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BOOK REVIEW

# Music therapy for autistic children in Aoetera, New Zealand (Rickson)


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Daphne Rickson has gifted us with a unique book that presents a fascinating qualitative study with autistic children in music therapy. In this study, 10 children engaged with 10 music therapists in one-year music therapy processes. Music therapists documented their sessions through Narrative Assessments, without constrictions or guidelines to their practice. Narrative assessments, and occasionally videoclips and audio clips, were then shared with commentators, both strangers and family members, to reflect, evaluate, and share their perspectives of progress and process. The aim of Rickson's study was never to prove that music therapy is effective, but to understand deeply how different observers, who may or may not have a relationship with each child, would understand music therapy. By understanding their understandings, a new conceptualisation of music therapy may arise. That, in itself, is Rickson's first intriguing innovation to methodology. By shifting her lens from the direct observer to *the observer of* the observers, a new layer of meaning is possible.

In Chapter 1, Rickson positions herself and her work in the context of lived experience, family experience, and country of residence. As Rickson points out, contexts are essential to understand a practice and its significance: her positioning is enlightening and welcome. Chapter 2 presents a balanced description of autism from different perspectives. In fact, Rickson mentions that takiwatanga (Aoetera name for autistic children, which poignantly means "in their own time") can "be viewed through various, often contrasting, lens." (p. 17). Recognising that autism has biological and neurological underpinnings, which can make life challenging for autistic people and can sometimes be addressed by therapy, does not go against the profound respect towards autistic people that Rickson demonstrates. I could not agree more. As Rickson, I believe that autistic characteristics may

undoubtedly be assets, if/when the environment supports them, but it is undeniable that many autistic people face challenges in life as we know it. Rickson even addressed the question "Autism: Disability or neurodiversity?" She deftly explains the value of the Neurodiversity perspective, while at the same time acknowledges that some autistic people may *choose* "adaptation [to a neurotypical world] over the longer process of socio-political change" (p. 23). In that way, autistic people may see the value of an autism spectrum (AS) diagnosis from a medical model lens as prerequisite to access appropriate services, which in some countries continues to be a reality. I would like to further another concept that can deepen our discussion regarding this sticky point: "partial representation" (McCoy et al., 2020). Although many self-advocates may choose to frame autism as a difference and not a disability or disorder, it is true that many people with significant challenges are not necessarily represented in this perspective. It is also true that cultural norms regarding identity, illness, and labels vary across languages and countries, as Rickson reflects. On the other hand, disability can be conceptualised as the combination of condition and environment, where a condition is exacerbated and becomes debilitating when the environment is not supportive. In other words, modifying the environment is as important to support autistic children as it is to provide them with resources to flourish. Self-determination, where each autistic child and their family explore the identity and representation that best suits them, may be, then, the most respectful way to approach this issue.

In Chapter 3, Rickson briefly explores different approaches of music therapy for autistic children. Through a thorough and knowledgeable lens, she presents the music therapy principles that have been supported by research and that promote social development in young children, adolescents, and adults. I especially value her efforts in maintaining the balanced perspective that seems to be her trademark, even if a partiality towards "improvisation" and "improvisational music therapy" is evident. My disagreement towards this partiality is two-fold. Firstly, I contend that improvisation is a technique (Bruscia, 2014), not an approach, and that it is present in multiple music therapy approaches. I agree with Rickson that improvisation allows for flexibility and in-the-moment responses that promote joint attention, engagement, and agency. Secondly, I disagree with the implication that this type of work can only be done in an unstructured or improvisational approach. As her own research shows, structure may sometimes be essential for a takiwatanga's development. That structure may or may not include improvisational methods; it is a choice that a child-centred perspective (i.e., a perspective that centres child needs) would determine.

Chapter 4 is titled "An Innovative Research Design," and is indeed an excellent description of the chapter and study. One of the most fascinating aspects of Rickson's book, which is based on one of her research studies, is the unique design that she employed to elicit the perspectives of music therapists and observers through Narrative Assessment. She invited music therapists in the community to engage in typical practice with children who did not have previous music therapy experience. Therapists took notes on goals and objectives for the therapy, child progress, and engaged in their own journaling. A group of observers was recruited from family members and other professionals working with the children. The therapists' notes and, in some cases video clips, were then shared with this group. These commentators read, viewed and critiqued the notes (and/or audio and video clips) from *all* children, even if they did not personally know the child. Commentators then responded to open-ended questions, as well as survey questions regarding goals, objectives, evaluation, and progress. For researchers unfamiliar with Narrative Assessment, this method may seem confusing for several reasons, including the wide discrepancy in observer expertise, knowledge of the children, and quality of the evidence (i.e., some therapists provided scarce notes, sometimes

centred on their own journey, while others provided highly structured therapeutic notes and videos). However, as a reader, it is critical to remember that this study was not an efficacy or effectiveness study: Rickson's intention was never to *prove* that music therapy "works." Rather, Rickson intended to provide a rich account of different perspectives of the music therapy process, with a critical realist lens. Her intent was to understand the creation of meaning from therapists and observers. In that regard, this study—and book—achieved their purpose amply.

Chapter 5 guides the reader in the elements of each of the 10 cases that were included in Rickson's study. Chapters 6 to 15 introduce us to each child and family, with a deliberate outline: background, music therapy process, commentators' interpretations, integration of findings, therapist summary, and Rickson's reflections on each case. By necessity, these chapters present a level of repetition that may seem cumbersome but are completely worthwhile when one reaches Chapters 16 – 19. In the latter, Rickson engages in a thoughtful and engaging exercise in abstraction of commonalities across cases that allow us to "make sense" of the detailed descriptions before. If any criticism could be levelled here it would be regarding the report of quantitative results (e.g., the use of linear graphs to represent different responses to Likert-type scales). It is evident that Rickson is much more comfortable with qualitative results, but it does not in any way diminish her integration of findings.

The most exciting and satisfactory chapters for me were Chapters 20 to 22, where Rickson situates her findings within the New Zealand context, effectively making them more meaningful for a broader milieu. I truly appreciated this generalisation and was fascinated to observe that fundamental principles of practice that are emerging or present in other countries are also evident in her (and her colleagues') work. Similar to Rickson, I wholeheartedly believe in (1) the need to use a child's (and parents') musicality to create physical and psychological "space" to promote joint attention, respectful and supportive interactions; (2) the importance of the therapist's expertise, careful planning and adaptability; (3) the flexibility in the use of structure to support family needs; and (4) the use of boundaries and expectations in a non-judgmental way to create safety and promote growth and learning. I would be most interested in having a live conversation with Rickson and/or other professionals to discuss how these principles are actualised in improvisational vs. structured ("behavioural") music therapy approaches. I think we would all be surprised to discover the commonalities amongst our practices. That said, the contextualisation of the findings also allows the reader to remember that music therapists are not exempt of systemic challenges (such as the preponderance of insurance payments, school systems, legal systems, or the like), which may direct our practices in different ways, sometimes more than individual therapist's intentions or beliefs.

In Chapter 23, Rickson critically assesses the strengths and limitations of her study and research. Rickson reminds the reader of the importance of music therapists' ability to communicate our uniquely intricate practice clearly and truthfully, and to include rational and emotional perspectives. Rickson highlights the value of "meaning making" that different stakeholders brought to the process. At the same time, she acknowledges the discrepancies among commentators, the limitations in amount, type, and quality of information from each case, and the lack of children's voices in the narrative. Once again, her thoughtful and balanced approach to research, practice, and theory makes this chapter a pleasure to read.

Finally, Chapter 24 discusses how the findings align to New Zealand's best practice guidelines for autistic children (Ministries of Health and Education, 2016). These guidelines indicate that appropriate intervention should be based on "person-centred planning, functional assessment,

positive multifaceted intervention strategies, and focus on environment, ecological validity, systems-level interventions and meaningful outcomes" (Rickson, 2022, p. 342). Rickson makes a case for music therapy in each of these categories. I think any music therapist would readily agree. The value of her work, however, goes beyond the music therapy community. It creates a strong argument for music therapy in New Zealand, of course, but also in many other countries. It engages us in reflection of our practice, and how multiple perspectives can move us forward. As I said at the beginning, Daphne Rickson has given us a very special gift. We should engage with it with gratitude.

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