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# Does Music Affect Behavior in the Special Education Classroom?

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Does Music Affect Behavior in the Special Education Classroom?

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By

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### **Abstract**

It is general knowledge that music affects our emotions; slow rhythmic music can make us sad and fast upbeat music can make us happy. Music is everywhere and it is a powerful outlet for people's emotions. Music in the classroom can have many effects on students. It may relax them, motivate them, or even soothe them, helping to reduce frustration levels. Music enhances learning in the classroom and it has long been used to help memory skills in students such as learning the alphabet through song. Music helps stimulate creativity and reflection, and it also provides a welcoming entrance into the classroom. While working on this project, many articles and websites were reviewed that provided insight into the theories of music in the special needs classroom. Educational researchers have long looked for a way to teach students to learn well. What they are finding is that music enhances all styles of learning. Upon completion of this study, data will show that background music is a valuable classroom management tool in decreasing unwanted behaviors in the special education classroom.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

There are many ways to integrate music in the classroom: music to help students learn, relax, and even remember. The special education classroom consists of many different learning styles. However, music will enhance them all. Rhyme and rhythm have been aiding the students with special needs for years. Children do respond to music.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The basic objective of effective classroom management is preventing unwanted behaviors and thus decreasing interruptions and distractions. The goal of any classroom management tool is to create a safe and nourishing environment suitable for learning. Because a classroom can be so diverse and disabilities so different, we must establish realistic goals with wanted behaviors of engagement and enjoyment. While discipline problems are going to happen in any classroom, proper management is the key to a successful classroom.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if the introduction of background music during instruction helps to decrease unwanted behaviors in the special education classroom.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Instructional time is precious and when distractions occur in the classroom, that precious time can be lost. Once a distraction occurs and students become off task, it can take a great amount of time to get them back on task. If background music can be shown to decrease unwanted behaviors during instruction in a special needs classroom and thus increasing time on task, it can become a very cost-efficient classroom management tool that educators may be able to use across all content areas and educational abilities.

## Research Question

This study attempted to answer the following question: Does music affect behavior in the special education classroom?

## Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

Music is used to enhance movies and to tell stories; children with special needs pay more attention to visuals with music than those without it. Researchers have long known there is a connection between music and learning. Playing music puts people in a highly focused state. According to Brewer (1995), music is such a powerful component in our lives in that it helps us to remember events. Music can even cause people to re-experience specific moments in time. "It is possible to use this memory phenomenon in the classroom and to use other music memory techniques to help students retain more information and provide them with multiple modes or information retrieval," (Brewer, 1995, p. 1) Background music helps to increase internal processing and facilitates learning. Music may be used at any level for learning, no matter what grade or subject. It is processed on both sides of the brain, therefore stimulating the whole cognitive function.

Music has long been more than a leisure activity; it is a treatment for the mind, body and soul. Children enjoy music in the classroom. It helps them cope with the stress of the day. It encourages children to join in the classroom activity giving them a less restrictive environment. The incidence is prevalent: "Nearly 4 million school-age children have learning disabilities and they occur in approximately 1 in 59 or 1.69% or 4.6 million people in USA." (Guy & Neve, 2005, p. 1). While there are no cures for learning disabilities, there are supports and interventions. Children with disabilities can achieve success. "During the 2007–08 school year,

IDEA-mandated programs and services were provided to more than 6 million children and youths with disabilities” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 1). According to these statistics, there is a great need for appropriate interventions, accommodations, and/or modifications to help those with disabilities become more successful. Music is a pleasant addition to the classroom which can yield positive feedback.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

#### **Setting and Participants**

The research took place in a high school setting in a self-contained classroom with eight students ranging from age 14 to 19 and in grades 9 through 12. There were two girls and 6 boys. Seven students have moderate mental impairments and one boy has autism.

#### **Design and Procedures**

Permission was obtained from the school’s principal and the special education teacher where the observations were to occur. Due to the nature of the study, parental permission was not required. The research took place over a two week period, Monday through Friday, during a forty-five minute class period each day. During the first week, unwanted behaviors were observed and tallied while math instruction took place without background music being played. Unwanted behaviors were defined as talking without permission, noise making, and throwing things. During the second week, unwanted behaviors were again observed and tallied while math instruction took place with background music being played. Afterward, data from both weeks were compared, conclusions were drawn, and results reported out.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Observations were done in one self-contained classroom during the same period each day over the course of two weeks. Tally marks were used to record unwanted behaviors. The first week of observation was used to establish baseline data. During the second week, soft background music was introduced and tally marks were again used to record unwanted behaviors during the same class period as week one. The data was analyzed and a comparison was made to determine if there was a reduction in unwanted behaviors with the introduction of music. Unwanted behaviors were defined as talking without permission, getting out of seat without permission, noise making, and throwing things. The goal of this research was to see if music can be used as a classroom management tool in the special education classroom to decrease unwanted behaviors during instruction.

Observations were done during second-period math class each day; this way, an entire class period could be devoted to the observation. The special education teacher reminded the students of the classroom rules at the beginning of class each day. Math instruction occurred without the use of background music during the first week. Tally marks were recorded to count the number of unwanted behaviors exhibited by all students in class. Tallies were totaled for each day and a total for the week was calculated. The same procedure was used to record unwanted behaviors during the second week as during the first week but with music playing in the background. A behavior was tallied when it had a clear beginning and end. Tally sheets used can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 included columns for the date, class period, tally marks for each unwanted behavior, total number of tally marks for the day, and a baseline total for the week as indicated. Table 2 included the same columns as Table 1 with the exception of the final column. It showed a total of unwanted behaviors with the introduction of music.

Table 1

*Week One: Unwanted Behaviors without the Introduction of Music*

Date	Class period	Unwanted behaviors	Daily total	Weekly total
3/23/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	## //	7	
3/24/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	///	3	
3/25/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	## /	6	
3/26/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	///	3	
3/27/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	## ///	8	
				Total: 27

Table 2

*Week Two: Unwanted Behaviors with the Introduction of Music*

Date	Class period	Unwanted behaviors	Daily total	Weekly total
3/30/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	////	4	
3/31/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	//	2	
4/01/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	///	3	
4/02/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	//	2	
4/03/15	2 <sup>nd</sup> period Math	////	4	
				Total: 15

According to the baseline data for week one, there was an average of 5.5 unwanted behaviors per day during math class without the introduction of music. The highest number of unwanted behaviors came at the beginning and end of the week. In week two, with music being played in the background, there were a total number of fifteen unwanted behaviors for an average of three per day. Again, the highest number of unwanted behaviors occurred at the beginning and the end of the week. Table 3 shows a comparison of data.

Table 3

#### *Data Comparison*

The data comparison indicates a nearly fifty-six percent decrease in unwanted behaviors during week two with the introduction of music during math class. Clearly, for the purposes of this study, it appears that the introduction of soft background music during instruction, is a good classroom management tool for decreasing the occurrences of unwanted behaviors. This in turn, may lead to the students' increased ability to follow instruction and behave more appropriately in the classroom.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether listening to music affected behavior in the special education classroom. This chapter shows the results of this study. It also shows the interpretation of the results, limits of the study, and future questions.

#### **Interpretation of the Study**

The hypothesis for the study was that listening to music would cause fewer unwanted behaviors in the special education classroom, as shown from first observation without music through second observation with music. While the unwanted behaviors did decrease, one must be cautioned; more research needs to be done before any concrete conclusions can be drawn.

### **Strategy**

When the first observation was done, the teacher reminded the students of his classroom rules and expectations. He said he does this on a daily basis. He then continued with the class without music in the background. I sat in the back of the classroom to observe the children's behaviors for one complete class period per day for a week in this manner. I noticed two students who were constantly being directed back to task. The others, only a few times during class.

During the second week, classical music was played softly in the background during the same class period. I sat in the back of the room to again observe and tally unwanted behaviors. The teacher began class as before reminding students of classroom rules. The unsolicited comment from the teacher was that this really seems to work. The study shows a reduction of unwanted behaviors from 27 occurrences during the first week of instruction without music to 15 during the second week with music. This was a reduction of unwanted behaviors by an average of three per day.

### **Limitations**

The study does suggest that music is effective as a classroom management tool, but there are limits to the study such as absenteeism. A few students were absent a couple of times during the second week.

### **Future research**

This study was done in a self-contained classroom with eight students with varying disabilities. For research in the future, the designer may want to use a general education classroom and multiple grades to do a larger comparison study of music's effectiveness on behavior.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study support the hypothesis that music can be used as an effective classroom management tool. Students in this study seemed to enjoy music as a relaxation tool. The teacher expressed interest in continuing the music in his class as an effective classroom management tool.

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*Thirty-five years of progress in educating children with disabilities through IDEA.*

Washington, D.C.

**Appendix A. Observation Tally Sheet for Week 1**

*Week One: Unwanted Behaviors without the Introduction of Music*

Date	Class period	Unwanted behaviors	Daily total	Weekly total

				Total:
--	--	--	--	--------

**Appendix B. Observation Tally Sheet for Week 2**

*Week Two: Unwanted Behaviors with the Introduction of Music*

Date	Class period	Unwanted behaviors	Daily total	Weekly total

				Total:
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