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**THE ROLE OF SINGING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
CREATIVITY AND LANGUAGE IN MILDLY TO  
MODERATELY RETARDED CHILDREN AND  
ADOLESCENTS**

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# The Role of Singing in the Development of Creativity and Language in Mildly to Moderately Retarded Children and Adolescents

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This paper briefly evaluates the way in which society's attitudes toward music, particularly spontaneous song, may be reflected in the classroom setting, perhaps to the detriment of the development of children's creativity, language and music. The premise of the paper is that the encouragement of spontaneous song in intellectually handicapped children helps promote language and pitch exploration, communication skills, extension of vocabulary and critical thinking capacities, divergent exploration of numerous dance or instrumental accompaniments, and the development of musical concepts and associated terminology. Pedagogical approaches and techniques are suggested within an unrestricted learning environment in which the role of the teacher changes from time to time.

## INTRODUCTION

For most people, the manner in which one participates in music is largely dictated by a complex matrix of both internal and external influences. Some people will often sing without inhibition, for example while engaged in repetitive tasks, whereas other people rarely sing and only do so if they are sure that others cannot hear. The appropriateness of the musical activity is clearly influenced by social and emotional circumstances. It would appear that the older and more 'sophisticated' people become, the less they engage in spontaneous musical experience, such as singing or dancing, and the more they experience music vicariously through activities such as listening to records or attending concerts or ballets. In addition, there appears to be a great deal of conditioning associated with the notion that musical performance is for the elite only, and that average persons have no right to indulge themselves in musical participation unless they have obtained a fairly high level of competence.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint all the sources of such conditioned responses to music, it seems quite apparent that the attitudes of adults who have frequent and close contact with children and mentally retarded people clearly have an influence on the development of their long-term values and attitudes toward music. One obvious, negative influence on children's musical values is the desire for quietness and order within the classroom or residential setting. Very early in many children's education, they learn that spontaneous participation in musical activities is not appropriate in the classroom where 'one is supposed to be learning'. However, one must not discount the numerous possibilities for advancement in many developmental and subject areas (such as language, music, memory, socialization and physical development) through spontaneous song.

In general, a great deal of learning takes place through all forms of spontaneous activity. An 'integrated day' approach, based on the early childhood (pre-school) model of education, provides the opportunity for mentally retarded children and adults to learn while engaged in many forms of spontaneous activity. In this type of programme, the development of individual and group abilities are carefully monitored through the teacher's selection of skill-appropriate materials and activities, although a disproportionate emphasis may be placed on structured lessons which focus on 'academic' subject areas, such as arithmetic or language. Other important activities, such as singing, dancing, playing musical instruments or listening to music, may also be placed inappropriately into a structured routine only, where the intellectually handicapped child learns to become dependent upon the teacher for stimulation. This is particularly true in programmes where music takes place (or is allowed) only at the scheduled 'music time'. While structured group experiences in music are educationally appropriate, the appropriateness of spontaneous musical experiences should not be overshadowed by formal music lessons.

The general aim of this paper is to outline the role of singing for mentally retarded children, focusing on both spontaneous and structured singing experiences. It deals only with mildly to moderately retarded children or adolescents in a structured setting such as a classroom, although many of the approaches and concepts discussed may be adapted and applied to children of different levels of ability.

## SINGING

Spontaneous, invented songs are not created very frequently by low ability retarded children; however, they are generated by individuals who would be classified as mildly retarded or in the borderline range of intellectual ability. Students functioning at the level found in special education classrooms, in sheltered workshops and various job situations spontaneously sing improvised melodies which express their own feelings. In addition, they may

develop the ability to sing on pitch and participate in more organized singing experiences, such as two-part songs or rounds (Cypret, 1975; Beall, 1985). The creation of song should be encouraged by teachers not simply for the promotion of individuality and creativity, but also because the activity encourages achievement in areas of personal growth, such as socialization, communication, perception and language development.

Spontaneous songs usually grow from repetitive motor activities and language exploration, and frequently contain repetitive words or phrases (Andress, 1980). For example, the words to an invented song which occur synchronously with the movement while painting at an easel might be 'Dab dab, spotty spot spot'. The 'melody' that accompanies these words might be characterized by a mixture of glissando and spoken tones with some clearly identifiable pitches. While engaged in spontaneous song, the inventor is not concerned with aspects of musical ability such as the use of a tonal centre, rhythmic consistency, stability of tempo or the exact reproduction of intervals. However, the rudiments for a specific musical grammar or set of rules which govern Western music could generally be considered to be developing (McKernon, 1979).

Where spontaneous songs are found the pitch range can be quite extensive, incorporating large rather than small melodic intervals; however, the vocal range generally used in a learned song, such as a sung nursery rhyme, is often limited to approximately a fifth (Davidson *et al.*, undated). Whether the songs are spontaneous or learned, retarded children usually have two interrelated limitations regarding pitch. First, they tend to use a restricted vocal range in their beginning experiences, and second, they have difficulty matching pitch with others.

#### Learning to Sing in Tune

There are several techniques which an educator can use to help intellectually handicapped children to sing in tune. Most importantly, the educator must encourage them to create spontaneous songs, as it is through these that many pitch deficiencies may be overcome. The teacher must give the creator the impression that spontaneous songs are very special, by means of positive physical contact and verbal encouragement, such as 'That's a nice song. Can you sing it again?' (McDonald, 1979).

The spontaneous creation of songs, often simply for pleasure, provides children with individual opportunities to become aware of the physical experience of singing. This physical experience is important not only for the development of sensitivity to the highs and lows of pitches in songs, but also to the vocal inflection of speech. Sensitivity to the sounds and physical experiences associated with varying the pitch while singing will extend retarded children's vocal range while increasing their accuracy in matching

pitch. The exaggerated dramatization of vocal, facial and physical expression during the reciting of favourite tickling, clapping and action rhymes is particularly effective on a one-to-one basis, but is also enjoyable in a small group.

Retarded children need positive feedback regarding the accurate matching of pitch so that they may formulate a model for themselves. It is advisable for educators to match the child's pitch range rather than attempt to impose their own. Conforming to the handicapped person's singing range has the added advantage of teaching the concept of singing in unison (Smith, 1963).

Songs which contain intervals larger than a fifth or sixth are often compressed by the singers to fit their vocal range (Davidson *et al.*, undated). Consequently, early songs which a retarded child will learn should have a range which is limited to approximately a fifth (between D and A, above middle C). When singing these songs in a group of peers, children will often listen without joining in, may lag behind in the words, and sometimes only whisper the words or sing parts of the songs (usually a repeated phrase). Such behaviour will decrease with reinforced experience, particularly with unvaried repetitions of favourite songs and frequent opportunities to listen before participating in a group. The basic of all musical understanding lies in the ability to listen perceptively (McDonald, 1979).

#### Singing for Language Development

Retarded children respond well to the singing voice, and the teacher can assist in their development by singing frequently to them, incorporating names and other personal aspects of their daily lives into the songs. With frequent encouragement to sing and increased familiarity with the experience, retarded children also may use music as a means for manipulating words and phrases. Such word play not only helps develop auditory discrimination and memory in children, but also helps them learn many speech sounds while increasing their vocabulary (Cypret, 1975). Nonsense rhymes, silly songs and verses have particular appeal and help develop language proficiency and rote learning.

As competence in language increases, some children find it easier to express their thoughts through song rather than speech, probably because of the playful nature of the activity and the opportunity to use silly, nonsense words and fantasy (Andress *et al.*, 1973). Singing, rather than speaking, also gives them freedom to use 'poetic licence' by extending a phrase or holding a word while they are thinking of their next ideas. 'Singing conversations' in which the regular, spoken communication is replaced with singing, can be more enjoyable and less threatening to the more inhibited people if puppets or favourite toys are used to displace attention away from themselves (Stecher and McElhemy, 1976). Improvised singing conversations may be based on special events, such as field trips. Making tape-recordings of these

songs can be very personal and provide the children with immediate feedback to an event. If kept, they may return to these tapes at a later date, just as they do to records or books in their library. Other activities of a similar nature are 'Show and Sing' (rather than 'Show and Tell') and 'Sing a Picture' (where a singing conversation or story about what is seen in a picture is improvised).

In an environment where spontaneous songs are encouraged and singing conversations are common, improvised chants and songs will be created by many children throughout the day. As musical experience grows, the sensitive teacher will gauge when it is appropriate to join in and promote these activities by echoing the creator's ideas, adding a clapped or instrumental accompaniment, stimulating a dance, or by extending the ideas used. For example, the teacher may pick up the rhythmic and/or melodic ideas established by the retarded child and join in on the chant or song. Once this had been established, extra or different words may be added to the original chant along with a supportive clapped accompaniment. The obvious gain here is the development of word usage and language reinforcement. Vocal inflection, facial expression and body language can add mystique to the experience as the teacher gently moves into a complementary dance pattern. This activity could be sustained for several minutes, with ideas for extension coming from both people. When the youngster is having difficulty thinking of ideas, open-ended questions which lead to inductive thinking may be sung by the teacher to extend the original ideas. For example, 'Who saw that clickity-clackity train?', 'How did it sound as it raced down the hill?', and other questions starting with 'What', 'When' and 'Where' are particularly good for open-ended response. Divergent questions such as these are important for the development of retarded children's critical thinking capacities.

With the more capable mentally retarded children, the vocabulary and creative use of language will be extended through the activity of modifying the words of familiar songs and nursery rhymes. Although this activity may be based on many favourite songs, a commonly heard example involves adapting the words to 'This is the Way we Wash our Clothes' to accompany numerous spontaneous activities. For example, 'This is the Way Jane Sweeps up Sand' becomes a personalized rendition which will help encourage the continuation of the activity. This continuation may have benefits in the development of many specific areas in addition to language achievement, such as gross motor co-ordination, self-help skills, self-esteem or socialization. Such modifications are not difficult for the handicapped person if the song has been made very familiar and if the teacher uses the techniques frequently.

#### Learning Musical Concepts

The task of involving retarded children in the creation of their own words to accommodate their own ideas will be simplified if the teacher illustrates the

melodic and rhythmic similarities between a number of songs in the standard repertoire. For example, note the similarities between 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' and 'Baa, Baa Black Sheep'; 'This is the Way we Wash our Clothes' and 'The Wheels on the Bus'; or 'The Farmer in the Dell' and 'Where is Thumbkin?'. The similarity between these songs is advantageous for retarded children as it is supportive of their need for repetition and familiarity. In addition, it provides them with examples of numerous possibilities for variation, and stimulates the notion of composing their own, often better, renditions.

Intellectually handicapped people can be made aware of the similarities of melodic and rhythmic content of songs through musical games which focus their attention on isolated musical elements. For example, they may be asked to recognize familiar tunes from the clapped rhythm (without words), or from the melody sung on 'loo', or played on an instrument (Kodály Musical Training Institute, 1975). The challenge of performing these familiar songs in this fashion encourages children to: (1) Separate out the specific musical elements (rhythm, pitch, text); (2) Think one thing while doing another; and (3) Develop the important musical skill of 'inner hearing' (i.e., hearing the words and melody 'in the head' without actually singing them).

Educators may assist retarded children to stabilize their concepts of pitch by tracing the contours of the melody with their hands, puppets or toys while singing. Songs in which actions or general movements (e.g., up/down for the concept of 'high/low') support the direction of the melody also help reinforce the abstract nature of the concept of pitch. Although some students may not be able to move their limbs purposefully, the teacher may help them participate in the activity by moving their legs up and down in time to the music or by tapping them against drums or tambourines. If some of the children are confined to a wheelchair, moving their chairs back and forth to the music will help them interact more with music and the teacher, and also will often stimulate responsive vocalization to the music (Cypret, 1975).

The use of correct terminology is very important when presenting and practising the concept of pitch and when talking to children about melodies (Choksy, 1974). Singing activities should provide the children with a foundation for perception of basic music contrasts. Just as it is important to use the correct terms to identify examples of other concepts, such as shape, colour or volume, the correct words to describe general musical concepts (i.e., 'fast/slow' for tempo, 'loud/soft' for dynamics and 'high/low' for pitch) are important for the development of auditory discrimination and musical proficiency. Whenever possible, activities which involve the perception of musical contrasts should be conducted with a small group of a few children or on a one-to-one basis.

#### CONCLUSION

The development of a creative, unrestricted learning environment for mentally retarded children in which music and its appreciation can burgeon is

dependent upon many factors. Not the least of these is the physical environment and the personal qualities of the teacher. In simple terms, the classroom must be flexible so that it provides for the development of the individual's personal, social and artistic character. The classroom structure should allow for (McDonald, 1979):

exploration, imitation, experimentation  
leading to  
discrimination, organization, creation  
which, in turn, leads to  
reorganization, production, conceptualization

This scheme presupposes that the room will be designed to allow for many activities including secluded nooks where the children may retreat for personal and private singing experiences. Additionally, there must be ample room for movement and free expression.

The second variable is the teacher. From time to time the role of the teacher will change; at times initiator, sometimes participator, and sometimes appreciator. The sensitive teacher will know how to initiate without restricting, when to participate without unwelcome intervention, and how to appreciate with encouragement (McDonald, 1979).

Special education teachers must continuously examine their own attitudes towards singing and music, search for new insights into retarded children's behaviour, and become increasingly aware of the potentials of the interactions between the child and music. Music for retarded children should not be used merely for 'therapy', nor should it simply be activity based or designed to keep the children busy. As well, a programme should provide more than just socialization, as there is much more that can be gained through music education. A general underlying aim of a music programme, in addition to the goals described in this paper, must be to instil in the child an appreciation for singing and general musical expression which will continue to develop and last for a lifetime.

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