

# ACTIVE LEARNING - THE BENEFITS OF PLAYING MUSIC IN EDUCATION OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED AND BLIND CHILDREN

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**Abstract.** This paper presents a methodological approach for teaching music to blind children, based on the interaction with musical instruments. A major educational goal for the visually impaired student is attaining a level of independence and self-assurance in all tasks, such as playing an instrument. As a teacher at a school for the blind, I have learned that success toward this goal occurs through the use of accommodations or modification appropriate to the learning style of each student. Music training strengthens the brain executive function. Executive function covers critical tasks like: processing and retaining information, controlling behavior, making decisions and problem solving.

**Keywords:** blind children education, music, instruments, active learning

## Introduction

Active learning is based on the belief that all children can learn (Cushman, 2013), assuming a holistic approach to educating children with severe disabilities. The philosophy behind active learning approach is that it provides learning opportunities, through their own exploration, the child will gain skills, helping him become as independent as possible. (Nielsen, 2004)

Music education has been narrow, formulated and controlled until recently from an artistic point of view alone but the situation is being redeemed by the modern recognition of music as a legitimate part in the curriculum. It allows for deep engagement with learning and it nurtures assets and skills that are critical to future success.

Aiming to provide children with their first contacts with the sound, musical instruments, this subject addresses three main themes:

- Contact with various types of musical manifestation, various styles and musical expression related to classical music, Romanian folklore, jazz, etc.
- Properties of sound and music: frequency, duration, intensity, timbre, tempo, notions of form, etc.
- Braille music notation

Before proceeding with the implementation of educational interventions, like any therapy, a certain path is being pursued:

1. *Assessment of the child's development*

An appropriate assessment is a very important first step. It is necessary to know as much as possible, what is the child able to do, and start the direction of his interests (Nielsen, 2004) to know where to start.

2. *Setting goal*

It starts from what the child love to do, what makes him feel happy and comfortable, from the reactive items.

3. *Selecting activities and arranging the surrounding area*

Rhythm: clapping and ostinatos, move on the everyday words, learning music notation;

Pitch Matching: solfeggio

Ear training practice

Step 1: Hear what it sounds like

Step 2: See what it sounds like

Step 3: Show what it sounds like

Step 4: Do it on the instrument

Lyrics: to help students remember and learn lyrics I always include a description of a picture or a tactile image

Critical listening

Listening sheets on a monthly basis list and allow children to choose a sheet.

4. *Implementation of activities according to established objectives*

5. *Reevaluation and intervention redesign*

To introduce active learning approach, the adults needs to know in detail the learning sequences that allow any child to acquire skills (Nielsen, 2004).

The profile of children's motor development in relation to music making reveals that synchronizing the performance of beat with music for a controlled duration of time may begin at the age of 3 (McDonald & Ramsey, 1992). They not only enjoy repeating known movements, but also like inventing and imitating new movements of action and game songs that primarily involve large motor muscles. From the age of 5 onwards, children develop greater small and large muscle coordination and control.

When natural and creative movements are encouraged to express musical perceptions, musical sensitivity leads children to the discovery and reinforcement of features and components of music and developing concepts about the body in relation to space (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 1995, 2006; Sims, 1990, 1993).

The correlation between children's abilities to play instruments and the maturity level of their physical development is obvious. Their coordination and perceptiveness to keep the steady pulse and to copy basic rhythmic patterns using instrument will also mature with age. Sound production is a physical activity and the human body has an innate drive to strike things in order to produce sounds (Moorehead & Pond, 1977). The discovery of the pleasure of hearing sounds inspires children to explore sounds of various sources and thus nurtures their motor development (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 1995, 2006; Sims, 1990, 1993, Zimmerman, 1971). Children translate the sensations of musical rhythm into

kinesthetic action so experiences of playing should also be obtained from musical instruments chosen to match children's developmental abilities.

#### *Find the right instrument*

When deciding on the proper instrument, you need to be realistic in your recommendations to students and parents and open and honest about limitations and potential success on certain instruments. Instruments like maracas, tambourines can be used one at a time with each group member taking a turn or all together with everyone playing his or her own. Larger instruments (e.g., conga drum, xylophone) can be shared. Children can play solos, duets, or in small subgroups.

During a movement activity all children can be directed to engage in the same movement (e.g., clapping hands, stamping feet, jumping), or they can be allowed to create their own ways of moving to the beat.

Of all musical instruments, the human body is the most natural one to young children. The variety of body sounds, such as clapping, snapping and patting the shoulders, head, elbows, knees and stomach, amazes children. The rhythmic experience of body percussion prepares young children for playing non-pitched instruments - like maracas, triangles and drums, followed by pitched instruments - xylophones, tone bells and keyboards.

According to Campbell and Scott-Kassner (1995), action songs and singing games facilitate coordination of "synchronized rhythmic movement and the singing voice". Learning to play an instrument boosts the development of musical understanding.

Point out that there are four – and only four – fundamental things to be learned in musical hearing: the hearing of pitch, intensity, time and timbre. Illustrate each of these by voice or instrument and give a concrete concept of each of these four characteristics, first in isolation and second in the actual musical situation. This identification well done is, in large part, the accomplishment of the whole task.

These exercises will improve your musical ability by developing a more intuitive understanding of what you hear: intervals, chords, scales, chord progressions, perfect pitch, scale degrees, melodic dictation, rhythm dictation, key signature identification, piano keys.

#### *Music adaptations for visual impairments*

##### Curricular

- Identify autoharp chords by different textured dots
- Use contrasting backgrounds for printed material and avoid clutter on the page
- Colored overlays on top of printed material may also help with figure/ground difficulties

##### Environmental

- Keep chairs, tables, and instruments in the same place
- Talk through movements for dances or instrument playing
- Guide individual movement for dances or instrument playing

### Presentational

- Use auditory sense by: recording on tape lessons or song materials; explaining unusual noises; training auditory perception of sounds in foreground and background; verbally cueing when they are to play instruments or change chords; using balls with bells or activities using balls in music
- Allow students to feel differences and shapes when holding instruments
- Give recordings and access to play-back equipment to learn by note
- Describe/name instruments when heard, felt or played

Descriptive characteristics of children's creative movements reveal that their excitement of discovering, testing and comparing instrumental sounds can often generate creativity; and that during spontaneous play activities. Creative singing emerges in form of chants (Scott-Kassner, 1993; McDonald & Simons, 1989). Most importantly, Moorehead and Pond (1997) indicated in their landmark research *Music of Young Children* that improvisation is the means to creative development, innate musicality and to creative problem solving. Interventions: improvisation, structured playing, song singing, movement to music, songwriting, lyric analysis, music listening.

Music is known for its power to evoke feeling and emotion. The affect evokes influences children's appreciation, attitudes, interests and musical taste (Zimmerman, 1971). The guiding principles most music educators would advocate see: music as a powerful channel of communication for everyone, music as a social process, music as a way of developing a range of skills, cognitive, physical and emotional, music for promoting well-being and self-esteem.

The important question then is not when to start music lessons, but what is the goal of music lessons for young children? Very young children with visual impairments are not exposed to instruments in order to master them, but to gain experience and learn to develop meaningful relationships with music at a young age and develop skills like identifying instruments, melody and beat. Areas of focus we develop through music: emotional, communication, social, cognition, motor/sensory.

Children find music enjoyable and are generally eager to participate in the musical activities. This intrinsic motivation can be used to generate movement and engage in music making.

Learning anything is an act which must be performed by the learner. It cannot be done for him by the teacher. The only thing a teacher can do is to assist in creating favorable conditions by motivation, supply of materials, and general guidance.

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