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The Role of Art and Music Therapy Techniques in the Educational System of Children with Special Problems

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Abstract

There is international consensus that the educational environment has an important influence on children's mental and spiritual health. Especially in the case of children with special health problems, this is deeply related to aspects regarding Education Sciences and Special Psychopedagogy, Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy. The aim of this study is to systematize some effective art and music therapy methods. A music therapist must use music and all of its resonances (spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, social, aesthetic) to help children with disabilities improve their educational results. The proposed methods are: ludo therapy, drama therapy and art therapy.

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1. Introduction/ Problem Statement:

From ancient times, music has been known for its capacity to cure. Mythological characters like Apollo (god of music and medicine), and also personalities like Asclepius, Plato, Aristotle and Hippocrates recognized and put into practice the capacity of musical art to boost prevention and to cure certain physical and psychic diseases. "At different moments of history and in different cultures, over the last two and a half millennia, music has been considered part of medicine. Singing or listening to music is more than entertainment; it is a spiritual ascent, which maintains or restores health to mind or even body" (Dragulin, 2009).

Art-therapy and music-therapy play a great part in the development of some efficient learning practices and of emotional self-regulation. A constant preoccupation of the contemporary educational environment consists in

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applying therapy practices in order to promote physical, mental and spiritual health. This paper refers to children with special needs, affected by various diseases and requiring careful supervision lest their life quality should be irreparably affected. The paper presents the application of some therapeutic techniques that would facilitate their access to educational experience according to their needs; for this purpose, we have also resorted to the concepts and techniques of educational psychology.

“Educational Psychology is the scientific study of (cognitive and affective) human learning processes, that allows researchers to understand individual differences in behaviour, personality, intellect and self-concept. The field of educational psychology heavily relies on testing, measurement, evaluation and training to enhance educational activities and learning processes” (Snowman, 1997). Educational environment plays an important role in the development of a child (with or without special educational needs), because it needs to be calibrated according to the requirements of their expression capacity and knowledge assimilation, depending on age, background, level of education and interior development; children with special needs require special attention, which has been directly observed in our own experience. The connection between education sciences (including music) and educational psychology is essential in order to conceive and coordinate a pedagogic process in an effective way (especially concerning children with special health problems).

2. Purpose of Study:

The aim of this study is to systematize some effective art-therapy and music-therapy methods and the conditions under which they provide their maximum benefits, and also to present the results of some specific experimental situations which were carried out within the department of postgraduate Melotherapy studies at Transilvania University of Brasov (where I work as a member of the teaching staff). This experimental research involved both participants in the courses (professionals in regards to psychological, educational, pedagogical, medical or musical training) as well as the members of the teaching staff who offered assistance with various courses and applications.

Children with varying degrees of disabilities have special educational needs and their condition can be improved through music therapy interventions, by using new strategies for the transfer of learning, concerning the study of memory, conceptual processes and individual differences (cognitive psychology). A good educational system promotes not only a quantitative learning approach, but also training of the whole human being (soul, mind and body), while taking into account the motivations and the individual or group emotional substrate, the development of a spiritual profile, of a good character, of a moral education. Children are particularly responsive to music. They address it in a very natural way, no matter if they have studied music or not. “Children with physical, cognitive, mental, sensory and emotional or developmental disabilities (93 million, in accordance with the statistics of UNICEF) are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in society, facing daily discrimination in the form of negative attitudes, lack of adequate policies and legislation”. They are effectively barred from realizing their rights to healthcare, education, and even survival” (<http://www.unicef.org/disabilities/>).

3. Therapeutic Techniques

A therapist must use music / art and all of its resonances (spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, social and aesthetic) to help children with disabilities improve their educational results. Using the specific procedures, music / art therapy methods were classified according to their effects on children with special needs. The proposed methods are either strictly musical or they are integrated in a complex context (that involves music therapy): ludo therapy (play therapy), drama therapy (the intentional use of drama and/or theatre processes to achieve therapeutic goals) and art therapy (particularly for teenagers). These methods are used simultaneously, as needed, in complex therapeutic art workshops (organized according to the age and level of development of children), under the direct supervision of professional therapists. Music / art therapy is effective for healthy children too, having obvious positive effects in the improvement of communication skills, the exteriorization of feelings, the development of emotional and volitional maturity and the integration within a community sharing common interests and which is meant to valorise them.

Ludo therapy can also be practiced in the case of pre-school children whose motivation is not yet strengthened as to be able to undergo a complex, advanced educational process. Ludo therapy enables the integration of children

into an environment that provides safety and the freedom of expression of feelings, under the psychological and pedagogical supervision of the therapist and educator. Ludo therapy (combined with art therapy) has the advantage to open a series of almost unlimited possibilities of progress, a very large creativity domain that allows patients' free manifestation.

Drama therapy is "the use of theatre techniques to facilitate personal growth and promote mental health. Drama therapy is used in a wide variety of settings (hospitals, schools, mental health centres, prisons). Drama therapy (a form of expressive art therapy, known as expressive therapy) exists in many forms and can be applied to individuals and various groups" (Malchiodi, 2003). Drama therapy must be associated with other therapeutic techniques that involve the arts (especially music) in order to obtain the best and most sustainable results.

Art therapy has emerged as a mental health profession in the 1940s. "Art therapy is a mental health profession in which clients use art media, the creative process and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, emotional conflicts, self-awareness, manage behaviour and addictions, develop social skills, improve reality orientation, reduce anxiety and increase self-esteem and personal well-being" (<http://www.arttherapy.org/aata-educational-programs.html>). Art therapy, especially, involves improvisation and creativity elements within drawing, painting or sculpture (fine art), with or without music, which take place within more or less controlled experiments, with an individual or specific group. The educational approach must be carried out on many levels at the same time so that the development of the skills occurs at the same time in a certain context, in a complex and effective educational unit.

Music therapy implies the relation between the subject and a specific musical repertoire offered by specialised staff. Music therapy is active in all domains that characterize a human being: music can help us to relate to our own feelings and emotions in order to be able to identify them, to control them, to become aware of them, to give them a direction and a value. „The resemblance that counts most for the expressiveness of music is between the temporally unfolding dynamic structure of music and the configurations of human behaviour associated with the expression of emotion" (Davies, 2006).

Music is a part of all the methods that we propose to consider thoroughly in this study. Music is included, in a direct or an indirect way, in all the modern methods concerning life quality improvement because it has the outstanding advantages of being a universal language that can be understood by anyone who has a certain level of education. Music offers direct access to the deepest levels of the human soul and personality. This sustains the efficiency of music therapy through different cultures and educational ambiances, for different ages and education levels, in a very broad and complex context.

Melotherapy is a complex process, based on the individual knowledge of the subject and on important psychotherapy resources, music being used with a view to rehabilitating the state of health or even curing. Music therapy implies a multidisciplinary area, which involves using concepts belonging to music, psychology, philosophy, psychoacoustics, psychoanalysis, pedagogy and education sciences, musicology, aesthetics and sociology. From Greek antiquity, music was associated to concepts of unity, harmony and order: "the concept of proportion had a dominant role in the philosophic and scientific speculations. The Pythagorean theory of the musical harmony (which is a pure mathematical one) relies on the theory of proportions" (Ghyka, 1981).

Music therapy can be practiced in an active or passive way, involving the subject in singing (vocal or instrumental) some musical segments or only in listening to them, while noticing his/her reaction in different contexts and the improvement of his/her state of health. Passive melotherapy is a responsive therapy, which contributes to processing experiences by sharing them, by discussing the associations that emerged, and by becoming aware of some less obvious emotional phenomena. "In the stages of emotional reorganization, music can diminish certain functions with harmful role and it can stimulate qualities that have a regulating character." (Athanasiu, 2003).

Apart from vocal sounds (materialized in songs and games) we can successfully use musical instruments as well. We mention some musical instruments employed in music therapy for children aged under seven years old or older: percussion instruments (that we can tune or not). These instruments can be used at a primary level without previous special instruction and they can communicate in a direct way the spiritual status of the subject. Percussion instruments have the advantage of giving value to one of the fundamental elements of art, rhythm. The rhythm of music, of which one performs or listens, can balance man's biological rhythm (defined by the state of health, temperament and hereditary factors), influencing the harmony of the whole being. Rhythm is the element the most

attached to the atavistic part of a human being and to the universe of the physiologic rhythms that we can find deep inside us. The piano can also be successfully used at such a stage. It can be used for children with special health problems as well because it is easy to handle by a subject who does not have a special musical education. We will use brief improvisations (associating melody and rhythm or only rhythm) that are easy to develop in the next stage. We use elements of musical composition and elements of musical performance in the process of music therapy in such a manner.

Music therapy is also a method for children with autism or ADHD because music can help “stabilize moods, increase frustration tolerance, identify a range of emotions and improve self-expression” (Crowe, 2007). Autism is a contemporary problem increasingly present in specialized literature and in the educational environment but “music may serve as an emotional outlet for people with autism. While other avenues of emotional expression and understanding may be difficult for people with autism, music may provide those with limited understanding of socio-emotional cues a way of accessing emotion” (Heaton, 2009). Music is a universal language that originates in a fundamental need for expression. This need has its origins in the “ante-predicative or even pre-reflexive levels of the human spirituality. These levels include a series of structures characterized by a low degree of differentiation that generate perceptive and imaginary units beyond any formal logics” (Misdolea, 2013).

4. Discussion:

The method to be used requires the music therapist to improvise a fragment that reflects a certain spiritual status. At that moment, we will also join the subject of the therapy. It is desirable that the music therapist be responsive to the individual structure of the subject: age, level of education, ambiance, moral education, health problems, level of attachment to the music and musical style preferred. Music can be combined with the experience of fine art and in this next case the result is eloquent.

The case study is part of the specialized practical training performed by the participants in the postgraduate Melotherapy courses at Transilvania University of Brasov; it proposes and develops situations for applying art and melotherapy methods to school-age children (8-11 years old), during a period of three months (March-May 2014). In the picture below children younger than seven years old express the style characteristics of the art of Chopin and Bach. In this case, we have the freedom and capacity to improvise, matched with a drawing representing the sea and illustrating the music of Chopin – picture a, and order and constructivism, matched with a drawing representing a great castle and illustrating the music of Bach – picture b. The colours are symbols of the spiritual condition that the children unfolded during the audition (various, intense colours in picture a, and dark, toneless colours in picture b):



Fig. 1. Drawings made by the children who participated in the music therapy projects (a, b)

For children with autism, each music therapy session used various topics. Topics such as “me”, “myself as a baby”, “friendship”, “relationship”, “family”, „conductor”, “singer”, and “drummer” were used as motifs for a percussion instruments’ performance. The therapist observed every child’s attitude being displayed during the performance (acceptance, neutrality, or rejection). To maximize therapeutic treatment it is best that music therapy

should begin as soon as possible after diagnosis. By integrating children into a pleasant and safe environment, they gain real benefits in terms of socializing with other members of the group as well as strengthening the role that each one of them has within the group (which confers them prestige and self-control).

Therapy started with an objective evaluation and the parents were present at all meetings. Music therapy of autistic children can be associated with various educational activities to speed up the acquisition of skills. As we have previously mentioned, within the department of postgraduate Melotherapy studies at Transilvania University of Brasov (where I work as a member of the teaching staff), several experimental research sessions were carried out, coordinated by the participants in the courses (professionals in regards to psychological, educational, pedagogical, medical or musical training) as well as by the members of the teaching staff who offered assistance with various courses and applications. One of the most complex applied research projects was carried out from October 2013-June 2014, and it involved the presence of children with hyperkinetic syndrome and delayed mental development. After nine months of bi-weekly sessions, 4 children aged 5-8 years began to listen to music as a basis for new activities (learning, focusing, playing, team work, improvement of emotional and social behaviour, and self-control). This experimental research implied using melotherapy as a group therapy, carried out in an ideal setting (a soundproofed average-sized room, with very good musical acoustics, with recording and hearing possibilities, and fitted with a professional lighting system). Professionals chose the music to which they listened. The sessions were carried out in the presence of therapists, who, in the case of the more responsive and talented children also stimulated their creativity. The results of the research project were analysed in studies presented at the specialty symposia in Romania, and were subsequently implemented within a special education institution in Brasov, thus contributing to the improvement of the life and learning conditions for school-age children (8-12 years old).

Language problems are also increasingly frequent disorders. They determine emotional dysfunctions that could be improved by using music therapy; “children suffering from language impairment have been shown to be unsuccessful at distinguishing emotions from musical excerpts. Instead, these children were more successful at distinguishing emotions based on visual cues such as photographs of faces displaying particular emotions” (Spackman, 2005). Heart diseases and affective and neurological disorders (such as schizophrenia, amnesia, depression, aphasia and speech disorders) could be improved in music therapy sessions.

5. Conclusion:

Children affected by health and behaviour problems, by language dysfunctions or educational problems need professional therapists who will collaborate with teachers, parents and doctors. The psychological and educational environment is deeply related to aspects regarding Education Sciences and Special Psychopedagogy, Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy. Music has an undeniable influence especially on children with disabilities. Music can help us develop our sentimental, intellectual and spiritual life, but also our capacity to know our deep being. These children will be more balanced during their school life, and also during their adult life. The process of diversification of educational experience is essential in addressing children with special needs. Art and music therapy offers them the advantages of a universal, non-verbal language, with immediate and strong emotional effects. Music and art therapy methods allow the development and harmonisation of all personal abilities of children with special needs, contributing to their social integration.

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