one’s own values, rather than to conform to the status quo. While this does not suggest a change in perspective on intercultural cooperation and inclusion, it is an important pre-condition for this. It suggests that the Music Connects experience is helping to foster individuals who may feel empowered to speak up when they witness an injustice, and perhaps to challenge the more limiting perspectives of family and friends.

Interviews with students from across the three schools indicated that the Music Connects experience gave young people a social experience in which ethnic labels were pushed right to the periphery, while opportunities to mix and engage across those differences were facilitated. The aforementioned ‘bubble of safety’ protected them temporarily from the wider world where those labels had power as determinants of socio-cultural opportunity and social life. We might think of the bubble as an incubator in which alternative perspectives may grow; or where existing perspectives can be ‘lived’ as if they are the norm and thus be strengthened through their constant, indirect reinforcement.

There was considerable variation among the MRS interviewees’ descriptions of parents’ and friends’ attitudes. While few felt that their MRS experiences would help to change the perspectives of parents and other adults from the generation that had directly experienced the war years, the examples offered of changed perspectives among friends suggested that this was a promising route. At the same time, they recognised that their mainstream school environments could reinforce more closed attitudes. Those that commented on this were wary of taking on a visible ‘activist/advocate’ role, with good reason given the potential social repercussions.

Pathways to positive perspectives and increased mobility

This section seeks to answer Research Question 4: **Are there particular activities or pathways that are strongly associated with more positive perspectives and increased mobility among the participants?**

This question follows on from the discussion of changed perspectives in Research Question 3. It considers the aspects of the Music Connects program that facilitate the proliferation of positive perspectives about people from other ethno-linguistic backgrounds, and increased confidence to move freely throughout a city (Mitrovica, Skopje) or between countries in the region. This is what the research question means by ‘increased mobility’.

This evaluation has identified three aspects that have helped to proliferate positive perspectives and increased mobility, based on reports by current Music Connects participants: the role played by concerts and other public-facing activities; the incremental expansion of what is conceived by Music Connects participants as ‘normal’, in terms of cross-community interaction and cooperation; and fun.

**Concerts and other public-facing activities**

Perspectives among friends of Music Connects participants are most likely to be changed through their attendance at concerts, listening to recordings, and being part of conversations about the Rock School experience. Concerts showcase the music and the rock school experience most vividly, but they also establish
the foundational understanding of music as the common interest and source of connection, and do not place the social goals of the project in the foreground (unlike social projects that are more explicitly focused on dialogue and reconciliation).

For example, one MRS North student shared the following story:

One of my best friends actually, her parents never let her do anything. And then she was just talking on and on about me and my friends being in a band and performing and they were just like, “Okay, if you really want it, then do it.” Just because she was begging them so much because I did it and my friends did it, you know. (2019)

Another student, from MRS South, described some of his non-MRS friends as having become keen supporters of the MRS music and bands. One friend had “three CDs of Mitrovica Rock School. And every time I go in his car, he's always listening to the rock bands”. Another group of friends had gone to great efforts to come to the concert at the Krim Club. “Even though they had something else to do, some work or a meeting. They said to me, ‘I’m not going [to that]. I’m coming to see you guys.’” (MRS South student, 2021).

This evaluation found that concerts, recordings, and other public-facing activities support the changing of (others’) perspectives in two keys ways. First, they offer an engaging and youth-centred performance of original music in a setting where there is a degree of ambiguity around performers’ identities, allowing those audience members that may harbour some prejudices towards other ethnic groups to take part without triggering those responses. Audiences have a good time, and thus are presented with information that may destabilise those pre-conceived ideas. Second, concerts (and recordings, and videos) act as publicity and promotion for the rock schools. Attendance at a concert works alongside word of mouth to showcase the school, its students, its musical outcomes and its values in action. Audience members have a good time at the gig but are also presented with a possible pathway for developing/expanding their own musical life, and thus developing their own opportunities for cross-community collaboration.

Online concerts, the documentary ‘The Real School of Rock’, and social media shares of video footage also contribute to normalising the idea of rock music as a vehicle for cross-community cooperation in deeply divided settings. The final concert for Music Connects was presented online in April 2021 and at time of writing had received over 2000 views.

Concomitantly, Music Connects has contributed to the region’s ongoing infrastructure for rock music development and presentation. In particular, it has contributed to recording infrastructure and resourcing, training young people to work as sound engineers. A link can be drawn between these activities and growing new audiences for local rock music, because the training of new sound engineers supports higher quality and more professional sound at gigs and on recordings, giving audiences a better experience.

Expanding what is ‘normal’

An important learning from the first ten years of the Mitrovica Rock School was that over time, and through carefully planned activities that push back against the city’s norms of division, MRS students come to see inter-ethnic connection and cross-city mobility as increasingly ‘normal’. This has been achieved gradually, and in small, strategic increments through testing what the wider socio-political environment will tolerate. While ‘normal’ in Skopje may be less overtly divided, the MRS experience offers an interesting model for creating changed perspectives and increased mobility for all the Music Connects schools.

‘Normal’ interactions in Mitrovica—a spatially and socially divided society that is rigidly conservative and nationalistic—are generally interactions that do not involve crossing to the other side of the city or mixing outside your ethno-linguistic group. MRS has programmed activities that push back against the current state of ‘normal’ through cross-communal activities, interactions, collaborations, and mobility.

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8 The concept of the continual expansion of ‘normal’ first emerged in an informal conversation between Gillian Howell and Wendy Hassler Forest (Musicians Without Borders’ Strategic Development Manager and Program Manager, Southeast Europe) in Mitrovica, August 2019.
For example,

- In Mitrovica, interactions between young people from North and South Mitrovica were not normal when MRS first opened and brought young people together for the first Summer School in Skopje.
- Initially, mixed bands seemed impossible to establish because of the challenges with being able to meet somewhere in the divided city to rehearse. First, mixed bands could only form, rehearse, and record together in Skopje. Then, MRS asked band members to consider rehearsing on one or other of the MRS branch schools (North or South), with MRS providing safe transport for those crossing to the other side. Now, playing in a mixed band is high status in the school (Milizza, MRS Co-Director, 2019) and bands commit to regular rehearsals on either side of the city. Some now walk to their rehearsals from the other side.
- Having a mixed band perform in Kosovo initially seemed impossible and too risky. But through careful monitoring of the political climate, MRS mixed bands have now been able to perform in a number of Kosovan cities.
- One of the most recent ‘expansions of normal’ was the performance of mixed bands in Mitrovica itself.
- Now the MRS recording studio has been built in the South branch, so that is where all the recording happens, regardless of where in Kosovo or Mitrovica you live.

Seeing a friend from Rock School creates a sense of pleasure (“I found someone I know!”) as well as a sense of security and insider knowledge (“if I want to find something that it’s not in the South I only need talk to them, and they never hesitate me to tell me where to find or where to go”).

Such incremental steps depend upon the judgement of those best placed to assess the current local dynamics. Emir, MRS Co-Director, confirmed the care with which such steps are appraised and taken:

> We’re really careful about it. Sometimes we can look a little bit paranoid about it . . . but things can happen. Maybe also a physical attack could happen . . . this never happened of course, with us. But we have to be careful because if it does happen once, then I don’t know how we would continue this. It would be a big attack on everything we’ve done for 10 years. (Emir, MRS Co-Director, 2019)

With each iteration and each small expansion of normal, the next cohort of participants has the pathway forged by the previous year’s cohort to follow. Within MRS it becomes ‘normal’ for these cooperative activities and acts to happen, so individuals begin to feel less wary, and more confident in their ability to explore a wider personal geography through increased mobility.

This evaluation found a number of interviewees expressing increased confidence in moving freely about their city and into other countries as a result of their Music Connects experiences. One interviewee described how “every time [he goes] to the North side, for example, to buy something, it’s impossible not to see one of the [MRS] guys. And you have always something to talk to them.” Seeing a friend from Rock School creates a sense of pleasure (“I found someone I know!”) as well as a sense of security and insider knowledge (“if I want to find something that it’s not in the South I only need talk to them, and they never hesitate me to tell me where to find or where to go”).

The same interviewee described looking forward to travelling independently to Skopje soon.

> Now it has been a long time that we haven’t met each other and it’s different, but we try just to keep that connection . . . I know that I’m not going to be alone there, because I can call the guys [I know from MSE and RRS], and maybe just hang out for a coffee or [they can] show me around. (MRS South student, 2021)
Of course, there are many factors that determine the degree of confidence a young person from Mitrovica feels when moving freely across the city. Some from MRS North described greater hesitancy towards the idea of travelling independently to South Mitrovica, as this exchange between two long-term students of MRS shows:

MRS North 1: We actually never go out on South side, like, alone . . . if you met someone [a friend], it’s easier to go there but you don’t really do it. I don’t know why, but-

MRS North 2: They are just normal people like we are, but in our society there are a few guys who are bad for them and they have a few people, but those people, I don’t know how to explain you, it’s very, very difficult. (MRS North focus group, 2019)

Another MRS North student said that going to MRS South branch for recording sessions or rehearsals felt “just like going to our school in the north. No differences in any way.” However, he hadn’t had any opportunities to hang out with his bandmates outside of their scheduled activities thus far. Prior to joining MRS this student had not known anyone from the South side. But within his family, cross-community connections were encouraged, and this gave him optimism that he could feel comfortable in all parts of the city.

Now that I experienced what the people down at the south are like, it’s comfortable now in that way . . . We live where we live, and sometimes for some people, it can be a little bit more of a stressful situation. But we [in my family] think that it should be really comfortable, I guess, because it’s our town in both the south and the north. So, we have to be open to everything. (MRS North student, 2021)

In contrast, a MRS North former student admitted that for her, “crossing the bridge isn’t the easiest thing. You never know if somebody is going to come up and beat you” (2019). She pointed out that the threat of violence could come from people in her own (Serbian) community as well as from the Albanians she might meet on the South side. This diversity of perspectives and experiences is an important reminder that while confident mobility is evidently facilitated by cross-community friendships, it is also dependent upon factors such as family support, the current political dynamics, age, and personality.

Expansion of ‘normal’ also depends on positive experiences. The learning from the MRS experience is that new steps that challenge the ‘normality’ of ethnic divisions have always been taken with great attention to ensuring positive student experiences. One RRS student in 2021 described his band’s concert experience in 2019 in great detail, including the way the band members had walked with their tutors through the City Park after the concert and rehashed every detailed aspect of the concert. When asked why this memory felt so important to share, he said, “it was one of the best experiences I have had. I had the time of my life” (RRS student, 2021). It was not only the concert, or the conversation that made it memorable, it was the sense of moving freely through the city centre and feeling connected to it in a new way through having contributed to its cultural life and scene, with his friends.

Expansion of normal does not only impact young people’s mobility; it may also change choices around language. One of the MSE band members in 2019 described that it was normal for her to speak Macedonian with her bandmates despite Albanian being her mother tongue, “because I am Albanian but I speak Macedonian and I live here.” (MSE band member, 2019). This and some other comments from MSE participants hinted that Macedonian (the majority language within society) might also be the default language within the school. By 2021, this seemed less likely, with one group of interviewees explaining that their band communicated in English, as this was the language that was most inclusive of all the members of their band.
The MRS experience of expanding notions of ‘normal’ and the early indicators of similar recalibrations occurring within the other Music Connects schools have important implications. They indicate a framework within which participants’ perspectives on inclusion and connection start to change. The expansion of ‘normal’ creates space to adopt new practices—such as choice of a band’s lingua franca—and build individual confidence for independent travel into territories in which they might otherwise feel unsure. And while ‘normal’ in Skopje may be less overtly divided, the MRS experience offers an interesting model for creating changed perspectives and increased mobility for all of the Music Connects schools.

“We’re having fun”: The importance of fun, friendship and positive experiences

Ultimately, the effectiveness of these two pathways relies upon the fact that the music-making experience within Music Connects is fun, one that creates pleasure and enjoyment and that is enhanced through friendships. Research participants who had been part of other NGO-led activities that were focused on inter-ethnic cooperation were asked to consider whether those activities had created similar bonds, connections, inclusion and mobility as Music Connects. They did not believe so, for several reasons.

The main reason was that Music Connects activities foregrounded fun and friendships. Comparing it to International Business College Mitrovica (IBCM, an inter-ethnic tertiary education institution in Mitrovica supported by the European Union) one student said that Music Connects offered “more than just acquaintances, more like friends” and “more than just cooperation, also recreation”. This student pointed out that the music learning is “not all just business. We’re having fun. We’re doing stuff. We’re always on the move” (MRS North student, 2021).

The second reason was that many other cooperation projects are quite formal. Participants are often trying to present themselves as mature and professional. The interactions between participants are usually quite structured and task-oriented, and “after lectures, usually you split up . . . You may have conversations every day with them, but it’s not the same” (MRS South student, 2021). He went on to explain:

With Rock School, when you have training weeks, you have a lot of talk, and even after training weeks, you have other discussions about changing something or not changing something. And you have also the concerts, and that’s completely different . . . But it’s not only that. You feel really good. It’s a passion. (MRS South student, 2021).

Fun, friendships, and informality enable Music Connects participants to be their most relaxed, secure selves. This then supports processes like the incremental expansion of ‘normal’ and the energy and enthusiasm with which positive stories are shared about the program with friends and family, drawing new people towards the program.

Evaluation summary

There are many pathways to positive perspectives on connection and inclusion across ethno-linguistic divisions and increased independent and confident mobility. This evaluation found that three practices particularly came to the fore as playing an important role in facilitating these outcomes.

Concerts and other public-facing activities can attract diverse audiences and normalise the idea of cross-community cooperation and entertainment. Concerts and similar public activities are nested within a more encompassing practice of constantly challenging the ‘normality’ of ethnic homogeneity and inter-ethnic cooperation. Every time cross-community cooperation and mixed bands programs are presented in a context where they have not been tried before, the next cohort of students comes to see that activity in that context as ‘normal’, and something to look forward to. This is a powerful overarching strategy. It benefits from deep understanding of the local context and the drivers of different constraints and fears. In this way, Music Connects has powerful assets in the form of its local staff in all three schools.

But none of the pathways towards new positive perspectives and increased mobility would be effective were it not for the fun and enjoyment that the Music Connects students experience in the program. Thus, the three pathways identified in this evaluation should be understood as intertwined, and interdependent.
The goals of Music Connects have been to promote inter-ethnic cooperation among youth in Kosovo and North Macedonia through rock music education, expanding target groups and increasing the integration of minorities. Alongside this, the program has sought to support youth to create, produce, record and perform their own music through establishing a new recording studio and training sound engineers; and to contribute to a more vigorous local cultural scene by promoting musical cooperation among a broad young audience in southeast Europe. It is an international partnership that has connected young musicians and their teachers in two countries with their counterparts from the Fontys Rockacademie in the Netherlands.

This evaluation has sought to examine this complex and multi-faceted program with depth and nuance. It has considered the outcomes of the program in relation to social connections, inclusion, changing of perspectives and mobility, and the practices, values, and strategies that facilitate these. It has identified factors that influence the depth of bonds that may be created, finding that these fluctuate over time, and may be outside the control of the program organisers and teachers. Throughout, it has foregrounded the voices of young musicians, who are the frontline beneficiaries of the program, as well as the emissaries of its messages of inclusion and connection.

It found that by approaching each other as likely friends, music-making becomes a rehearsal space for skills – such as negotiation, compromise, self-acceptance, and collaboration – that have immediate application beyond the ‘bubble’ of Music Connects. These skills are also peacebuilding competencies, which is an important acknowledgment given the ongoing policy imperatives (regionally and internationally) to create lasting peace and stability in the region.

Yet at the same, the music-making must be authentic as music. This evaluation has found that Music Connects’ effectiveness is in the program’s capacity to maintain this authenticity while also creating safe space for alternative social relationships to form. It creates spaces in which those factors that have value and relevance in the musical world—such as musical competencies, the ability to improvise, collaborative and communicative skills, the willingness and capacity to be in synchrony with others—are in ascendance. It offers an experience of freedom from the way that factors such as ethnicity and religion can structure and limit everyday life. And throughout, the authenticity of the music-making remains foregrounded, supported by high-quality pedagogies and investments in infrastructure that increase the quality of the outputs and help to revive the region’s rock scene.

For these reasons, and compared with other music programs in conflict-affected areas with similar social goals, we consider Music Connects an exemplary program that combines strong social benefits with cultural development. It is successful in connecting young people, building a culture of inclusion in its programs, and normalising the idea of cooperation across ethnic division. Its decision-making is grounded in local knowledge and is highly responsive to subtle changes in local dynamics. Most importantly, Music Connects is trusted, innovative and inspirational, with strong potential to be a model for similar programs in other sites of entrenched social division.

Consistently and effectively over time, Music Connects helps to normalise friendly, positive, cooperative encounters with others and making deeper friendships possible. And in so doing, it changes the world for those young people.
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