

## ABSTRACT

### RELATING MUSIC TO A SPECIAL EDUCATION SETTING IN AUSTRALIA

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Music programs currently being undertaken in two special education settings in Australia, support the view that music in special education is just as applicable as it is in general education. Particular features evolve through relating the reasoning of past and present music educators for the purpose of music education. Some of these features are the improving of learning skills, the fulfilling of social needs and the challenge offered through musical education both for the child in regular education and for the learning disabled child.

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The power of music in the training of a person's character, moral and aesthetic judgement was recognised by the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427-347 B.C.). In devising a curriculum for use in his republic he imposed rigid controls over the kind of music to be used in a child's general education. Plato saw appropriate experiences in music as crucial from earliest childhood:

"For rhythm and harmony penetrate deeply into the mind and take a most powerful hold on it, and if education is good, bring and impart grace and beauty, and if it is bad, the reverse"

(1955:163)

Song words, modes and rhythms were considered important. Words were determined by their content and form and certain rhythms and musical modes were selected for their association with evoking different types of feeling and character such as the Dorian and Phrygian modes for expressing elements of courage and self-control.

Without delving too deeply into the philosophy of the nature of a 'human' person, it is relevant to mention that in the days of Plato, and other Greek philosophers, there was an awareness of the soul and of the body. Plato devised a curriculum for early childhood divided between "mousike" for the soul or intellect, and "gymnastic" for the body (Bonham, 1982). Participation in and practice of these two components prepared the whole person for a healthy, active life

in harmony with him/herself and society. Plato believed that if children were taught and trained to choose the things that are good they would live harmoniously together. Bonham elaborates:

"Music incorporating good values - nobility, wisdom, courage, temperance, piety - would help achieve this ideal condition if it were used as the medium of habituation and behavioural control in early childhood. Plato's philosophy of music in education is based on a theory of ethos, on human character, as it is expressed in and conditioned by music. "Ethos" refers equally to individual and social character, to durable and permanent psychological states and regular patterns of behaviour".

(1982:21)

The writings of Plato thus contain the beginnings of reasoning for music in education.

In more recent times Reimer, in his book *A Philosophy of Music Education* (1970), writes that the art of music is a basic way of knowing about reality. He states that:

"Studying music makes one a better person in many ways; it improves learning skills; it imparts moral uplift; it fulfills a wide variety of social needs; it provides a healthy outlet for repressed emotions; it encourages self-discipline; it provides a challenge to focus efforts upon; it gives a basis for worthy leisure time; it improves health in countless ways; it is..... a most effective way to make people better people"

(1970:20)

One could elaborate on each of these supports in relation to a child's education (Bygrave, 1985). However I have selected three to discuss in reference to the theme of the Commission, "Music As It Relates To Therapy, Education or Medicine", with the focus on music as it relates to Education and Special Education. These are the improving of learning skills, the fulfilling of social needs and the provision of a challenge.

As expounded in detail elsewhere (Bygrave,1985), an examination of the acquisition of learning skills would indicate that most children learn in at least one or more different ways - through the auditory, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic perceptions. It is for example, through the development of auditory discriminations that a child learns to recognise, discern, differentiate and analyse sound. These skills

which are necessary for a child to be able to speak, communicate and read, can be developed through musical activities. For instance, the exploration of high/low, short/long, loud/soft sounds can lead to an improvement in a child's ability to listen and respond. Indeed, it is the area of auditory discrimination which is believed by many educators to be the most important in the development of successful reading skills (see eg. Bryant and Bradley,1985). Visual discrimination also can assist in expanding aural skills and to further extend language capabilities. By developing an understanding of the use of visual representation of sound through using musical terms, signs and notation, a child can learn to make sense of written symbols, words and numbers. The tactile and kinaesthetic modalities of learning add a further dimension to the reinforcing of aural and visual skills in music. Through tactile associations, such as the playing of a percussion instrument, or through kinaesthetic associations, such as rhythmic movement, the ability to feel beat and rhythmic patterns is developed. The sounds a child hears thus can be felt for their comparative duration, pitch and intensity. Consequently this aural, tactile and kinaesthetic awareness can be transferred more easily to the written visual symbol (Bygrave, 1985).

The theme of the XIX International Society for Music Education (I.S.M.E.) World Conference, 1990, "Music Education Faces the Future", acknowledges that "music is an integral part of general education and community life". The importance of social needs and social skills is identified and reflected in community living. Music can provide the social ground that allows children to learn how to communicate, to relate to one another, co-ordinate in a group situation, and to learn the joy of doing something together. For the shy child who has difficulty in expressing him/herself verbally, and for the child experiencing difficulty with written work, a common meeting place is established with other children in which to work, play and establish a rapport. Children quickly learn their capabilities and how to evaluate themselves and each other in a social situation. In discussing the question of how music should be taught, Schafer (1976) states that one can learn a good deal from social psychology about group dynamics:

"I never appoint leaders but let them arise naturally from the ranks. The trick is to devise varying assignments for the groups so that at one time or another each member will discover naturally that he or she possesses the requisite skill to lead the group".

(1976:241)

Such reasoning makes use of the non-threatening environment of music which allows each child to find relaxation, self-confidence and poise within the group.

There are many ways in which music can provide a challenge to the individual child. Often these ways take the form of educative learning and teaching aims, personal philosophies, methods of instruction, and so forth perhaps more concerned with a collective overall view rather than a challenge to an individual's actions. A challenge however must be seen also as the response of an individual to a situation, in this instance to the objects and events of music. Swanwick (1979) elaborates on this idea in an article relating to challenge and music education. He discusses the traditional and progressive views of music education before honing in on the fact that each individual is an inheritor, part of a tradition, and an innovator, creative, who shapes the world through the symbolic making processes of his/her own response actions:

"In a very real sense we are taken out of ourselves by being responsive (to music), we cease to be aware of our personality: new experiences open up before us."

(1979:5)

He comments on three roles of responsive involvement in relation to music - composition, which includes the originality of improvisation; audition, or the act of listening; and performance, the act of presenting music as an expressive event. Skills and knowledge, often over-ranked by music educators, are given indirect and supportive roles. These roles are concerned more with attaining a feeling of achievement in their relationship to the challenge composition, audition and performance presents to the individual.

The components which make music a justifiable discipline in any education system are just as applicable in a special education setting. The educative role of music in special education is concerned with the total development of the child. This includes the acquisition of knowledge skills - cognitive, psychomotor, and affective; social skills, and the development of a personal value system and positive self-concept (Bygrave, 1988). This total development of the child can in turn be linked to a challenge such as the responses of an individual child to the experiences of a music education program.

Approximately 11% of children enrolled in regular schools in Australia (Andrews *et al*, 1979), experience learning difficulties; they have problems responding to regular teaching strategies. Many of these children are catered for through special education facilities. These facilities range from special classes attached to regular schools, such as Learning Centres which provide various education programs focusing mainly on the learning problem areas of literacy and numeracy, to help for an individual within the regular classroom by a special-needs teacher. Behaviour problems often are associated with learning difficulties. Learning Disabled (L.D.) children as well often tend to lack the appropriate social skills necessary to readily assimilate into the regular school community.

The teaching of specific learning skills through one mode of learning can present learning problems for many L.D. children. Meyers and Burton (1989) discuss children experiencing learning difficulties in mathematics. If, for example, the teaching-learning emphasis in mathematics is mainly through a visual-processing approach, such as learning facts through the use of flash cards or filled-in-grids, the child who has deficits in visual processing will not be helped. Similarly a child who learns through kinaesthetic experiences would find problems in a teaching program centered around oral explanations. The point Meyers and Burton make is that appropriate learning in mathematics can be achieved through the identification of a L.D. student's particular modality processing deficit. This, followed by carefully planned instruction, can lead to successful learning.

Not only is such an approach appropriate for mathematics but it ought to apply to all learning. Recalling Reimer's support for studying music to improve learning skills, and the subsequent discussion on the acquisition of learning skills through music, one can perceive that musical activities provide a learning medium which encompasses all the learning modalities - aural, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic.

At the beginning of the school year in 1989, I introduced and supervised music programs in two Learning Centres attached to regular primary schools in the Australian Capital Territory (A.C.T.), by two teachers of L.D. children. These teachers were unfamiliar with and not confident in taking music and the children had had few previous musical experiences. The basic concern behind the implementation of the music programs was the apparent lack of development of the children's listening skills. It was felt that participation in daily musical activities might lead to improvement in

the children's listening skills as well as contributing to an overall improvement in a child's total development. The music program, based on various musical activities, is associated with singing, the playing of musical instruments, listening, movement and creativity. It is currently being undertaken with twenty L.D. children aged from 5 to 9 years.

Many of the musical activities in the program encompass all of the learning modalities. A favourite activity centres around the traditional song "Alison's Camel". The children enjoy singing this song. In one of the schools they have performed this song at a school assembly and have involved the mainstream children in singing, and in following and performing the actions of the song. Such an activity illustrates the acquisition of learning skills. Through listening to the song and responding by singing the song, auditory learning skills are provided. By following the actions of the song and moving to these actions, visual and kinaesthetic learning skills are experienced. Tactile awareness also can be incorporated and implemented by a child or children playing a beat on a musical instrument such as a drum or glockenspiel to signify and emphasise the number of humps Alison's camel can have.

Besides demonstrating the various modes of learning, participation in such a song also shows how music can be integrated into the curriculum areas an L.D. child can experience problems with. Reading, spelling and written composition skills, components of literacy, can be assisted through learning to listen and to distinguish, identify, blend and sequence sounds through singing. This can lead to word recognition, structure and strategies in language. Handwriting skills and fine motor control can be developed through hand-eye co-ordination activities, such as playing a drum or glockenspiel. Body movements can be controlled and co-ordinated through gross motor and fine motor movement to the music. In numeracy the most fundamental of all early number skills, counting, can be learned through playing and counting musical notes or beats, in this case to demonstrate a camel's humps. The grasping of such basic number concepts and skills can be extended later into counting musical bars and identifying tunes in for example, the 4/4 time of the song.

The performing of "Alison's Camel" at the school assembly gave the children in the Learning Centre positive social recognition in the school community. Many L.D. children lack a positive self-concept. Negative teaching and learning circumstances can lead to negative

associations with their peer group fostering the development of a poor self-image. Consequently some L.D. children withdraw into themselves or become attention-seeking or aggressive. Disruptive or deviant behaviours can occur which further alienate and isolate the L.D. child within the community. The performance of "Alison's Camel" by the Learning Centre children illustrated that social involvement with other children can occur through music. Since the performance the children's confidence and self-esteem has been developing steadily. Other songs have been performed, and acknowledged positively by the school community, creating a further awareness for these L.D. children that they too can contribute and participate in the life of the school.

As well as providing a social identity in the school community the music program has been an educational experience not only for the children but also for the teachers of both Learning Centre classes. Learning the various components such as beat and its associated concepts, for example long/short, heavy/light in the context of musical activities, has provided new social opportunities for them all in the classroom. The teachers are finding that the children are responding enthusiastically week after week to educative experiences focussing around music. They are experiencing a change from teacher-directed instruction to a more guiding and facilitative role in their teaching. The children within the classroom musical activities are co-operating and contributing as members of a group, are demonstrating that they are able to work independently and are enjoying the novelty of sharing and working with a partner. These developments are beginning to manifest themselves in other curriculum areas in the classroom. For example when the children undertake numeracy exercises, some are now able to work comfortably alone or happily in conjunction with a peer.

Thus music is providing a challenge to each of these Learning Disabled children. They are responding to the challenges of new experiences offered through a music education program. Each in his/her own way is learning that they can shape the world around them. Through the creation of a musical action, through listening to what music is, and through the expression of music to themselves and to others, these children are positively responding and relating to the educative experience music offers for their total development.

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