

Music and Emotional Expression in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Abstract

This correlational study is intended to determine how exposure and involvement in music (singing, listening to music or playing music) can affect the emotional expression of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Ten special education teachers and aides in the Conejo Valley Unified School District who work with elementary school and middle school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder were polled using an online survey. The survey asked the participants about their use of music in their classes when they have students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as asking them to observe the amount of emotion expressed by those students with and without music. Overall the special education teachers observed more emotional expression in their students with Autism Spectrum Disorder when they were singing, listening to, or playing music. This indicates that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder do show more emotion when exposed to music. This study is introducing how teachers have observed the correlation between exposure to music and emotional expression in their students in the classroom setting and why the teachers should use more music to specifically discover how their students are feeling on a day to day basis.

Introduction

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder have often had trouble expressing how they feel to those around them. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a disorder that affects motor skills in the individuals affected by it. Although attempts have been made to help non-speaking or minimally speaking individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, such as using apps with text-to-speech capabilities, not much has been done to find ways to increase their level of emotional expression—how intensely they express how they are feeling—without using technology. While technology can be useful for helping individuals and children with Autism Spectrum Disorder express how they feel, some people may not have access to that. Music is known for helping people express how they are feeling and enhancing existing emotions. It has also shown that music can help children with Autism Spectrum Disorder with their communication skills and to recognize emotions. Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder have also benefitted from music therapy in helping their communication skills.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that when students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are exposed to music in a classroom setting, they will begin to show more emotional expression. For example, when students are listening to upbeat, energetic music or music they like, they will begin to show more positive emotions, such as happiness and excitement.

Methods

Participants:

Special education teachers, aides, and paraprofessionals from elementary and middle schools in Conejo Valley Unified School District and Pleasant Valley School Districts were surveyed.

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Methods (cont.)

Survey:

1 Music and Emotional Expression in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

* Required

Do you use music in your classes? If so, how often? *

1-2 times a week

3-4 times a week

Every day

I don't use music

If you play music during the day, when do you usually play it?

Morning

Middle of the day

Afternoon

Other: _____

3 How much emotion do the majority of your students show when singing/listening to/playing music? (Using the same scale as the last question.) *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

During what type activities do you usually play music? *

Your answer _____

2 If you do not, how do you try to better understand how your minimally speaking or nonverbal students are feeling?

Your answer _____

How often do you have trouble understanding how your minimally speaking or nonverbal students are feeling? *

1 2 3 4 5

Never Always

Have you noticed your students showing more emotions when listening to/playing music/singing, such as in music class? *

Yes

No

If so, how much more emotion were they showing?

1 2 3 4 5

None Much more

4 What kind of music do your students respond the best to? *

Your answer _____

How much emotion do the majority of your students show without music? 1-either vocally, facially, or physically, 5- two of the three, 10- all three *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Results

Based on the results, all the participants that responded to the survey used music in their class. While the majority (40%) used music everyday, the other 60% is evenly divided between 1-2 times a week and 3-4 times a week. The majority (50%) used music as a part of their morning, 40% used music sometime in the middle of the day, and only 10% used it at various times. On a 1-5 scale of how often teachers have trouble understanding how their students with limited expressive language skills are feeling, 50% answered 3 and 50% answered 4. This shows that teachers are having trouble understanding how these students are feeling, which could lead to miscommunication between the teacher and student. Other ways that teachers have tried to understand how these students are feeling is through visual charts, hand signals, pictures, asking questions, and nonverbal cues. Out of the teachers I surveyed, 70% saw their students with Autism Spectrum Disorder showing more emotions when listening to/playing music/singing, such as in music class. On a 1-5 scale, 100% of teachers who did see more emotional expression in their students with Autism Spectrum Disorder said that it was a 4 out of 5. On a 1-10 scale, as shown on the screen, teachers were asked how much emotion the majority of their students show on an everyday basis. 30% said 4, 40% said 5, and 30% said 10, showing that the majority of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder aren't able to fully communicate how they are feeling. Using the same scale as the prior question, when teachers were asked how much emotion do the majority of your students show when singing/listening to/playing music, 10% answered 4, 20% answered 5, 50% answered 7, 10% answered 8, and 10% answered 10, showing that there is a difference in the amount of emotion expressed with and without music. More of the numbers were on the higher end of the scale (7,8,10) as opposed to the majority being on the lower end (4,5) in the previous question indicating that more emotion was expressed. Also, teachers noted that most of their students respond best to children's music, calming music like that used in yoga, upbeat music, or Disney. They use them during activities such as reading, studying, or working independently.

Discussion

Through the literature that was read while researching this project, it was discovered that in an everyday setting with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, music does in fact help to increase things like social interaction, cognitive function, and emotional recognition. Music was also proven to diminish the amount of off task behaviors and vocal stereotypy in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This specific study was meant to focus on how music and exposure to music can be used in schools and classroom settings to give teachers a different way to better understand how their students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or just students who have limited expression abilities, are daily feeling so they can adjust their teaching methods and attitudes towards those students accordingly. First, through the questions on the survey the special education teachers took that asked about how much emotional expression students with Autism Spectrum Disorder show with and without music, it is shown that the students did in fact show more emotional expression when they were singing, listening to, or playing music. This is proof that music does bring out more emotion and that it can be used to find out how other people are feeling. The majority of teachers have already noticed a difference in the emotional expression in their students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. And the majority of noticed differences were an increase in the amount of emotion expressed in those students. This further proves the claim seen in my literature that music is a useful method to better understand how students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are feeling. Another aim of this study is to show teachers how they can implement music in their classrooms with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Through the survey used in this study and from prior literature written, it is shown that teachers can use music in various activities such as a part of their lessons, in a time such as morning or afternoon circle, or in the background during studying or independent reading time during the day. This is meant to encourage special education teachers to start using music in their classes with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder to try to better understand how their students are feeling on a day to day basis.

Conclusion

The results seen in this study should prompt special education teachers to start using, or for those currently using music, to use more music in their classes with their students who have limited expression skills. It has been proven that music leads to increased emotional expression in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, therefore special education teachers should utilize this knowledge to try to have a better understanding of how these students may be feeling and how to approach students individually based on the emotion(s) they are showing in class. This project is significant because it gives special education teachers a way to discover how their students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are daily feeling. Being able to understand students and work with them are some of the most important things that come with being a teacher and being able to build relationships with your students. If special education teachers are provided with a way to better understand their students with limited expression skills, this could result in the teacher knowing how to approach teaching those specific students, which may vary on the individual, and that may lead to the students learning more and higher achievement as well as test scores.

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