

Connecting traditional music to education for sustainable development: the case of a First Nations child diagnosed with autism.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine music as an innovation in special education using a case study to illustrate how factors such as ethnicity and ability can become insurmountable obstacles for participation. The purpose of my presentation is to discuss and obtain other teacher's and researcher's views and comments on this ongoing PhD project. Using an ethnographic approach, interviews and observations were conducted to study the meaning of music for a six-year-old First Nations boy in BC Canada, diagnosed with autism. In light of his situation, sustainable development seems unperceivable.

Background

As a music therapist, teacher of English and Music, and as a special education teacher, I have always used music and esthetic learning processes in my teaching. My ongoing PhD project is on the meaning of music for First Nations children in British Columbia, Canada, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. I became interested in issues concerning First Nations because I have three half-sisters who are Carrier of the Lake Babine Band, BC, Canada. From the age of 11 months to 14 years old, I lived in Canada. Thus, I have many years of firsthand experience of education in Canada which made the idea of doing research in that context appealing. As a teacher in a remedial group, I worked with many children with autism, and used music as a pedagogical tool. I currently work as a lecturer in special education at Karlstad University, Sweden, but I am also working on my PhD at the University of Eastern Finland. An important aspect of my research is reporting my results in various contexts and spreading information about Indigenous issues, specifically regarding autism and music interventions.

There are three Aboriginal peoples that are recognized by the Canadian Constitution; Indians, Métis and Inuit (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013). Aboriginal and Indian are names given by the colonists, and therefore, in this paper, Indigenous and First Nations are used. Indigenous worldviews hold common beliefs about the world and are relational (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Everything in the world has a spirit and people live in a reciprocal relationship with everything in the world and spirit world (Castellano, 2004).

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Indigenous knowledge systems are oral-based (Kovach, 2009) and the peoples passed down their history, for instance, through storytelling, songs and dances (Gray, 2011).

Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD, is a developmental disorder that involves deficits in social communication and social interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior (Autism Speaks, 2015). Autism prevalence has risen, but within First Nations in BC, Canada, autism appears to be under detected (Lindblom, 2014). There is not much literature on autism and First Nations, but Kapp (2011) describes the Navajo philosophy as relational, inclusive and beneficial to individuals diagnosed with autism. Music is used in interventions for communication, socialization and behavior, but the efficacy of music interventions with children with autism needs to be investigated further (Simpson & Keen, 2011). Music interventions with First Nations children in BC, Canada, diagnosed with autism lack in cultural sensitivity (Lindblom, 2015).

Education for sustainable development (ESD) affects all aspects of education and supports lifelong learning (Unesco, 2015a). Health promotion and cultural diversity are prioritized areas within ESD. Indigenous knowledge and worldviews are important and “should be integrated into education programmes at all levels whenever relevant” (Unesco, 2015b).

Aim

The purpose of my presentation is to discuss and obtain other teacher’s and researcher’s views and comments on this ongoing PhD project. Furthermore this presentation aims to put focus on how education for sustainable development can be exemplified by a case, and elucidate some obstacles that stand in the way.

Case

Connor is a six- year- old First Nations boy (Lindblom, 2015). At an early age, Connor was diagnosed with autism. Connor is minimally verbal and needs assistance with almost everything in his daily life. His mother passed away when he was very young and he now lives with the family who took care of his mother when she was a child. Four generations lived together in a house on the reserve the first time I met the family, but since then both the Elders have passed away. Everyone in the family has different roles in the care of Connor. These include responsibility for mothering, economic issues, driving Connor to school and picking him up, and other day-to-day things that need to be taken care of. Life within the

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family resembles what tradition First Nations life would have been like before contact with colonists, although, living on reserve is a form of segregation. At home Connor had the opportunity to hear traditional music when the grandmother listened to it or watched the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Within the school context, Connor attends the local school, but receives his education in a small room together with an assistant. Short periods of integration with his peers occur during the school day, but for the most part, Connor is educated in a segregated setting. At school, Connor does not listen to traditional music. In the course of my fieldwork, he showed interest in traditional music during interventions.

Conclusions

Education for sustainable development stresses the need for “every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future” (UNESCO, 2015a). Indigenous worldviews and ways of living were, before contact, very much in line with these goals. ESD can be seen in a global context, but also in an individual context, which the case of Connor exemplifies. Marginalization and segregation, both in the school setting and in society, limit his acquisition of the skills necessary according to UNESCO (2015a). There is much to be learned from Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems which could lead to sustainable development and influence education on all levels. For Connor, the possibility to obtain traditional skills and, for instance, music interventions that are culturally sensitive, would offer interesting opportunities.

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