Who are the children and young people with ‘complex needs’?

The beginning of wisdom, it is said, is to call things by their right names, and certainly, for children and young people who require educational resources over and above those that are typically provided for the majority, being categorized seems to be a fact of life. On what other basis (it is argued) could specialist services be organized to meet the needs of those they serve, effectively and efficiently? Obversely, on an individual level, labels are sometimes viewed as the keys that can unlock entitlement. But (ethical considerations aside) the reality is that many pupils and students do not fit neatly into categories that are constructed according to medical or functional deficit models, and this is particularly true of children and young people whose plurality of special needs interact with each other as they impact on learning and development (cf. Lauchlan and Boyle 2007).

Here, we will follow the pragmatic line that labels of disability or special educational need are a useful servant but a poor master. They are valuable as a reflection of the conceptual shorthand that enables a book such as this to be written and hopefully for it to be of benefit to a broadly based audience, but one should always be mindful of the fact that children and young people need to be judged first and foremost in terms of their individual abilities, requirements, wishes, and propensities. So the label ‘complex needs’ may provide something of the context for planning educational provision but not, ultimately, its content for a particular child or young person.

Although the term ‘complex needs’ is widely and commonly used, it is open to a range of interpretations. In Victoria, Australia, for example, the label is taken to include ‘adolescents and adults who may experience various combinations of mental illness, intellectual disability, acquired brain injury, physical disability, behavioural difficulties, social isolation, family dysfunction, and alcohol or other substance abuse’. In Alberta, Canada, children with complex

needs are defined as requiring ‘significant extraordinary care due to the severity of their impairment(s) and require services from more than one ministry.’ Those who require such services may include [those] with multiple impairments, complex mental health and health issues and/or severe behavioural needs. In the UK, children and young people with complex needs are said to have ‘a number of discrete needs—relating to their health, education, welfare, development, home environment . . . [that] may be life-long.’ Different needs tend to interact, exacerbating their impact on the child’s development and well-being. Children with higher levels of need are often described as [having] “severe and complex needs” or . . . “significant and complex needs”.

The breadth of these definitions is reflected in the evidence presented to the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee’s Enquiry into Special Educational Needs (2005–6), where it is evident that different agencies interpret ‘complex needs’ according to their particular area of concern. So, in employing this term, some groups appear to have in mind those with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, for example, whose ‘volatility raises issues of health and safety’, while others, such as the UK-based disability-focused organizations Scope, Sense, and the RNIB, tend to use the label to refer to children and young people with aggregations of severe, or profound and multiple learning difficulties. It is in this, latter, sense that the term ‘complex needs’ will be used in this book.

This, of course, begs another question: what is meant by ‘severe learning difficulties’ (‘SLD’) and ‘profound and multiple learning difficulties’ (‘PMLD’)? Again, there are no agreed definitions, although in undertaking a research project into the provision of music education in special schools in England, the following descriptions were suggested and accepted without demur by the 50 or so schools that participated (Welch, Ockelford, and Zimmermann 2001). First, it was proposed that, in round terms, ‘pupils with PMLD have profound global developmental delay, such that cognitive, sensory, physical, emotional and social development are in the very early stages (as in the first 12 months of usual development)’, and second that ‘pupils with SLD have severe global developmental delay, such that cognitive, sensory, physical, emotional and

---


3 As part of the Every Child Matters initiative; details to be found at <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/multiagencyworking/glossary/?asset=glossary&id=22365>.
social development are in the early stages (as in the first 12 to 30 months of usual development). These are the descriptors that will be adopted here, implying that children and young people with complex needs (as defined above in terms of SLD and PMLD) are likely to be functioning well below their chronological age in all areas, although, as we shall see, some have markedly uneven profiles of development.

In terms of numbers, pupils with SLD or PMLD make up only around 0.5 per cent of the school population in England. Here, they are largely educated in special schools—around 29,540 as opposed to 10,970 in mainstream—a ratio of about 3:1.

Music for children and young people with complex needs

Whatever the context in which it occurs—special or mainstream—music education for children and young people with complex needs is still a pedagogical infant. To put this in perspective, in the UK, the statutory entitlement of those with the greatest intellectual disabilities to any form of education is relatively recent, and only started to occur following the Education (Handicapped Children) Act 1970 and the Education (Mentally Handicapped Children) (Scotland) Act 1974. However, in the past four decades or so, the role of the music teacher, as it is generally understood, has not evolved to include the expertise necessary to work in this highly specialized area: as we shall see, this has tended to be the province of music therapists. The problem has been compounded by the lack of nationally recognized courses for music teachers wishing to work with young people with SLD or PMLD, the almost total absence of relevant research, and a dearth of a pertinent literature. Those books that have been written concerning music education for children and young people with disabilities—the more venerable of which being now outdated in many respects—make little or no reference to those with severe or profound learning difficulties: see, for example, Dobbs (1966), Bailey (1973), Dickinson (1978), Wood (1983/1993), Childs (1996), Streeter (1993/2001), Adamek and Darrow (2005), and Jaquiss and Paterson (2005).

---

5 Since the categories SLD and PMLD lack nationally agreed definitions, and since other categories (such as autistic spectrum disorder) may include children and young people with learning difficulties, these figures should be treated with some caution.
Aims and structure of the book

It is in this context that the current book was written and is offered to policy makers, planners, and practitioners working in the field of music and learning difficulties, although parents and carers with an interest in the subject may also find material that is of relevance. It is the first volume to be devoted solely to the subject of music education for children and young people with complex needs, and it takes a consciously novel tack. Solutions to the issues that are identified are embedded in a new psycho-musicological theory\(^7\) that seeks to explain how music ‘makes sense’ to all of us (Ockelford 2005a). This stance is adopted in an effort to bring conceptual unity to an area of work that, like many disciplines that are still in the early stages of their evolution, has been characterized by idiosyncratic, piecemeal, and even conflicting approaches—among which, for sure, are some of individual value. Accordingly, the two main aims of Music for Children and Young People with Complex Needs are, first, to offer a coherent model that can be used to underpin education in music and education through music for this group of young people, and, second, to use this model to contextualize practical advice for teachers, teaching assistants, and others.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I, ‘Issues’, sets out three of the greatest challenges in the field: the patchy nature of music-educational provision for children and young people with complex needs; the confusion over the role of ‘teachers’ and ‘therapists’, and, consequently, what constitutes ‘education’ and ‘therapy’ for this group; and difficulties with the framework of music education for those with severe or profound learning difficulties that was published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 2001. Although this framework has an English purview, there is no evidence elsewhere of a coherent, evidence-based music curriculum appropriate to the potential levels of attainment and progress of pupils with SLD or PMLD. Hence the observations that are made have wider applicability.

Part II, ‘A New Model’, presents the theory of musical understanding that will be used to inform the potential solutions and discussions of these that follow. The theory grapples with the question of just how music ‘works’: of how it is that abstract patterns in sound are able to convey meaning, and what the characteristics of that meaning are. It has three important implications for Music for Children and Young People with Complex Needs. First, that the unrelenting (though typically subconscious) search for different manifestations of repetition and variation must be fundamental to music cognition. Second, the

\(^7\) That is, one that uses psychological information and ideas in a musicological context.
pursuit of this form of pattern-recognition must be embedded in music development. Third, promoting this necessary aspect of musical thinking should be central to curricula that seek to nurture the advancement of musical abilities.

Part III, ‘Addressing Special Musical Needs’, offers a model of musical development for children and young people with SLD and PMLD, and shows how this can be used as a basis for curriculum planning and delivery, and to assess attainment and progress, both for musical activities and other areas of engagement in which music is a permeating strand. This section explains how those in the early stages of development can represent and communicate about music, and convey their musical preferences.

Part IV, ‘Identifying and fostering special musical abilities’, examines the issue found across the learning disability spectrum of uneven profiles of development, in which one facet or more of musicality evolves markedly beyond other skills or domains of knowledge. Occasionally, several narrow peaks of ability (such as auditory processing, memory, and motor skills) arise together and are fused through exceptional motivation, resulting in the emergence of a so-called ‘musical savant’. Young people with capacities such as these present particular challenges to teachers and the educational systems within which they operate, and this section includes accounts of a number of tried and tested pedagogical strategies.

Hence (inevitably) *Music for Children and Young People with Complex Needs* covers a range of topics embedded in a variety of disciplines, including special educational needs, music, music education, music therapy, musicology, and developmental and cognitive psychology. These are likely to correspond idiosyncratically to different readers’ areas of particular interest and expertise, and two strategies are adopted to minimize the potentially negative impact that this may have. First, all specialist language and concepts are explained in footnotes, with extensive references to other literature and relevant websites. Second, as well as being tied in to the overall narrative thread of the book, each chapter is designed to stand alone. So, teachers faced for the first time with the responsibility of educating a musical savant may wish to concentrate their attention on Part IV, for example, whereas a therapist seeking to support those with profound and multiple learning difficulties may find Part III of most relevance.

Finally, it is hoped that the book will be of interest not only to those working with and children and young people with complex needs, but to all those engaged in music education. This is because although an understanding of those with special needs should be informed by the way that the majority of children and young people develop, it is equally clear that there are lessons for us all from those whose abilities or disabilities are at the extremes.