The 'exclusion' of autism:

How does music therapy aid the psychological, social and educational difficulties confronted by children with autism in a special education setting?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master
of
Music Therapy

at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

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2006
ABSTRACT

This research project explores how music therapy can provide opportunities for inclusion and exclusion for children with autism. It draws attention to the various psychological, social and education difficulties faced by children with autism regarding social inclusion and social exclusion. The project also considers current attitudes towards social exclusion documented within the fields of special education and child welfare and rights.

The research was conducted using a qualitative and naturalistic enquiry approach. The therapeutic method was client centred. Case material is presented for three children with autism who attended individual music therapy sessions once a week for a period of five weeks. Characteristic narratives of each music therapy session are included in the body of the text. From these, the researcher highlighted moments of inclusion and exclusion observed in the music therapy sessions for each child. These were collaborated and presented in classification tables designed by the researcher from her observations.

Music therapy sessions reveal evidence of opportunities for both social interaction and social isolation for three children with autism. Moments were categorised as Inclusion Moments and Exclusion Moments.

Inclusion Moments were grouped under four headings: Client Initiated Moments, Verbal/Vocal Communication Moments, Engaged In Music Non Verbal Moments and Therapist Supported Inclusion.

Exclusion Moments were grouped under four headings: Inappropriate Social Behaviours, Purposeful Removal from Musical and Social Interaction, Withdrawal and Therapist Supported Exclusion.

Techniques to support inclusion included listening, playing, improvising, singing and movement, adapting the level of attention demanded from the child. Exclusion could be supported by allowing the child to withdraw from verbal interaction and providing them with a safe and non-demanding environment.
This research project concludes that there are patterns of inclusion and exclusion in music therapy sessions and suggests that exclusion does play a role in music therapy for children with autism. The researcher highlights the difficulty for therapists to find a position that satisfies the child's right to social inclusion, while still respecting the child's lack of a need for social connectedness.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank and acknowledge the assistance of

Sarah Hoskyns
(Supervisor, Director of Masters of Music Therapy Programme, Massey University, Wellington)

Teachers and ESWs (who are more than helpers to me) at the Special Education Unit

Mary Hepburn
(Supporting Music Therapist)

Special thanks to

My dad and mum, Tony and Ellie Travaglia, who if they had not let me go to university to become a Rockstar, I might never have become a Music Therapist;

My flatmates Marianna Kennedy and Zoe Chennedy, for letting the lounge be a bomb site for officially the whole time I’ve lived here;

Fellow geeks including Anna ‘Queen Geek’ Hill and Fiona ‘Queen Procrastinator’ Shaw, for your friendship and support while writing the Thesis (and for always including time for leisure topics in our geek discussions);

Jason Secto for always needing the computer for emails while I was writing my thesis;

My array of proofreaders;

Malo and Havana for the endless supply of coffee;

And of course my dear friends, who are angels and have supported me through the entire Masters (you know who you are).

This thesis is dedicated to

The beautiful children of the Special Education Unit who have taught me so much.

Ethics approval was obtained from
Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC: PN application – 05/60) and
Central Regional Ethics Committee (CEN/05/10/075).
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