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Case Study: Finding a Voice: How Rhythm and Melody Helped Bridge Communication with Autistic Children

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Abstract

This case study grew from my work as a PhD student exploring inclusive education. I noticed that three non-verbal autistic children in a mainstream classroom remained largely disconnected during standard teaching. Over eight months, I tried a different approach, using music and rhythm to guide them through daily activities instead of relying only on spoken words. This idea came from reading about how music can help build connections (Geretsegger et al., 2014). I watched as each child began to respond in their own way—starting tasks more readily, using new sounds or gestures to communicate, and handling daily changes with less anxiety. What this experience taught me is that musical communication can be a powerful tool, even when used by a teacher without special therapy training. It offers a practical way to build inclusion and understanding in the classroom.

Keywords: *Music Therapy, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Inclusive Education, Non-verbal Communication, Rhythmic Instruction, Action Research.*

Disclaimer on Anonymity and Ethics: This case study is based on action research conducted within an ethical framework. To ensure the confidentiality and well-being of the participants, all names—including those of the children and the educational institution—are pseudonyms. Specific identifying details have been altered; however, the core experiences, interventions, and observed outcomes truthfully represent the research process.

The Case Study

1. Introduction: The Silent Wall

My research in inclusive education became real to me during my time at “Springdale Elementary.” In a class of twenty children, three boys—Ayaan, Sam, and Rohan—seemed locked in a world I couldn’t reach. All were on the autism spectrum and mostly non-verbal, facing well-documented challenges in social communication (Baron-Cohen & Bolton, 1993). They often didn’t respond when asked to do something directly. Common strategies like repeating instructions or using picture cards made little difference. Everything changed one ordinary afternoon. A teaching assistant was humming while tidying up, and I saw Ayaan, who usually shut out noise, gently swaying to the tune. That small moment made me wonder. I had read that music can help link hearing and movement in the brain (Sharda et al., 2018), and I asked myself: **Could music reach these children in a way that words had not?**

2. The Children and My Approach: Using Music as a Tool

With permission from the school and families, I began an eight-month journey using music during classroom activities. The three children each had unique needs:

- **Ayaan (7 years):** Jumpy around loud sounds, often seemed worried, and rarely made eye contact.
- **Sam (6 years):** Full of energy, he often repeated lines from videos without using them to communicate.

- **Rohan (7 years):** Found it very hard to move between activities, often leading to meltdowns. He did not speak or copy actions.

My approach was straightforward. I used singing and rhythmic chanting instead of regular speech for simple instructions. This was inspired by the music therapy idea of starting where the child is and building a relationship through shared music-making (Nordoff & Robbins, 2007). I'm not a music therapist, but as a teacher, I used these ideas in the classroom. I chose rhythm intentionally because studies note it can help children with autism regulate their senses and movements (LaGasse & Hardy, 2013).

3. Making It Happen: Stories from the Classroom

It started with something as simple as cleaning up.

The “Clean-Up Song”: Instead of telling Ayaan, “Please put the blocks away,” I sang the instruction to a gentle, made-up tune. The first time, he stopped still, then looked right at me for several seconds. That moment of shared focus is so important, and research shows music can help create it (Kim et al., 2008). After a couple of months, he would start cleaning up as soon as he heard the song's opening notes.

Using Rhythm for Change: Shifting from playtime to circle time was especially hard for Rohan. I began using a steady, walking-beat chant, like “Time... to... walk... to... the... circle... time.” One difficult moment, as he started to get upset, I began the chant. He watched my hands, and instead of crying, he took one step, then another, in time with the beat. This fits with what we know about how music and movement can calm the body's stress response (Srinivasan & Bhat, 2013).

Turning repetition into communication: Sam often repeated sounds meaninglessly. He loved a particular cartoon song, so I used the tune but changed the words to, “Sam, it's time to wash your hands, wo-ba-du-ba!” He paused, looked at me, and repeated “Wo-ba-du-ba!” while walking to the sink. It was a small shift, but it showed how a musical frame can turn empty repetition into an action with purpose (Berger, 2002; Wigram, 2002).

4. What Changed: Small Steps Forward

After eight months, each child had moved forward in their own way, echoing what broader studies have found about music and autism (Geretsegger et al., 2014).

- **Ayaan** started to seek me out. He would bring a drum, tap it, and look at me, asking me to join him. This move from being passive to taking the lead is a key goal in any therapeutic work (Meyer, 2013). He also made his first clear attempt to communicate with sound—a lilting “Aaah?” that copied the questioning tone of my voice.
- **Sam** began using his songs to guide himself. I'd hear him softly singing the “hand-washing” song on his way to the sink. His repeated phrases were becoming a useful tool for navigating his day.
- **Rohan's** improvement was seen in the sharp drop in his upset episodes—by nearly 70%. He began to use touch to communicate, gently tapping my hand on the table to ask for more of a rhythm game. This was his first calm, clear way of making a request.

5. Conclusion: Building a Bridge with Music

This journey showed me that music, especially rhythm and melody, can build bridges where words fail. The small successes I saw—a shared moment, a smooth transition, a new sound or gesture—add real-life support to what research is finding (Sharda et al., 2018; Geretsegger et al., 2014). The message for teachers and parents is hopeful. You don't need to be an expert. You just need to be

willing to try—to sing, to chant, to find a shared rhythm. In doing so, we built a bridge across a silent divide, and on that bridge, we found each other.

This work was done following the ethical rules of [Your University] and with permission from all families. The children's names have been changed.

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