



## Education-oriented Music Therapy as an after-school program for students with emotional and behavioral problems<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how an after-school Education-oriented Music Therapy (EoMT) program can impact students' emotional and behavioral problems and academic competency. The study implemented a 16-week music therapy program using music activities and interventions to promote academic, social, and emotional skills. The Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliott, 1990); which measures social skills, academic competency, and problem behavior, was administered before and after the intervention by the classroom teachers. The results showed that the areas of social skills and problem behavior improved significantly after program implementation; however, there were no improvements in academic competency. Results suggest that this structured music therapy program benefits students who have behavioral issues, though the positive changes in their emotional and behavioral problems did not influence academic competency.

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After-school programs (ASPs) were first initiated in the 1980s, and unlike regular class, ASPs have offered a variety of learning-associated content for individual and group needs (Fashola, 1998; Hofferth, Brayfield, Deich, & Holcomb, 1991; Morrison, Storino, Robertson, Weissglass, & Dondero, 2000). ASPs are a successful educational strategy that offers a safe after-school environment to help students improve academic skills and maximize their potential through efficient, extra-curricular programming (Halpern, 2002).

For students with working parents or single parents, ASPs provide vicarious care in the absence of parental care at home by having the student participating in learner-centered programs beyond school curricula. Participation in after-school programs has been associated with reduction in negative behaviors including juvenile delinquency (Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soule, Womer, & Lu, 2004; Mahoney, 2000), substance abuse (Carlini-Cotrim & de Carvalho, 1993; Morrison et al., 2000), school dropout, and other counterproductive outcomes often related to the absence of parental supervision.

Along with offering extended after-school care, ASPs also help students to adjust in school by meeting their emotional and social needs. Various approaches have been integrated into ASP

curricula in response to the challenges arising from students' behavioral problems. Such behavioral problems are often manifested in two ways: externalized behaviors such as aggression, hyperactivity, or delinquency, and internalized behaviors such as withdrawal, anxiety, or depression (Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003; Sterba, Prinstein, & Cox, 2007). ASPs offer schools the opportunity to address students' individual needs, as these emotional and behavioral issues are common to every school setting.

As ASPs evolve and continue to incorporate various strategies and approaches to meet students' individualized needs, art-based activities for ASP programming are proving to be an effective means for increasing self-esteem, social skills, and leadership skills among at-risk students (Mason & Chuang, 2001). Music in particular, among various arts media, is a powerful therapeutic medium because of its viability, familiarity, and ability to induce intrinsic motivation. Music-oriented activities have already been successfully implemented for students with specific individual needs as after-school programs in regular school settings (Chong, 2003). Music therapy studies report positive emotional and behavioral outcomes from the use of various music activities based on adolescents' specific target behaviors (Henderson, 1983; Montello & Coons, 1998; Rickson & Watkins, 2003), and structured music activities have been shown to enhance self-confidence, self-worth, and socialization skills in children (Sausser & Waller, 2006). Likewise, the use of music has become an effective therapeutic intervention for behavioral programs, school counseling, and other approaches (Clark & Breman, 2009; Lemieux, Fisher, & Pratto, 2008; Stephens, Braithwaite, & Taylor, 1998).

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Various therapeutic music interventions have been proven to be helpful when working with students who have internalized and externalized behavioral issues. Instrumental playing and sound projection effectively reduced externalized emotional problems such as hyperactivity and aggressive behavior (Jackson, 2003; Montello & Coons, 1998), whereas active listening and singing interventions were effective with children exhibiting internalized emotional and behavior problems such as withdrawal, depression and anxiety (Kim, 2009). Studies showed that improvisation was an effective intervention for inducing students' emotional catharsis and anxiety reduction, and group music play led to increased peer interaction and trust-building (Gunsberg, 1988; Jellison, Brooks, & Huck, 1990; Rickson, 2006).

Music therapy in ASPs also benefits students with learning or underachievement problems, through the use of music as an auxiliary strategy to enhance learning skills and academic achievement. Cardarelli (2003) investigated the effects of instrumental music instruction on standardized test performance of third-grade students. Results indicated statistically significant differences in mean scores between control and experimental groups, with the music program positively impacting students' achievement level. McLelland (2005) also examined the impact of learning instrumental music on student academic achievement as it was demonstrated in reading and mathematics skills, providing a longitudinal assessment over a span of two years. The results indicated that there were significant differences in reading and mathematics achievement between the two groups, with music participants scoring higher in reading and mathematics.

Other longitudinal studies demonstrate how the duration of interventions affects research outcomes. Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga (1999) found sizeable differences in academic performance and attitudes in children who had intensive and extensive music and arts learning experiences. The research was carried out over a five-year time span in a longitudinal study using a sample of over 25,000 students in 8th through 12th grades. They found that students who were consistently involved in high levels of instrumental music demonstrated significantly higher mathematics proficiency than their non-music peers. Moreover, the comparative gains in academic success became more pronounced over time.

The existing literature offers support for the use of structured music therapy applications in ASPs to enhance students' emotional and behavioral functioning, and suggests that the skill building involved in music instruction can transfer to improvements in general academic achievement. Based on these findings, Chong and Chung (2006) formulated a setting-specific music therapy approach for after-school programming named Education-oriented Music Therapy (EoMT). EoMT is conceptualized and structured with three essential components. First, music activities are formulated for students who have exhibited emotional and behavioral problems in the school setting, differentiating their needs from those of the clinical setting. Second, the music activities are refined by the assessment of the behavioral issues associated with an individual's temperament and behavioral traits. For example, based on the assessment, therapists select the level of music interventions, instrumentation (percussive vs. melodic) and level of participation (passive vs. active experience in music-making) most appropriate for an individual's needs. Lastly, EoMT seeks to bring about a more effective adjustment to the school environment for the student, as well as academic performance that is strengthened by an enhanced sense of motivation and self-esteem. Chong and Chung (2006) insist that, unlike music therapy in the clinical setting, those interventions offered at school can be delineated as "school music therapy" working with a dual set of goals, both therapeutic and educational. The therapeutic goals address negative emotional and behavioral problems that are affecting students' achievement and adjustment

at school, and the educational goals focus on using the music experience to reinforce skills that transfer to academic learning. The therapeutic rationale behind EoMT is that emotional issues are redirected through positive and successful music-making experiences, allowing students to release repressed energy and tension through sound sublimation in music. Thus, EoMT ultimately attempts to maximize educational outcomes by promoting positive changes in students' emotional and behavioral functioning, subsequently leading to changes in learning behavior and/or academic competency.

Building on the reported benefits of therapeutic uses of music in school settings, the current study sought to examine the effects of EoMT for students with emotional and behavioral problems. This study was designed to pursue both educational and therapeutic outcomes. The educational goals included improvement of cognitive skills and task accomplishing skills in music, both of which can be transferred to academic learning. Therapeutic goals included sublimating repressed energy through musical output and also promoting self-expression through musical activities in order to develop further interpersonal skills with peers. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of EoMT on the social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competency of elementary students with social and emotional behavioral issues.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 89 elementary students from 13 different schools who did not have any prior music instruction were selected to participate in the study. Teachers were contacted and asked to refer students who had not been clinically diagnosed but who demonstrated significant, identifiable social and emotional problem behaviors. Teachers were asked to fill out a referral form in which they recorded the frequency and the intensity of the identified behavior, both in and out of the classroom setting. These referral documents provided substantial information on the participant's behavioral traits and the target behavior, which the music therapists used as a reference for setting session objectives and goals.

Following the teacher's referral, parents were issued an introductory sheet regarding the study, an invitation to participate in the EoMT program, and two copies of an informed consent form, with the instruction to return one signed copy of the consent form. Among the 128 students contacted, 95 students' families returned the consent form and agreed to participate. However, 6 of these 95 students were not included as participants due to their absence from more than one-third of the sessions.

### Research design

The entire study took place over six months. The screening of participants lasted two weeks from the point of the therapists' initial contact with the teachers. After subjects were screened based on their reported behavioral problems, a pretest using the Social Skills Rating System was administered. The research program was 16 weeks long, with sessions occurring twice a week and lasting 50 min each. Because each academic semester is comprised of 20 weeks, the research program's total number of sessions was selected in order to fit within this time frame, with extra weeks built in for field trips and exams. Sessions were held in either the music, counseling or special activity rooms.

The participants were placed in groups of four to six students. Attempts were made to group participants by grade: grades 1 and 2 were combined into one group, grades 3 and 4 into one group, and grades 5 and 6 into one group, respectively. Students were

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