

ELUCIDATING JAPANESE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH MALAYSIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC THERAPY APPROACH FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an intervention therapy that uses the unique methods of Malay traditional performance, which relates the dances and songs of 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang'. The therapy will assist in the socialization of special needs children and work upon their audience perception skills. This study utilized a quantitative method facilitated by a survey questionnaire that was distributed to an audience during a special concert that included children with special needs and other students. The 20-items survey of 5-point Likert Scale was descriptively analyzed for each item's percentage. Consequently, it has been determined that performances which particularly embrace the arts of music, singing, dancing and acting have a great influence and impact on groups with special needs. This research contributes to the literature by illustrating how traditional music therapy can stimulate special needs children to improve their active engagement in their own lives and that of their community.

Keywords: Japanese Community, Music Therapy, Special Needs Children, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Art therapy comprising of music, dance and singing was introduced in the 1950's as an intervention program (Talwar et al., 2006). The objectives of such a therapeutic method were to restore and improve the psychological condition of individuals and physiological disorders particularly for children with special needs (Berger, 2002). Several types of music, singing and dance approaches have been used in previous research to socialize and communicate with special needs children in an attempt to overcome their disabilities, especially in the contexts of social communication and behavior (Kim et al., 2008; Duffy & Fuller, 2000). To further understand and encourage participation of the special needs group into musical activities, feedback from the caregivers and particularly their parents is also needed. The focus of this feedback would be the child's behavior and improvement.

Generally, it is noted that musical interaction with special needs children in the form of singing, playing, movement, and listening can be very creative, joyful, and fun. Children with multiple disabilities have shown a significant development in their general education following active participation in various musical styles and approaches. As a result, adapting musical education to music therapy has been widely used as music intervention (Chiengchana & Trakarnrung, 2014). Singing is one of most the direct methods of musical learning since language, speech, chants and songs are linked inextricably with the activity. In addition, children can learn social skills through the use of singing types of games, as well as expanding their vocabulary by learning words through songs (Campbell & Kassner, 2002). Research by (Lau, 2005) found that singing and games in music lessons cultivated a young child's social development. These results indicate that when a child is held back by their disabilities, music will permit them to have alternative adaptations that are conducive to a better and more active participation in their life.

Meanwhile, dance movement can be a valuable tool for therapeutic healing and can play an important role in promoting self-esteem and the development of coping strategies among special needs children (Murcia et al., 2010). Moreover, dance movement boosts the motivation to overcome functional limitations and challenges, especially among young children with disabilities (Duggan, 1978). Thus, music, singing, and dance are universal phenomena with significant implications in spite of differences in culture or custom. It is undeniable that these elements are substantially accepted as representing the identity of any nation or culture.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Special Needs Children

One percent of the world population has autism spectrum disorder (CDC, 2015), and the prevalence increased by 6-15 percent per year between 2002 and 2010. Meanwhile, 1 percent of the adult population of the United Kingdom has autism spectrum disorder (Brugha et al., 2011), and more than 3.5 million Americans live with autism spectrum disorder (Buescher et al., 2014). As statistics currently indicate a global increase in the number of children with special needs, notably down syndrome and autism. Data shows incidences of Down Syndrome in Japan and Malaysia of 159,169 and 29,403 respectively, representing 1-in-800 overall births annually.

A Japanese study in 2008 by Kawamura and colleagues reported that the prevalence has estimated to be 181.1/10,000. Meanwhile, according to the National Autism Society of Malaysia, the organization's intake of individuals with autism has increased by 30% for the past three years (Clinch, 2009). In conclusion, the prevalence of autism appears to be rising at a potentially alarming rate, with some studies suggesting an increase of 10% to 17% annually in the previous few years. Autism appears to be more likely to affect boys than girls, a phenomenon that is still without explanation. Ten years ago, autism spectrum disorder would have been diagnosed as learning disabilities or even mental retardation (Jevtic, 2015).

Children with autism experience some problems or disabilities; for example, ASD is a type of neurodevelopmental disorder affecting a person's mental, emotional, learning and memory capabilities (McCray et al., 2014). According to (Bicard & Heward, 2013), this group of children often facing problem particularly on impairment of social interaction, lack of communication and stereotyped pattern of behaviors, interests, and activities. As a result, they portray problems of passivity, tantrums and lack of common sense, aggression, rebellion, lack of spontaneous or imaginative play, rocking their body in a sitting position, flicking fingers, twirling around, spinning objects, staring at lights, sniffing at the air and flapping hands at the wrists (Loftin et al., 2008). Due to these multiple disabilities, they can also exhibit sensory losses, behavior and/or social problems (Singh, 2010).

Special needs children also face a sensory impairment that affects the sensitivity towards sight, hearing, touch smell and taste sense, which showed 70-80% of them, exhibited sensitivity to sensory stimulation (Harrison & Hare, 2004). Specials needs children also appear to be over-responsive (hypersensitive) and have an inability to stand certain sounds, dislike being touched, and refuse to eat food with certain textures, smells, or tastes. They also have an under-responsiveness to sensory stimulation, they do not feel pain in a normal way, they spin continuously, rock their bodies, and rub or push things hard into their skin (Gabriels et al., 2008; Leekam et al., 2007).

Therefore, numerous studies have been conducted to treat and create appropriate intervention options for this group that can be applied by therapists, teachers and parents. These methods are; a) auditory integration, b) diet modification, c) medicines adjustment, d) music therapy, e) occupational therapy, f) physical therapy, g) sensory integration, h) social skill and behavior intervention, i) speech therapy, j) vision therapy (Fraser, 2013). This study emphasises how music therapy, singing and dance can explore cognitive and psychomotor abilities, independent senses and the ability to deal with everyday life.

Music Therapy

Music has always been associated with people's lives and especially those of special needs children. Music is compelling and captivating for the special needs group of children. The provenance of music establishes it as an exceptional method of connecting, communicating and socializing that can benefit children with special needs. Music therapy encompasses elements of a "meaningful and flexible treatment" modality, as musical experiences are inherently structured, yet creative (LaGasse, 2014). Music therapy also can be performed in various forms and settings. Music has thus encompassed a relaxed approach to a recovery for many years in many fields.

Music interventions used in tandem with developmentally appropriate materials and activities can enhance social skills. Nondisabled peers can also be included in the group, and educational experiences can be embedded into on-going activities that can be enjoyable and instructive at the same time (Hall, 2009). Music interventions can help individuals with ASD start to foster their trust of others, and also be somewhere they can experience non-judgmental friendships, and be part of a group where they can enjoy being themselves in the environment. Such a treatment should take place based on goals or objectives in the planning stages including aspects of diversity improvement, methods of diversification, the composition of the education, and shaping the behavior of the children involved. In the other words, music serves as a stimulating and fun medium, which helps engage children in activities promoting developmental skills (Kennelly, 2000).

Through musical interactions and interventions, music therapy can help children with disabilities learn both the functional and academic skills necessary to lead independent and fulfilling lives. Furthermore, it has been widely reported that music therapy plays an important role in stimulating and facilitating learning and development in young children with special needs; such as autistic spectrum disorder, down syndrome, visual impairment, hearing loss, developmental delay, cerebral palsy and learning difficulties (Schwartz, 2008; Bonde, Pedersen & Wigram, 2002).

A music-based approach is one of the strategic techniques used in "scaffolding" and "zone of proximal development" as expressed in (Vygotsky's, 1978) theory, in order to explore child behaviour including those with intellectual disabilities (Flum & Kaplan, 2006; St-John, 2004). Vygotsky's theory provides an exposure to an educational system that allows students to function independently with the guidance of parents, adults and peers. A "scaffolding" approach gives the space and opportunity to educators, counsellors and teachers to use music therapy to provide children with the stimulation and exposure to handling the disability that they are experiencing.

Qualitative research has shown that long-term music therapy provides an experience of high self-esteem and confidence, combined with feelings of shared acceptance and success, and the opportunity to develop and sustain friendships (Pavlicevic et al., 2014). Music therapy includes the following factors; the development of positive relationships, the reduction of behaviours which challenge service, an improvement in the quality of life, and an improvement in mental health conditions such as eating disorders, depression and anxiety (Fillingham, 2007; Nicholls, 2002).

All in all, music therapy is an excellent psychotherapeutic model for supporting the emotional wellbeing of people with intellectual disabilities who may have difficulties verbally expressing their thoughts, feelings, experiences, desires and wishes. The non-verbal nature of music therapy provides individuals who may find it difficult to engage in any other verbal, or non-verbal, therapy (such a counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy or art therapy), with a therapeutic process through which they can express themselves. Overall, previous discoveries have indicated that music, singing and dance make a significant contribution to special needs children.

Malaysian Musical Therapy Approach – 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang'

The Sejuta Kasih concert was staged by Twinkle Love Cats from Japan, an organisation that provides exposure and training to children with special needs in the musical, singing and dramatic arts. To facilitate exploring the potential of these mediums, students a particular Malaysian university collaborated with Twinkle Cats to organize the concert. 'Dikir Barat' groups named Kejora Emas and Seri Kencana. It was a joint mobility program between Malaysia and Japan under the "Look East Policy". The resulting beautiful performance was one of the significant contributions to the local community in achieving the event's mission and goals.

The concert showcased the beats of drums, gongs, tambourines, 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang' are the symbols of the Malay arts that could become the main element of human development for special needs children based on music. The manifestation of the program which was formerly known as the Sayuri Program was meant to expose special needs children to music, singing and dance *via* a special performance made by children with disabilities such as autism and down syndrome and subsequently performed by a group from Japan called Twinkle Cats. The purpose of the program encompasses various aspects including the educational psychology and sociology of children with special needs in the community.

'Dikir Barat' was started in the 1930s by Tuan Haji Mat Salleh or Mat Salleh Tape. 'Dikir Barat' is often staged at Malay wedding ceremonies, entertainment events or festivals and competitions represented by *Tukang Karut*, *Juara* and *awok-awok* for each group. The task of the *Tukang Karut* is to sing songs in the Kelantanese dialect supported by *awok-awok*. The performers sit cross-legged on the floor and accompany the lyrics while moving their arms, hands and upper limbs by tramp or formations as if dancing to follow the rhythm of music harmonised by clapping and shouting the stanzas of certain lyrics. A 'Dikir Barat' competition would also be staged by two groups performing the songs based on the themes that they were given. These themes would be narrated where the words of the lyrics might be funny, exciting, poetic and contain lessons of moral values. Popular songs famously performed are *Wau Bulan*, *Ikan Kekek* and other modern songs that follow the rhythm of the drum of 'Dikir Barat'. 'Kuda Kepang', on the other hand, is an art performance whereby a warrior, whose costumes that have Javanese and Islamic influences, tells stories of ancient wars and battles. Dancers use replicas of horses that have been made out of bones and dyed to resemble horses. The dancers perform a dance that resembles horse riding.

The main aims of this study were to investigate audience engagement and responses to the performance held by the students and special needs children. The study also intended to reveal the implications of exposure to music, dance and singing in traditional culture by special needs children that were jointly performed with normal students through 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang' musical activities forming part of a music intervention program. This study also attempted to obtain further information on the relationship between two nations, Malaysia and Japan, who have similar interests but with different approaches to stimulating special needs children with cultural music and dance therapy.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study has used a quantitative descriptive review to obtain the primary data followed by open questions to respondents so that they may express ideas, opinions and views in describing changes in the respondent's children having been exposed to activities involving music, dance and singing

The study population comprised the audience in the Sejuta Kasih concert organised by the Twinkle Cats at the Cosmos Commons, region Lizuka, Kyushu, Japan. The audience comprised of parents, the local community and voluntary parties who were committed physically, mentally and emotionally to ensuring that the children would be given the opportunity to undertake any of the activities. The sampling method used was random sampling

method, in which a total of 600 respondents were randomly selected from the audience to answer the survey questionnaires, of which 120 forms were returned and only 115 accepted as valid samples for analysis. Questionnaire forms were printed and distributed to the audiences at the beginning of the concert while they were entering the hall with the addition of a short briefing. After the concert, the forms were collected for data analysis.

The 20-items non-standardized survey questionnaire was formulated by the researchers to specifically tap as much information and data as possible from the audience; parents of the special needs children, local community and volunteers. The items were arranged using 5-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree/dissatisfied, 2=disagree/dissatisfied, 3=neutral, 4=agree/satisfied, 5=strongly agree/satisfied). The survey forms were translated into Japanese in order to make it easier to answer the questions. The questions asked were aimed at identification of the amount of knowledge and exposure to music and Malaysian traditional dance such as 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang'. Additionally, the questions also focused to the parents to give feedback on their children who have joined in art music therapy classes and activities.

RESULTS

The overall findings indicated that out of the 115 respondents, 110 (95%) had not heard about 'Dikir Barat' or 'Kuda Kepang'. Nevertheless, almost all respondents revealed they truly enjoyed the performance. A question was asked aimed at discovering whether parents were encouraging their children to participate in the art activities (dance, theatre and musical) and it noted that almost 101 (88%) parents agreed that they had and 14 (12%) said they had not. Significant improvements in 105 (91%) were observed in children in their daily life following their participation in dancing, playing instruments and theatrical acting according to the parents. The audience also expressed their feelings about the performance. The stage performance appeared to have united everyone involved through the medium of music and dancing which also spurred them into activity where they had fun and were happy despite any differences in language, cultural background and social community. One of the most significant performances was a Malaysian dance in 'Kuda Kepang' with horses made of wood and paper and 'Dikir Barat' by the Twinkle Cats group together with another performance was live music theatre, marimbas and Arabian nights. The overall level of satisfaction with the performance was rated by the audience at 103 (80%) being very satisfied and 12 (20%) being satisfied. None of the audience was dissatisfied. Table 1 depicted the main findings of the study.

Questionnaire's Items	Knowledge/Agreement/Satisfaction (%)	
	* K/A/S	** DK/DA/DS
Respondents' knowledge of 'Dikir Barat' or 'Kuda Kepang'	5	95
Parents' encouragement for children to be involved in arts (dance, theatre, and musical) activities	88	12
Life significant improvements in children who involved in arts (dance, theatre, and musical) activities	91	9
Respondents' satisfaction with the overall performance of the concert	100	—

* K/A/S – Know/Agree/Satisfy

** DK/DA/DS – Don't Know/Disagree/Dissatisfy

Parents of children with special needs were also questioned as to whether they had noticed differences in improvement in the daily life of their child after they had participated in dancing, playing instruments and theatrical acting. The most notable changes encountered by the parents were the smiling faces of their child and a convincing sense of determination following the child's participation in the aforementioned activities. With regard to communication, the children became friendlier and more able to work in teams with others. The children also became more self-expressive and appeared to have a happy demeanour following the receipt of praise from others. On the other hand, some children did not exhibit any change at all after participating in the events/activities.

Audiences also commented on the show performance, suggesting that they would like to see more of what they termed a 'great and wonderful international collaborative program' encompassing the local disabled children and the wider community. There was perceived to be a fantastic and enjoyable atmosphere between Japanese and Malay students with friendships being made and joint participation through music. It was very notable in the expressions of the smiling children that many thought was wonderful to see. The parents and community also raised an expectation of more of similar performances from other countries.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Overall, this study evaluated the results from the collaboration performance of both 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang' from Malaysia and Twinkle Cats performing theatre, including the playing of marimba instruments by students some of whom were also special needs. During the performance, there was observable social interaction, communication, positive behaviour and intercommunication between participants from Malaysia and Japan. Moreover, the special needs children demonstrated a good level of confidence, capability in the singing, the ability to play musical instruments, dance, and mimic the 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang'. These activities revealed the fundamental goal of singing activities in music lessons was to encourage social development and social skills in young children (Chiengchana & Trakarnrung, 2014; Lau, 2005).

Traditional music therapy intervention comprising of 'Dikir Barat' and 'Kuda Kepang' having a maximum use hand movement and composition of rhythm through original music equipment have been found to stimulate the senses and the sensory apparatus of children. It was noted that music has played an important role as an art throughout human history, as a way of stress reduction and to soothe the mind. Research has shown that through ancient history, music has been an important source of physical, psychological and sociological development in human nature (Aktan & Yazar, 2015). For future research, other elements of arts activities such as traditional dances of 'Zapin' or 'Inang', and theatre performance like 'Wayang Kulit' shall be considered as research framework. Furthermore, other settings such as the western or far eastern geographical locations should be selected to tap different communities' views towards the study's objectives and variables.

In a nutshell, the integration of Malaysian traditional music therapy approach together with the involvement of all parties such as parents, educators, local community, therapists and the movement of peers all have potential to create positive impacts on children with special needs learning process. Moreover, implementation of such a collaborative program in cross-cultural community, proved as an effective strategy in educating children with special needs that can increase their skill, talent, potential and intellectual capabilities.

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