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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

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New Zealand.

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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 withdrawal 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.

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