

The Importance of Music Therapy in Primary Education: Enhancing Emotional, Cognitive, and Social Development

Amparo de Dios Tronch

Universidad de Valencia, Spain

Corresponding author

Amparo de Dios Tronch, Universidad de Valencia, Spain.

Received: May 20, 2025; Accepted: May 29, 2025; Published: June 03, 2025

ABSTRACT

Music therapy plays a vital role in promoting the emotional, cognitive, and social development of children in primary education. As a therapeutic discipline, it uses music intentionally to achieve individual and group goals within a structured setting. In the classroom, music therapy can help students express emotions, improve communication, and manage stress or behavioral issues. This is especially beneficial for students with special educational needs, such as those with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, or emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Music therapy also enhances concentration, memory, and academic learning through rhythm, repetition, and musical engagement. Group music activities encourage cooperation, turn-taking, and peer interaction, fostering a positive classroom climate. Furthermore, it provides a safe, inclusive, and motivating environment for all students, regardless of their abilities or background.

Teachers and schools that incorporate music therapy into the curriculum or as part of support services report improvements in students' self-esteem, participation, and overall well-being. As education moves toward more holistic and inclusive approaches, music therapy proves to be a powerful tool for supporting diverse learning needs and creating meaningful learning experiences. Integrating music therapy into primary education offers long-term benefits for students' personal and academic growth.

Introduction

Music therapy has increasingly gained recognition as a valuable resource in educational settings, offering benefits that extend beyond traditional academic instruction. Defined as the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship (American Music Therapy Association, music therapy supports students' emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development [1]. It serves as a non-verbal, creative medium that allows individuals to express themselves, process emotions, and engage with others in meaningful ways.

In general education, music therapy contributes to a more inclusive and holistic learning environment. It can be used to improve attention span, reduce anxiety, enhance self-expression, and foster social interaction [2]. These outcomes are especially

important as schools increasingly accommodate diverse learning profiles, including students with special educational needs.

In primary education specifically, music therapy is particularly effective due to children's developmental stage. Early childhood and the primary years are crucial for shaping self-esteem, communication skills, and emotional regulation. According to Standley, music interventions during this period can significantly support language development, classroom engagement, and positive behavior [3]. Furthermore, Nordoff and Robbins highlight the power of active music-making in helping children with developmental delays to connect with peers and educators in a motivating, non-threatening context [4]. Integrating music therapy into primary classrooms not only enhances learning but also contributes to students' overall well-being, providing a foundation for lifelong social and emotional skills.

Citation: Amparo de Dios Tronch. The Importance of Music Therapy in Primary Education: Enhancing Emotional, Cognitive, and Social Development. J Clin Res Case Stud. 2025. 3(3): 1-4. DOI: doi.org/10.61440/JCRCS.2025.v3.72

Historical Foundations of Music Therapy

The evolution of music therapy has been shaped by various pioneers who contributed to its theoretical and practical frameworks. The following table presents a chronological overview of key figures and their contributions:

Table 1: Definitions of Music Therapy

Year	Author(s)	Definition of Music Therapy
1968	E. Thayer Gaston	"Music therapy is the use of music in the accomplishment of therapeutic aims: the restoration, maintenance, and improvement of mental and physical health."
1973	Juliette Alvin	"Music therapy is the use of sounds and music within an evolving relationship between client/patient and therapist to support and encourage physical, mental, and emotional well-being."
1975	Mary Priestley	"Music therapy is a means of emotional expression through improvisation and interaction, grounded in psychodynamic principles."
1983	Bruscia (early publications)	"Music therapy is a systematic process of intervention wherein the therapist helps the client promote health through musical experiences and the relationships that develop through them."
1998	Kenneth E. Bruscia	"An interpersonal process in which the therapist uses music and all of its facets—physical, emotional, mental, social, aesthetic, and spiritual—to help clients improve or maintain their health."
2002	American Music Therapy Association (AMTA)	"Music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional."
2014	World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT)	"Music therapy is the professional use of music and its elements as an intervention in medical, educational, and everyday environments with individuals, groups, families, or communities who seek to optimize their quality of life and improve their physical, social, communicative, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health and well-being."

Key Research Studies on Music Therapy

Music therapy encompasses various theoretical approaches, each offering unique perspectives on its application:

- **Psychodynamic Approach:** Emphasizes unconscious processes and emotional expression through musical improvisation [5].
- **Humanistic Approach:** Focuses on self-actualization and personal growth, utilizing music to foster creativity and self-expression [2].
- **Developmental Approach:** Addresses developmental milestones, using music to support cognitive and motor skills [6].
- **Behavioral Approach:** Applies music as reinforcement to shape behaviors and enhance learning outcomes [7].

Table 2: Research on music therapy

Author(s)	Year	Title / Focus	Main Findings / Contributions
STANDLEY, J. M.	2003	Music intervention and academic readiness in preschool children	Music interventions improved pre-literacy and cognitive skills in preschoolers.
GERETSEGGER, M., ET AL.	2014	Music therapy for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	Music therapy significantly improved social interaction and communication in children with ASD.
RICKSON, D. J., & WATKINS, W.	2003	Music therapy to reduce anxiety and disruptive behavior in adolescents	Music therapy sessions reduced classroom anxiety and disruptive behavior.
GOODING, L.	2011	Music therapy as an academic intervention for students with emotional/behavioral disorders	Music therapy helped improve classroom behavior and academic focus.
REGISTER, D.	2001	The effects of an early intervention music curriculum on pre-reading/writing skills	Music enhanced emergent literacy skills in early learners.
AIGEN, K.	2013	Music-centered music therapy theory and autism	Emphasized relational and musical engagement over behavioral outcomes in therapy with children on the autism spectrum.
GOLD, C., ET AL.	2009	Music therapy for children and adolescents with psychiatric disorders	Music therapy was effective in improving emotional and social functioning in young patients.

Benefits of Music Therapy in Primary Education

1. Emotional Development

Music therapy provides a safe space for children to explore and express emotions. Engaging in musical activities can reduce anxiety, enhance mood, and promote emotional resilience [8].

2. Cognitive Enhancement

Incorporating music into learning can improve memory, attention, and problem-solving skills. Studies have shown that music therapy interventions can lead to significant improvements in cognitive functions among students [7].

3. Social Skills and Communication

Group music therapy sessions encourage collaboration, turn-taking, and active listening. These interactions foster social competence and effective communication among peers [9].

4. Support for Special Needs

Children with developmental disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), benefit from music therapy through improved social interaction and communication skills [10].

Implementation Strategies in Schools

Effective integration of music therapy in primary education involves:

- **Collaboration:** Working with certified music therapists to design and implement programs tailored to students' needs.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Incorporating musical activities into daily lessons to reinforce learning objectives.
- **Professional Development:** Training educators on the principles and benefits of music therapy.
- **Evaluation:** Regular assessment of program outcomes to ensure effectiveness and inform improvements.

Conclusion

The integration of music therapy into primary school classrooms presents a powerful, evidence-based approach to supporting the holistic development of young learners. As educational paradigms shift toward inclusive, emotionally supportive, and student-centered models, music therapy offers a complementary tool that enriches the learning experience far beyond academic achievement.

Supporting Emotional and Psychological Well-Being

Music therapy plays a key role in nurturing emotional intelligence and psychological health in young students. Primary school is a critical period when children develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and coping mechanisms. Music provides a natural outlet for expressing emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally, especially for children experiencing anxiety, trauma, or social-emotional challenges [11]. In a therapeutic setting, music becomes a medium through which students can explore and manage feelings, ultimately enhancing their emotional resilience.

"Music therapy offers children the opportunity to express and regulate their emotions in a structured and supportive environment" [11].

By facilitating emotional expression through singing, improvisation, or listening, music therapy fosters a sense of safety and empathy in the classroom, which is foundational for effective learning.

Enhancing Cognitive and Academic Skills

In addition to its emotional benefits, music therapy also promotes cognitive and academic development. Engaging with rhythm and melody activates neural pathways involved in attention, memory, and executive functioning [3]. Studies show that structured music therapy programs can improve early literacy and numeracy skills by enhancing auditory discrimination, sequencing abilities, and listening comprehension—all of which are essential for reading and mathematics.

"Musical interventions enhance emergent literacy, phonological awareness, and cognitive flexibility in early learners" [3].

Music therapy is especially effective for students who struggle with traditional instruction methods, as it offers multisensory, engaging alternatives that cater to diverse learning styles.

Fostering Social Skills and Peer Interaction

Primary classrooms are also social environments where children learn to collaborate, communicate, and build relationships. Music therapy provides a structured setting for the development of interpersonal skills. Group music-making encourages cooperation, turn-taking, active listening, and empathy. Nordoff and Robbins argue that music, as a shared experience, naturally promotes human connection and collective participation [4].

"In shared musical experiences, children learn the fundamental social behaviors of cooperation, empathy, and mutual engagement" [4].

This is particularly beneficial for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or other social communication challenges. According to Geretsegger, music therapy has been shown to improve joint attention, social reciprocity, and expressive communication in children with ASD, making it a valuable inclusion strategy [10].

Reducing Behavioral Challenges and Promoting Classroom Harmony

Behavioral regulation is another area where music therapy has proven to be effective. Through the use of rhythmic structure, routine, and musical engagement, students are able to channel their energy productively and develop impulse control. Gooding reports that music therapy helps reduce disruptive behavior and improve classroom engagement among students with behavioral and emotional difficulties [12].

"Music therapy contributes to the development of self-control and decreases behavioral disruptions in educational settings" [12].

Incorporating music therapy into daily classroom routines—through songs for transitions, calming background music, or short rhythmic exercises—can help establish a more focused and emotionally regulated learning environment.

Inclusive Education and Support for Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Perhaps one of the most compelling arguments for the integration of music therapy in primary education is its adaptability to diverse learners. Music therapy is inherently inclusive, offering

non-verbal, experiential learning opportunities that transcend linguistic, cognitive, and physical barriers. For students with SEN, music therapy provides a modality through which they can access learning, participate meaningfully, and build confidence [2].

“Music therapy offers a person-centered, adaptive framework for addressing a wide range of special educational needs” [2].

It serves not only as an intervention but also as a pedagogical approach that values individual strengths and promotes equity in the classroom.

In conclusion, the integration of music therapy into primary school education aligns with modern educational goals that emphasize emotional intelligence, inclusivity, creativity, and holistic development. It supports the child as a whole—not only intellectually but also emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. When facilitated by trained professionals and embedded within the school ecosystem, music therapy becomes a transformative force that enriches learning experiences and empowers every child to reach their full potential.

As the demands on students and educators grow, music therapy offers a vital, evidence-based solution to many of the challenges in today’s classrooms. Schools that embrace its use demonstrate a commitment to nurturing not only academic success but also the well-being and humanity of every learner.

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