

Book Review

Music Therapy with Autistic Children in Aotearoa, New Zealand / Haumanu ā-Puoro mā ngā Tamariki Takiwātanga i Aotearoa (2022)

Daphne Rickson (Palgrave Macmillan Cham)

Reviewer: Rachael Hannah

MA (Music Therapy), BMus (Hons), NZ RMT
The Champion Centre | Tamariki Toiora
Correspondence: rachaelh@gmail.com

Citation

Hannah, R. (2025). [Review of the book *Music Therapy with Autistic Children in Aotearoa, New Zealand / Haumanu ā-Puoro mā ngā Tamariki Takiwātanga i Aotearoa*, by D. Rickson.] *New Zealand Journal of Music Therapy*, 23, 73-77.

Music Therapy with Autistic Children in Aotearoa, New Zealand / Haumanu ā-Puoro mā ngā Tamariki Takiwātanga i Aotearoa summarises a research project in which commentators reflect on ten individual music therapy case studies. The impetus for this research began several years earlier, in response to barriers to accessing music therapy due to perceived lack of evidence. Findings from an exploratory study indicated that “those who witness music therapy in action develop more understanding and appreciation for what can be achieved, and can be readily convinced of its importance” (Rickson et al, 2015, p. 30). Therefore, this study asks: “How is music therapy with autistic children (tamariki takiwātanga) in New Zealand (Aotearoa) perceived by family members and other autism experts?” (p. 63). This question is of interest to me as a music therapist who has worked for a number of years with autistic children in the UK and NZ. How might the commentators, with no prior knowledge of music therapy, respond to the case studies provided?

Dr Daphne Rickson is well known in New Zealand and internationally as a music therapy practitioner, researcher, author and educator. She was the recipient in 2023 of the Lifetime Achievement Award by the World Federation of Music Therapy, recognising her significant contributions to the field of music therapy through practice, teaching and research, and in

2022 was appointed Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM) for services to music therapy. This 2022 text is based on research undertaken in 2018, when funding enabled ten music therapists around New Zealand to offer music therapy sessions to tamariki takiwātanga who had no previous experience of music therapy for up to a year. On completion of the therapy, each therapist provided a case study in 'narrative assessment' form (used by teachers in New Zealand schools to document learning progress for students, especially those with additional learning needs; Ministry of Education, 2009). They also included audio or video examples where possible. Each case study was then reviewed by a team of commentators made up of a mix of family members, teachers or other professionals who knew the child well (individual to each case) as well as six autism experts who did not know the children and reviewed all ten cases. Commentators provided both qualitative descriptions and completed a Likert scale questionnaire in response to the case studies. This data was then collated and analysed by Rickson to draw out common themes from the responses.

The initial chapters (1-5) serve as an introduction to the research project, including a thorough introduction to autism through both medical and neurodiversity lenses and a literature review of research in music therapy with autistic children. The literature review is comprehensive, covering both smaller qualitative and larger quantitative studies from around the world published since the year 2000 and reflecting on the difficulties of capturing statistically significant proof of effectiveness in larger studies. The project and its predecessor, a survey of music therapists working with autistic children in New Zealand in 2015, are then outlined.

Chapters six to fifteen cover the ten individual case studies. Each one begins with some background information on child and therapist then includes: a summary of the music therapy process in the form of 'learning stories'; a summary of commentators' descriptive / qualitative responses to the work; comparison between qualitative responses and the Questionnaires; a brief summary from the music therapist (not seen by the commentators); and reflections from the researcher. The children range in age between five and ten years old. The work happens in a variety of settings (schools, homes, therapist's studios) with a variety of key aims or goals, mostly focusing on social interaction, communication, and relating to others. Therapy lasted between five months and a full year. Narrative assessment format was chosen to allow therapists to select meaningful moments from the work after it was completed and allow the therapy to unfold in a natural way without research study prerequisites. The music therapists each provided a number of 'learning stories' (or short vignettes). These give us a glimpse into the therapy, however the

focus of each chapter is the responses from the commentators: The qualitative responses are quoted in excerpts and similarities are highlighted. As a reader, whilst I enjoyed each unique case study presented, I felt at times there was a disconnect between the description of the music therapy process and the responses, as the brief summary we are given is of course very different from what the commentators had read, heard and seen. I wished at times to have a fuller picture of the therapy from the therapists' point of view or more context as to what was presented to commentators.

An in-depth analysis of thematic findings, based on data from the commentators, follows in chapters 16-23. Chapters 17 and 18 explore how commentators consistently perceived music therapy to support regulation, social communication and relationships. Commentators perceived sessions across case studies to support children by creating a safe and trusting relationship, establishing rapport, offering motivating and engaging activities, responding skilfully and playfully to build connection which in turn reduced anxiety and built confidence in children. Examples of commentators' responses illustrate the themes throughout. Chapter 19 covers goal setting. There is more of a mixed response from commentators on whether the goals set were appropriate and whether timely progress was made. The chapter has a thoughtful discussion around the complexities of goal setting. Goals were generally broad, and possibly clarified as the music therapy process unfolded. The nature of collaborative and child-centred work can feel at odds with formally defined and measurable goals, and while more precise goals can enable concisely reported outcomes, this can mean missing the full and rich picture of what is happening in sessions. However, in this book, goals are perceived as helpful by both therapists and commentators to communicate what is happening and define focus for sessions.

Chapters 20-22 consider themes around common methods and approaches the therapists used and the choice of sessions to be mostly individual (only one case study involved paired working with several peers from school over the course of sessions). I found the discussion around inclusivity to be thought-provoking. Working with individual children, withdrawing them from class for their sessions, was certainly the norm of my working experience in the UK whereas the focus in NZ on inclusive classrooms perhaps means broadening the way music therapists are trained and work. Generalisation of skills and sustainability of progress are considered in chapter 23. Here there was a marked difference between commentators unfamiliar with the individual children (who were unclear whether progress had been seen and sustained outside of

therapy) and those commentators who knew the children (the majority of whom felt there had been generalisation of skills beyond sessions).

The epilogue highlights the many ways that the findings from this research align with the recommendations of the New Zealand Autism Spectrum Guideline. In the same year as Rickson's publication, the Guideline published a third update which includes the recommendation: "Music therapy can enhance social communication skills and should be considered for children and young people on the autism spectrum" (Whaikaha, 2022, p. 30). The epilogue also considers music therapy as an evidence-based practice, and how qualitative synthesis approaches in research practice, such as the cross-case analysis in this project, are increasingly recognised, as are the limitations of traditional randomised control trials.

This book is a valuable and captivating account of a significant and innovative research project. While the commentators held varying opinions in response to many of the questions asked, this reflects the complex and rich data captured. It was heartening to read that the commentators were, overall, impressed by the strengths-based and child-centred approaches used by the music therapists and that they were able to appreciate the way that the music therapists engaged with all forms of expression offered by the children to build the trusting therapeutic relationships which are at the heart of our work. I did observe a small but significant number of errors in proofreading and page number references which was frustrating. The lack of any child's voice is noted in several places throughout the text as being disappointing. Narrative assessment in theory encourages participating children's (and other) voices but no therapists chose to include input from children in this research. Perhaps, as Rickson notes (p. 344), more explicit encouragement was needed at the outset.

Overall, I would highly recommend this book for music therapists in New Zealand and overseas who work with autistic children, as well as for educators, parents and family members who are interested in the process of music therapy. In the introduction, Rickson says the research was born from a "call for more evidence to underpin the potential employment of music therapists to work with takiwātanga in NZ" (p. 9). I certainly hope that it will continue to strengthen the case for more support and funding for access to music therapy.

References

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