

Special needs children benefit from music therapy

December 10 2010

The benefits of using music as an everyday tool when teaching disabled children have been demonstrated in research by Daphne Rickson, the first PhD graduate from the New Zealand School of Music—a joint venture between Victoria and Massey universities.

Mrs. Rickson's degree will be conferred at the Victoria University graduation in the Michael Fowler Centre on Tuesday.

A lecturer in [music therapy](#) in the school at Massey's Wellington campus, she has worked with teams supporting four primary school-age children with very high special needs in South Canterbury, the West Coast, the Bay of Plenty and Hawke's Bay.

She spent a week at each school, showing the teachers and teacher aides working with the disabled student how to include music in activities and daily routines, and provided a term of follow-up support to ensure the strategies were cemented in classroom programs.

Mrs. Rickson says using music made a tangible difference to the relationship between team members and the student. "A big part of it was that the team members felt more motivated and optimistic as a result of using music in their teaching and care giving. They were able to communicate better with the student once they had learned strategies like taking the lead from the student and going a bit more slowly to allow time for a response.

"As a result they became more positive about the student, and expected and got more from them."

One example was a student who constantly got up from their desk and moved around the classroom. "The teacher made up a 'sitting at your desk song' and would sing it to the child whenever they weren't at their desk. Within a few weeks, the student was remaining seated for much longer periods."

Mrs. Rickson says giving team members confidence in their musical ability was one of the challenges. "People think you have to be talented to make music, but that is a socially constructed view. In many cultures, music is as natural as talking, and dancing as natural as walking."

"Some of the team members were self-conscious at the start but the positive results made them bolder, together with the fact that other children in the classroom did not make a big deal of it. Children at that age don't judge; they just love the sounds."

Many of the research participants told her the music strategies would be helpful for all students, not just those with special needs. "[Music](#) motivates and is a great form of emotional expression. It also keeps a group together—a class of children that is marching and singing is more contained."

She believes her approach, of spending intensive time with the team followed by ongoing support, is a formula that would work well in other specialist areas. "You have to build a rapport with the team and see what they do day-to-day to find out how best they can include new strategies in their routine. Going to a seminar for a few hours would be much less effective."

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

Citation: Special needs children benefit from music therapy (2010, December 10) retrieved 21 September 2024 from

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