



**Utilizing Japanese Community Engagement**  
*Understanding Malaysian Traditional Music Therapy for Children with Special Needs*

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**ABSTRACT**

This study suggests an intervention treatment relating to the dances and songs of “Dikir Barat” and “Kuda Kepang” and utilizes the distinctive methods of Malay traditional performance. Children with specific difficulties will benefit from the therapy’s emphasis on audience perception skills and socialization. The audience for this study, which comprised students and people with special needs, was polled using a survey questionnaire that was provided as part of a special concert. The descriptive analysis of the 5-point Likert scale survey’s 20 items yielded the proportion of each item. As a result, it has been found that shows, particularly those that incorporate the performing arts of singing, dancing, and acting, greatly affect and have an impact on groups with special needs. This study adds to the body of knowledge by demonstrating how conventional music therapy can encourage children with special needs to become more actively involved in their own lives as well as that of their community.

**KEYWORDS**

Japanese community; Malaysia; Music therapy; Special needs children.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The use of music, dancing, and singing as part of art therapy interventions dates back to the 1950s (Talwar et al., 2006). Such a therapeutic approach aimed to improve and repair people’s psychological health as well as their physical diseases, especially in children with special needs (Berger, 2002). To help special needs children socialize and communicate, a variety of music, singing, and dance techniques have been employed in prior studies (Kim et al., 2008; Duffy & Fuller, 2000), particularly in the contexts of social communication and behavior. Feedback from the caregivers, especially the parents of the special

needs group, is also required to better comprehend and promote special needs group participation in musical activities. This input would be centered on the child’s behavior and development.

It is generally acknowledged that singing, playing, moving, and listening to music with children who have special needs can be incredibly imaginative, joyous, and entertaining. Children who have numerous disabilities and who actively participate in a variety of musical genres and methods have shown considerable improvement in their general education. As a result, music intervention has been frequently employed to adapt musical education to music therapy (Chiangchana & Trakarnrung, 2014). Singing is

one of the most straightforward ways to acquire music because it is so closely related to language, speech, chants, and songs. Children can also develop their social skills by playing games that involve singing and their vocabulary by learning words through songs (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2002). According to Lau (2005), a young child's social development can be developed through singing and activities in music lessons. These findings suggest that when a child's limitations prevent them from participating fully in life, music will enable them to find alternate adaptations that are more favorable to a better and more active involvement.

In the meantime, dancing movement can be a useful instrument for therapeutic healing and can help special needs children build their self-esteem and coping mechanisms (Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010). Furthermore, dancing increases motivation to overcome functional restrictions and difficulties, particularly in young disabled children (Duggan, 1978). Thus, despite differences in culture or customs, music, singing, and dance are universal phenomena with important ramifications. It is indisputable that these components are widely seen as encapsulating any nation's or culture's identity.

The primary objectives of this study were to examine audience participation and reactions to the special needs and student audiences' performances. The study also sought to shed light on the effects of exposing children with special needs to traditional music, dancing, and singing through musical activities like "Dikir Barat" and "Kuda Kepang," which were performed alongside typically developing kids as a part of a music intervention program. This study also sought to learn more about the interactions between Malaysia and Japan, two countries with comparable interests in cultural music and dance therapy for children with special needs but distinct methodologies.

## **METHOD**

This study's design used a quantitative descriptive review to gather the primary data, then opened questions to the respondents to allow them to express ideas, opinions, and views in describing changes in the respondent's children after being exposed to music, dance, and singing activities.

The participants in the study were those who attended the "Sejuta Kasih" concert, which was put on by the Twinkle Cats at the Cosmos

Commons in Lizuka, Kyushu, Japan. Parents, members of the neighborhood, and volunteers who were devoted physically, psychologically, and emotionally to making sure the kids had the chance to participate in any of the activities made up the audience. A total of 600 audience members were randomly chosen to complete survey questionnaires using the random sampling method; of these, 120 forms were returned and only 115 were recognized as acceptable samples for analysis. In addition to a brief introduction, survey forms were printed and delivered to the audience members as they entered the music hall at the start of the performance. The forms were gathered for data analysis after the concert.

The 20-item non-standardized survey questionnaire was developed by the researchers to particularly gather as much information and data from the target population, which included volunteers, local community members, and parents of special needs children. According to a 5-point Likert scale, the items were organized as follows: 1 = severely disagree/dissatisfied, 2 = disagree/dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree/satisfied, and 5 = highly agree/satisfied. To make it simpler for respondents to respond, the survey forms were translated into Japanese. The questions were designed to determine the degree of familiarity and exposure to Malaysian traditional dances like "Dikir Barat" and "Kuda Kepang" and music. The parents were also asked to comment on their children's participation in art music therapy programs and activities as part of the questioning.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Special Needs Children**

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in 2015, autism spectrum disorder affects one percent of the world's population, and between 2002 and 2010, the prevalence rose by 6 to 15 percent year. According to Brigha et al. (2011), 1% of adults in the United Kingdom have autism spectrum disorder, while more than 3.5 million people in the United States have the condition (Buescher et al., 2014). According to statistics, there are currently more kids worldwide with special needs, particularly those with Down syndrome and autism. According to data, there are 159,169 and 29,403 cases of Down syndrome in Japan and Malaysia, respectively, which amounts to one out of every 800 live births each year.

According to a 2008 Japanese study by Kawamura and colleagues, the prevalence was estimated to be 181.1/10,000. In the meantime, the National Autism Society of Malaysia reports that over the previous three years, the organization's intake of autistic people has climbed by 30%. In conclusion, it appears that the prevalence of autism is increasing at a potentially worrying rate. According to some research, this growth has been between 10% and 17% every year over the past few years. An unexplained phenomenon suggests that boys are more likely than girls to be affected by autism. Before 2015, learning impairments or even mental retardation would have been used to diagnose autism spectrum conditions (Jevtic, 2015).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a form of neurodevelopmental illness that affects a person's mental, emotional, learning, and memory capacities (McCray et al., 2014). Children with ASD may also face other issues or limitations. According to Bicard and Heward (2013), this group of kids encounters issues frequently, especially when it comes to communication difficulties, lack of social engagement, and stereotypical patterns of behavior. They exhibit issues like passivity, temper tantrums, lack of common sense, aggression, rebellion, and a lack of spontaneous or imaginative play by rocking their bodies while seated, flicking their fingers, twirling around, spinning objects, gazing at lights, sniffing the air, and flapping their hands at their wrists (Loftin et al. 2008). They may also display sensory losses, behavioral issues, and/or social issues as a result of these various disabilities (Singh, 2010).

Children with special needs can also experience sensory impairments that influence their sensitivity to touch, hearing, smell, and taste. According to Harrison and Hare (2004), between 70 and 80 percent of children displayed sensitivity to sensory input. Children with special needs also exhibit signs of being too responsive (hypersensitive), including an inability to tolerate loud noises, aversion to touch, and refusal to consume food with particular flavors, textures, or aromas. They also exhibit under-responsiveness to sensory stimuli, abnormal pain perception, and repetitive body rocking, spinning, and pushing or rubbing objects into their skin (Gabriels et al., 2008; Leekam et al., 2007).

Numerous researches have been carried out to identify this group's needs and provide suitable intervention strategies that therapists, educators, and parents can use. According to Fraser (2013),

these techniques include auditory integration, nutrition modification, medication adjustment, music therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, sensory integration, social skill and behavior intervention, speech therapy, and visual therapy. This study emphasizes how singing, dancing, and music therapy can be used to examine cognitive and psychomotor skills, independent senses, and daily living skills.

## Music Therapy

Music has long been a part of people's lives, including those of children with special needs. Children with special needs find the music interesting and captivating. The history of music confirms its remarkable value as a means of socialization, connection, and communication for children with special needs. Because musical experiences are fundamentally organized but creative, music therapy includes components of a "meaningful and flexible treatment" modality (LaGasse, 2014). Additionally, music therapy can be used in a variety of ways and places. As a result, music has long been associated with a carefree approach to healing in a variety of professions.

Social skills can be improved when music interventions are combined with activities and materials that are developmentally appropriate. Peers without disabilities can join the group as well, and educational opportunities can be incorporated into ongoing activities that can be entertaining and instructional at the same time (Hall, 2009). Through nonjudgmental friendships and being a part of a group where they may feel comfortable being themselves, music treatments can help people with ASD begin to develop their trust in others. Such a procedure should be carried out following the planning's aims or objectives, which should taken into account the diversification of education, the construction of the curriculum, and the molding of the children's behavior. In other words, music acts as a motivating and enjoyable medium that encourages youngsters to participate in activities that support their developmental skills (Kennelly, 2000).

Children with disabilities can develop the academic and practical skills they need to live independent and meaningful lives via musical interactions and interventions in music therapy. In addition, it has been widely documented that music therapy is effective at promoting and facilitating learning and development in young children with special needs, such as autistic spectrum disorder, down syndrome, visual or hearing impairment, developmental delay,

cerebral palsy, and learning difficulties (Schwartz, 2008; Bonde, Pedersen & Wigram, 2002).

To examine child behavior, particularly that of children with intellectual disabilities, one of the strategic tactics employed in “scaffolding” and “zone of proximal development” as articulated in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory is a music-based approach (Flum & Kaplan, 2006; St-John, 2004). With the help of their parents, adults, and classmates, students can function autonomously under the supervision of Vygotsky’s theory of learning. A “scaffolding” strategy allows educators, counselors, and teachers the room and chance to employ music therapy to give kids the stimulus and exposure they need to deal with their handicaps.

Long-term music therapy offers an experience of high self-esteem and confidence, together with emotions of shared acceptance and success, and the chance to form and maintain friendships, according to qualitative research (Pavlicevic et al., 2014). According to Fillingham (2007) and Nicholls (2002), the benefits of music therapy include improving relationships, lowering service-challenging behaviors, improving quality of life, and treating mental health conditions like eating disorders, depression, and anxiety.

Overall, music therapy is a great psychotherapeutic approach for promoting the emotional health of people with intellectual disabilities who might have trouble vocally expressing their feelings, experiences, wants, and goals. The non-verbal character of music therapy gives patients who might find it challenging to participate in any other verbal or non-verbal therapy (such as counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy, or art therapy) an outlet for their emotions. In general, prior research has shown that dance, singing, and music have a considerable positive impact on children with special needs.

### **Malaysian Musical Therapy Approach – “Dikir Barat” and “Kuda Kepang”**

Twinkle Love Cats, a Japanese organization that exposes and trains children with special needs in the performing, singing, and dramatic arts, put on the Sejuta Kasih event. Students from a particular Malaysian university worked with Twinkle Cats to plan the event to make it easier to explore the potential of different mediums. Tribes called Kejora Emas and Seri Kencana from “Dikir Barat”. The “Look East Policy” allowed Malaysia and Japan to participate in a cooperative mobility program. One of the key contributions to the neighborhood

in attaining the event’s aim and goals was the lovely performance that resulted.

Drums, gongs, tambourines, “Dikir Barat,” and “Kuda Kepang”, which are emblems of Malay arts and could serve as the foundation for a music-based approach to human development for children with special needs, were featured in the concert. The Sayuri Program took the form of a special performance made by kids with disabilities like autism and Down syndrome and was later performed by a Japanese group called Twinkle Cats, which was intended to introduce special needs children to music, singing, and dance. The program’s goal spans a variety of topics, including community-based special needs children’s sociology and educational psychology.

The 1930s saw the beginning of “Dikir Barat” by Tuan Haji Mat Salleh, also known as Mat Salleh Tape. At Malay wedding ceremonies, entertainment events, festivals, and competitions, “Dikir Barat” is frequently performed by the *Tukang Karut*, *Juara*, and *awok-awok* for each group. The *Tukang Karut*’s job is to perform songs with *awok-awok* accompaniment in the Kelantanese dialect. The performers clap and shout the lyrics as they move their arms, hands, and upper limbs in formations called *tramps* to match the beat of the song. They also sit cross-legged on the floor while performing. Additionally, two groups would perform the songs in line with the themes they were given, setting up a “Dikir Barat” competition. These themes would be told in songs with lyrics that might be humorous, exciting, poetic, or carry morality teachings. Popular songs that are well-known performed include *Wau Bulan*, *Ikan Kekek*, and other contemporary songs that mimic the “Dikir Barat” drumbeat. On the other side, “Kuda Kepang” is an artistic performance in which a warrior relates tales of historic battles and wars while wearing armor with Islamic and Javanese influences. Dancers use horses that are reproductions made of bones and painted to seem like horses. A dance that the dancers do has elements of horseback riding.

### **Findings**

The overall results showed that 110 (95%) of the 115 respondents had never heard of “Dikir Barat” or “Kuda Kepang”. Nevertheless, nearly all of the responders said they were genuinely pleased with the performance. In response to a question on whether parents supported their kids’ involvement in the arts (dance, theater, and musicals), it was reported that nearly 101 (88%) parents agreed that they had and 14 (12%) disagreed. According to the parents, children who participated in dancing,

playing instruments, and theatrical acting showed significant gains in 105 (91%) of their daily lives. Additionally, comments from the audience regarding the performance were made. Despite any disparities in language, cultural background, or social community, the stage performance seems to have brought everyone participating together through the use of music and dancing, which also inspired them into activities where they had fun and were pleased. A Malaysian dance called “Kuda Kepang” with horses made of wood and paper and the Twinkle Cats group’s “Dikir Barat” were two of the most notable performances, along with live music theater, marimbas, and Arabian nights. The audience performed an overall satisfaction rating of 103 (80%) very satisfied and 12 (20%) satisfied. Nobody in the audience expressed displeasure. The study’s primary findings are presented in the following:

- (i) 95% of respondents disagree with knowledge of “Dikir Barat” or “Kuda Kepang”
- (ii) 88% of respondents know Parents’ encouragement for children to be involved in arts (dance, theatre, and musical) activities
- (iii) 91% of respondents know Life significant improvements in children who are involved in arts (dance, theatre, and musical) activities
- (iv) All respondents were satisfied with the overall performance of the concert

Parents of special needs children were also asked if they had seen differences in their child’s daily life after they had engaged in dancing, playing an instrument, or participating in a play. The smiles on their children’s faces and their apparent resolve after they participated in the aforementioned activities were the most noticeable changes noticed by the parents. The kids improved their communication skills, making them friendlier and better able to cooperate in groups. Following the receipt of praise from others, the kids also grew more outgoing and showed signs of happiness. On the other hand, some kids showed no improvement at all after taking part in the activities or events. The show’s performance drew comments from the audience, who expressed a want to see more of what they called a “great and wonderful international collaborative program” that included the neighborhood’s disadvantaged children as well as the larger community. There was thought to be a wonderful and joyful environment between the Japanese and Malay students, with friendships being formed and shared musical engagement. The smiles on the children’s faces caught everyone’s

attention, and many people thought it was beautiful to watch. The community and parents also expressed a desire for future performances of a comparable caliber from other nations.

## Discussion

Overall, this study assessed the effects of cooperation between the Malaysian performing arts groups “Dikir Barat” and “Kuda Kepang” and Twinkle Cats, which featured marimba playing by kids, some of whom had special needs. Participants from Malaysia and Japan interacted socially, communicated, acted positively, and intercommunicated during the performance. The special needs youngsters also showed good levels of confidence, singing ability, musical instrument proficiency, dance skill, and capacity to imitate “Dikir Barat” and “Kuda Kepang.” These exercises demonstrated that the primary objective of singing exercises in music courses was to promote young children’s social development and social abilities (Chiengchana & Trakarnrung, 2014; Lau, 2005).

Children’s senses and sensory apparatus are stimulated by traditional music therapy interventions like “Dikir Barat” and “Kuda Kepang,” which feature a maximum use of hand movement and rhythm composition through original music equipment. It was highlighted that throughout human history, music has played a significant role as an art form, serving to relieve stress and calm the mind. According to research, music has always had a significant role in the psychological, sociological, and physical development of people (Aktan & Yarar, 2015). As a framework for future research, traditional dances like “Zapin” or “Inang” and theater productions like “Wayang Kulit” will be taken into consideration. Additionally, alternative contexts should be chosen, such as western or far eastern regions, to get a sense of how various populations see the study’s goals and factors.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the integration of the traditional Malaysian music therapy approach along with the participation of all parties, including parents, educators, the local community, therapists, and peer movement, all have the potential to positively impact the learning process for children with special needs. Additionally, implementing such a cooperative program in a multicultural setting has proven to be a successful method for educating

special needs kids and developing their ability, potential, and intellectual capacity.

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