

Music Therapy Charity Small Grant Project Report

Tina Warnock – October 2021

How can the use of non-verbal vocal interplay in music therapy support the development of vocal communication in verbal and non-verbal autistic children?

This study explored the ways in which music therapists can support children with autism's capacity for vocal interplay, intersubjective relatedness and hence quality of life. It examined how different music therapists use their voices in music therapy and the factors that influence this. The underlying hypothesis was that a music therapist's vocal approach and experience have a direct impact on the responses from, and benefits to the client.

The project was carried out between October 2020 and October 2021, with significant delays due to Covid-19.

Methodology

The research questions were explored in 3 ways:

- 1) Video observation of 1:1 music therapy with a 5-year-old, pre-verbal child with autism
- 2) Developing the beginnings of an evaluation tool to help music therapists think about the vocal processes taking place in music therapy with autistic children.
- 3) A basic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews carried out with music therapists via Zoom.

This project was supervised by Dr Amelia Oldfield who assisted with the set-up of the ethical framework and consent, reflective case study, video analysis, therapist questionnaire design and distillation of the key questions to be explored. She also gave valuable feedback on the evaluation tool. Dr Diane Austin provided a space for reflection on the therapist interviews.

There were 7 participants: one child, his parent and sister, and four music therapists.

Summary of results analysis

Video analysis revealed a relationship between the therapist's approach, the interrelatedness between therapist and child, and the length of the vocal interactions. A non-directive, non-verbal vocal approach facilitated a marked increase in the child's receptiveness to the relationship and consequent capacity for vocal interplay, compared to a more directive, verbal approach. This concurred with the original hypothesis of this study and correlated with results attained from the Music Therapy Outcome Star.

Micro-analysis of the therapist and child's vocal expressions resulted in the beginnings of an evaluation tool, 'The Vocal Self-Awareness Scale'. This tool includes the breakdown of the child's vocal sounds and classification in terms of how they correlate to Sterns four senses of self, the recording of observable behaviours related to autism and the therapist's vocal interventions. The thinking for this tool is based on the 'Voice and the Self' model proposed by the researcher. (Stern 2004, Warnock 2011, Warnock 2019)

Common themes, similarities and differences were identified in the therapist interviews. Questions focused on the therapists' relationship with their own voice in terms of vocal history, vocal training and major life events, and how they use their voices in clinical work. Key themes and findings were:

- A music therapist's voice changes in response to their physical and emotional health.
- The voice plays an important role during times of personal challenge or development.
- There are significant differences in how music therapists perceive their singing voices and how this evolves over time.

- Levels of vocal training and awareness vary and this has a direct impact on how music therapists use their voices in music therapy.
- There are variations across training courses in the quality and focus on the voice as a clinical tool.

Impact and Benefits

This research has begun to answer the questions posed and created many more. The child's vocal communication increased during the project and the family are keen to continue his music therapy. The evaluation tool has significant potential to improve music therapists' understanding of vocal processes in this field and how they both influence and demonstrate self-awareness.

After the interviews, the music therapists shared that the discussions had ignited a deeper curiosity in their relationship with their voice and how they use it as a clinical tool. This has inspired the researcher to pursue their idea of setting up a new Voice Network via BAMT focusing on advancing our work in this area, which will be launched in November 2021.

The researcher intends to write up the findings of this project for publication, which would potentially benefit the public by improving the quality of music therapists' clinical work and translate to greater benefits for their clients.

The findings may also offer inspiration to other professionals working with the voice in health and education settings including creative arts therapists, arts in health practitioners, community musicians, speech therapists, teachers, and parents.

Finances

	Cost p/h	Predicted hrs	Predicted total	Actual hrs	Actual total
Clinical / contact time	43	20	860	17	731
Research hours	30	30	900	40	1200
Academic Supervision	30	6	180	6	180
Final report	30	7	210	7	210
Total			2150		2321
School contribution	43	14	-602	12	-516
Total			1,548		1805
MTC Grant			-1500		-1500
Overspend			0		305

Future Plans

Either or both parts of this study could form the foundation for a PhD, which the researcher is keen to explore. The BAMT Voice Network is a new platform which will encourage reflection on and developments in the use of the voice in music therapy practice.

References

- Stern, D. (1985) *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. London: Routledge
- Warnock, T. (2011) *Voice and the Self in Improvised Music Therapy*. BJMT Vol 25(2) 2011.
- Warnock, T. (2019) 'Voice and the Autistic Self' in Dunn, H. et al *Music Therapy and Autism Across the Lifespan: A Spectrum of Approaches*. JKP