

Pascal's Song

When Pascal was four years old he'd witnessed a massacre in his village in Rwanda but the school hadn't been told how he'd survived or by what extraordinary route he'd come to live in England. Profoundly traumatised and unable to form words, he had a singular way of communicating; a scream as he laughed, a scream with tears or a scream blank-faced while his teacher held him. The pitch never altered - there was, it seemed, only one thing he wanted to say.

I was the music teacher in a school for children with moderate learning difficulties in North London and Pascal was one of six children in a Year 2 class. Every week we'd sing. We'd sing about the Pet Shop, Tommy Tomato and The Lazy Bee. Pascal, clearly enjoying the experience would scream his contributions. His classmates generally accepted him although Joe, a boy on the autistic spectrum, would cover his ears a few minutes into the lesson. I was at one with Joe – sometimes the unrelenting sound would be too much and I'd want to leave the room. What, I wondered had Pascal actually seen? Then I skittered away from the horror and re-focused on the job I was doing and the music in the class.

I'd worked with this group throughout the year and by the end of the summer term I felt, at last, that I was really getting beyond their joyful involvement to something approaching a kind of healing. But with Pascal nothing seemed to have changed. Until one day...

Sessions always began with the Ghanaian children's chant Che Che Kuhle. This lovely call and response song allowed the children the space to vocalise from the start of the lesson and gave me the opportunity to assess the mood of each individual. Who's withdrawn today? Who's excitable? How are they pitching notes? With Pascal, of course, it was a

little more difficult to gauge these elements. Typically, he'd scream over my call, not waiting for the gap to make his response. There seemed to be little connection between us except for me believing that Pascal was glad to be involved in the music. After singing the chant a few times I'd indicate that the end of the song was approaching by lowering the volume of my call. The children's whispered response would then lead to a moment's silence before we started the next song.

One morning, Pascal seemed able to register the structure of the chant. He waited for me to finish the first 'Che che kuhle' before screaming in the gap. As I listened, astonished, he repeated this pattern for each successive line and then as I whispered the words, his scream became quieter and quieter until there was no scream. No scream at all.

All children's names have been changed.