

MUSIC AND THE SLOW LEARNER

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"Music springs from a profound response to life itself. It is a language and as a vehicle for expression it is available in some degree to everyone."¹.

Introduction

Music is one of the most flexible, inviting and rewarding areas of activity for children. An increasing awareness is now developing in this country that an active involvement with music is essential in the total development of every child. Through this involvement is learned sensory motor skills, auditory and visual skills, social skills, listening and movement - necessary components for all modes of learning and communication. There exists in our society however many children who have special needs. The importance of music in the education of these children is slow in gaining recognition. Research in the U.S.A. has investigated the area of the arts in relation to education of the handicapped child². but there is very little research available relating solely to the area of music. Articles, papers and books published in the English-speaking world, namely Britain and North America, are concerned with music and the handicapped or exceptional³ child, but in relation to the particular circumstances experienced in their countries.

In Australia there are two approaches to the teaching of music to children with special needs - through special education music teachers and educators and through music therapists. Music in special education is concerned with trying to help the personal development of the handicapped/ disabled child in a schooling situation whereas music therapists, usually in an institutionalised setting, directly intervene (as part of a team including doctors and psychiatrists) to change behaviours and feelings for medical reasons.

Literature is available relating to the area of music therapy in Australia but there is little published work concerned with music and special education apart from an article published in the Commonwealth Schools Discussion Papers.⁴ Within the area of special education in Australia it is difficult to locate any reference to music and the slow learner.

The Australian Association for Special Education published a book in 1981, Responding to Need : Special Education in the 1980's, containing papers read at their 1980 conference. In the area of curriculum papers were presented relating to art, language, physical education and mathematics. Music was not mentioned. The purpose of this paper is therefore to discuss music in relation to the slow learner. The term "slow learner" will first be defined followed by a rationale for the inclusion of music in the curriculum of a slow learner. Music in relation to special education in the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia will follow and a music program I have initiated with slow learners in an A.C.T. Primary School Learning Centre briefly reviewed.

The Defining of a Slow Learner

The term "slow learner" encompasses a wide range of children with varying ability in learning skills. Slow learner children, in their early years of schooling, experience difficulties in reading readiness and language skills below the normally expected standard. Often associated with these difficulties is an unwillingness, or inability, to conform to accepted behavioural patterns expected of their class or age group. A variety of circumstances may have caused a child to become a slow learner. Some of the features broadly identifying these children are -

- a limited intellectual potential which affects a child's capability to absorb quantities of knowledge and to develop certain skills (this can be as a result of neurological damage and perceptual handicap);

- an I.Q. : usually between 70 and 85; two years below chronological age;
- the missing out of important steps, leading to an understanding of the concepts of a subject, through illness or different and varied school changes;
- a lack of love and security needed to help intellectual growth and provide emotional stability;
- a physical incapacity which does not allow participation in regular life-styles resulting in withdrawn and introverted behaviour;
- difficulties in communication due to: differing cultural backgrounds; having English as a second language;
- a slow down/break down in developmental stages.

Slow learning children can be found in most schools. In Australia nearly 2% of the nation's children are enrolled in special schools in classes for physically, emotionally or intellectually disabled children. The Survey of Special Education in Australia⁵. undertaken for the Schools Commission, also showed however that approximately 2% of all students in regular primary and secondary schools had handicapping problems, 11% learning difficulties and 3.2% behavioural problems and fail to respond to regular teaching strategies.

In Australia children are identified as handicapped - "any disadvantage that makes success more difficult"⁶. - or disabled - "the measurable functional loss resulting from impairment"⁷, according to a variety of definitions individual to each State. Handicapped children, according to their disabilities, are found in a diversity of full time, or part

time, special education facilities. These range from help in the regular classroom from itinerant specialists, to segregated classes within the regular school such as a Learning Centre, to the concentrated help and resources of the Special School.

Music in the curriculum of a slow learner

Why should music be included in the curriculum of a slow learner? As with an average child in the regular classroom we have to look at the requirements of the slow learner and what he/she needs for self actualisation and development. These necessities have to be considered alongside the competence which can be expected of him/her in terms of growth and maturation.

Slow learners require a remedial-type education program that is designed to overcome particular disabilities. With the slow learner we have to assume there is a general slow down, as compared with peers, in the progress of their development or that there is an actual breakdown at some point.⁸ This is of relevance when considering a music program for slow learners and an individually tailored, carefully graded and modified music program needs to be designed building on what the child can do but aimed at experiential concepts several years below a slow learner's chronological age.

Music can make a unique contribution in meeting the needs of slow learners and in helping them realise their full potential. Through consistency, firmness, warmth and acceptance on the part of the teacher successful learning experiences can be directed through music. For the most part slow learners lack concentration, confidence and memory and so need a different approach to the teaching of music - more practical, more vivid and more vital than the usual approach in the regular school. The willingness of the teacher to accept a change, or variation, in regular teaching strategies will have great bearing on the success of the music program.

By participating in a wide variety of music activities slow learners can be helped to become more aware of themselves and of others. Music provides a social arena wherein children can learn to communicate, create, relate to one another, co-ordinate a work effort, experience leadership and appreciate the joy of doing something together. A child's self-image concept can be expanded in the group situation when emotions and things wanting to be expressed can be released through the creative environment provided by music. Graham⁹. says that "basic to any process or progress in the music education of exceptional children is the development and preservation of an accurate body image and healthy self-concept". Other educators concerned with music and the handicapped endorse this view and find that as a result of consistent, positive musical experiences the slow learner's self-image is improved. The child in relating to others as a member of a group experiences a feeling of capability and security which leads to the development of poise, self-confidence and personal satisfaction. The feeling of confidence can contribute markedly to the slow learner's re-entry into regular classroom participation.

The slow learner's learning capabilities, while differing from the developmental norm, do not exclude him/her from learning all of the time. An article by Welsbacker¹⁰. suggests that the processes of learning - perception, differentiation, conceptualisation - through music allow a child with learning disabilities to show knowledge in many ways. For example learning and distinguishing one sound from another aids perception; the differing of pitch, duration, intensity and timbre in sound helps differentiation; the combination of sounds into patterns, which can be repeated and varied infinitely, assists conceptualisation.

As well as auditory discriminatory skills visual and sensory motor skills are also developed and extended through music. Notation, and the visual tracking of notated rhythmic patterns, provides visual practice which can be extended into eye-hand co-ordination through the playing of musical instruments. Visual motor co-ordination, which implies the use of the aural, visual and kinesthetic senses,¹¹.

can also be improved and developed through the experience of rhythmic exercises so that ultimately children can hear, see and feel beats and simple rhythmic patterns in form. A fluency in mental and motor functioning can be achieved which helps facilitate speech, reading, writing, listening and movement.

Through musical movement slow learners can develop body co-ordination and learn to relate to the space about them, to objects and to other people. Often music appeals to the slow learner's body and emotions rather than to their intellect.¹² The expression of music through movement is therefore most appropriate. Music is essentially non-verbal. It is possible to feel music's expressiveness without expressing it verbally thus providing an opportunity for the slow learner to use his/her body creatively and to respond to music in an individual and spontaneous way.

Above all music can give enjoyment, an enjoyment that allows the discovery of feelings and experiences. By extending informal music-making to performing music for others the slow learner can also experience the joy and exhilaration of giving pleasure to others. It has been demonstrated in the United Kingdom that slow learners can achieve levels of musical performance which compare favourably with those of average children given the appropriate teaching.

An active music program allows the slow learner to learn the satisfaction of participation with others; to learn and practise skills which extend body co-ordination, visual and aural awareness, and feelings. Music need not however be confined to only one area of the curriculum. It can become inter-related through various learning experiences, situations and resources, with most of the "basic" subjects to form an integral and vital part of any slow learner curriculum.

Relating music to special education

The general success of special education programs in Germany, towards the end of the nineteenth century, led to the development of special classes in the U.S.A.¹³. where music was included in the curriculum. These were originally for retarded and other problem children. In recent years special education in the U.S.A. has been concerned with two broad categories of children - the handicapped and the gifted - to come under the general term of exceptional. With the passing of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, appropriate educational experiences were guaranteed for the exceptional child. This often meant bringing these children into the mainstream of music education courses. It was soon recognised that variations in the curriculum were necessary if these children, who deviate mentally, physically or emotionally from the average child, were to receive maximum benefits from their education. The Music Educators Journal in April, 1982 published articles featuring new techniques, lesson plans and strategies that can make music learning possible for handicapped students.

One of the references generally found in bibliographies concerned with special education is J. Dobbs who wrote The Slow Learner and Music¹⁴. Dobbs was Director, and D. Ward, Organiser, of the Music for Slow Learners project which was set up in the United Kingdom by the Standing Conference for Amateur Music to examine "the special contribution music can make to the education of slow learning children". This project terminated in 1976 after eight years of looking at the music activities of all groups of children, with the exception of the deaf and the blind, who were receiving special educational treatment in special schools and in special classes in regular schools.

Special Education in Australia recognises that there exists in our society differences among individuals and their

needs which vary to such an extent intellectually, physically, socially or emotionally from the average child that a special educational setting is required if they are to receive the full benefits from a learning situation. However if an indication of needs is to be gathered from the Australian Association of Special Education publication music is not considered an essential need in special education.

Two approaches to teaching music in Australia to children with special needs have been previously discussed. A need for music for the disabled/handicapped child has been identified by music therapists. In an article by Erdonmez and Cooke¹⁵. the roles of the special music teacher/educator and the music therapist are compared. They write "that educational goals and therapy goals overlap considerably and indeed there may be more similarities than differences in the two approaches". Further in the article they recognise that "the need is so great for trained personnel to work with the great numbers of children and adults, who are disabled and in need of specialist help, that a variety of models and schools of thought can be integrated without harm" (ibid. 14). A movement toward de-institutionalisation with community and educational involvement was recently expressed at the Australian Music Therapy Association National Conference, 1983. Perhaps the creating of this new environment will allow for more exchange of ideas and support between the two approaches.

The slow learner is often the "fringe dweller" of the special education services. Learning Centres and Special Schools cater for children with recognised slow learning difficulties but there are also the many students in regular schools with slow learner and associated behaviour problems. Besides the benefits that the inclusion of music in the curriculum can provide there are other areas where music can help in the general living experiences of the slow learner.

Communication difficulties are often experienced by the slow learner due to a differing cultural background or

from having English as a second language. The importance of music in the preservation and transmission of cultural values is generally recognised in most societies and music must be one of the most useful ways of reminding us what a melting-pot our world really is. In our country now populated by many ethnic groups music can be a useful tool in the developing of closer ties between differing traditions and in helping with migrant integration into the community.

As we move towards a future of more leisure time music will acquire a particular relevance in providing relaxation, outlets of expression, and forms of communication for many individuals. So too for the slow learner when active or inactive, formal or informal, musical activities can extend beyond the classroom. In preparing for adulthood, and the frustrations of work availability, satisfaction and success, music can provide an effective means through which slow learners can meet, and come to terms with, the world and reality.

A music program with slow learners

As a primary trained teacher with a music specialisation I am aware of the vast and essential contribution music can make to learning in this area. During the past four years I have developed a music program for slow learners in an A.C.T. Primary School Learning Centre. This program has been based on singing, the playing of instruments - percussion and chime bars - listening, movement and creativity. It has been developed intuitively using my musical training and experiences, and a personal involvement with the children, to create and adapt a musical program for their needs and abilities as slow learners. The main aim in the program has been to provide an enjoyable as well as a learning experience. Patience, spontaneous improvisation, constant reinforcement, imagination, enthusiasm, and above all optimism, have been

essential elements required in the development of the program. Concentration levels of the children are variable and sometimes the simplest of activities, such as sitting in a horseshoe formation, has taken hours to reinforce.

My judgement on the value of music for the Learning Centre children is based on the evident enjoyment the children are receiving through participating in the various musical activities. I see opportunities for communication and co-operation between each child; aural experiences; body co-ordination; visual exercise; creativeness; release of bottled-up emotions; relaxation; concentration; joy and pleasure provided by musical experiences.

To many educators the school curriculum consists only of the "basics", i.e. maths, language, the sciences etc. Little consideration or thought is often given to the needs of the child. Kodaly said in 1951 - "Recent psychological studies have convincingly established that the ages between 3 and 7 are the most important in education ... these years seem to be decisive in a man's whole life".¹⁶ For music then to become part of these formative years it has to be available at the same level of value as other important aspects of education. One can hope that as educators begin to realise and appreciate the value of music an awareness will also develop in the sphere of special education in Australia, of a child's increased ability to concentrate, the gaining of a greater physical and emotional control, and a general broadening of knowledge attained through the experience of music.

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