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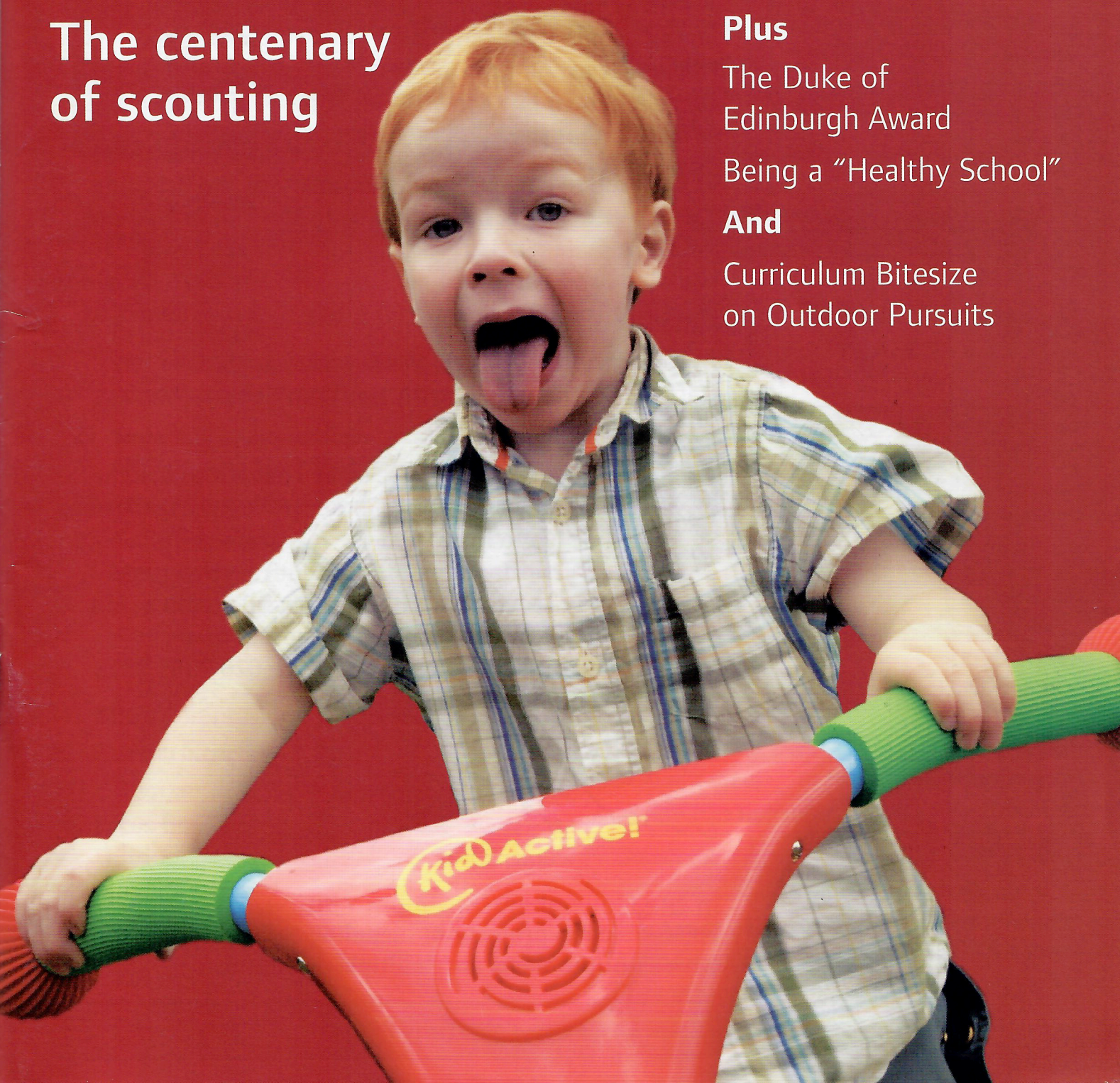
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Focus on Music

Adam Ockelford summarises the findings of a study recently undertaken into the musical interests and abilities of children with septo-optic dysplasia.

The “Focus on Music” study draws on the experiences and views of parents and carers elicited via a questionnaire, and through direct observation. Although the evidence was gathered in relation to a particular group of blind and partially-sighted youngsters – those with septo-optic dysplasia – I believe that the findings will have a wider relevance, offering insights of potential value to many of those bringing up, caring for or working with children and young people with visual impairments, including those with additional disabilities.

Septo-optic dysplasia is a rare condition that occurs in approximately one in 16,000 children. It is defined as a combination of optic nerve hypoplasia (absent or small optic nerves), pituitary abnormalities and the absence or malformation of the septum pellucidum or corpus callosum (or both) – without which communication between areas of the mid-brain (such as the transfer of sensory information) is hampered. Among the likely effects of septo-optic dysplasia are visual impairment, hormonal problems, delayed development, behavioural difficulties and obesity. The type and range of symptoms can vary from mild to very severe.



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Thirty-two questionnaires were completed on behalf of children and young people with septo-optic dysplasia from the UK and the US, of whom 16 were blind and 16 partially sighted. Eleven had additional disabilities. This group was matched as far as possible by age and sex with a group of 32 children from the UK who had no special educational needs, whose parents also completed the questionnaire for the purposes of comparison.

In summary, the main findings are as follows:

Parents' accounts suggest that, irrespective of age, sex or general level of development, children who are partially sighted, are more likely than their fully-sighted peers to have a particular interest in music. However, there is a greater chance that this will be at a lower level than in the case of children without a visual impairment.

As far as blind children and young people are concerned, the picture painted by their parents suggests that they are more likely than their fully-sighted peers to have a particular interest in everyday sounds and music, and more likely to find music important as a source of stimulation or comfort, for communication, socialisation or understanding, or to mark out events in their daily routine. And while, in the view of parents, their musical development may be in line with general expectations, or even delayed, it is much more likely to be unusually advanced than in the case of fully-sighted children.



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Where such advanced musical development occurs, a common feature is the possession of “absolute pitch”(“AP”) – the ability to recognise and reproduce notes in isolation. It is estimated that this ability is generally found in only 1 in 10,000 of the Western population.

While learning difficulties may have an impact on a child’s musical development, it is possible that many areas of musicality (including AP) will be unaffected. Indeed, it is evident from individual case-studies beyond the current survey that blind children with septo-optic dysplasia may

excel in one area or more of musical performance despite having learning difficulties.

Among the group of 16 participants with septo-optic dysplasia who were blind, an exceptional interest in music, which included spending two hours or more a day in active music-making, was always present in reported cases of exceptional musical development.

However fewer of the children and young people with septo-optic dysplasia were said to play musical instruments (at any level) than their fully-sighted peers. Also, the range of instruments they played was more limited. None of the participants with septo-optic dysplasia was reported as having had specialist lessons from a music teacher.

Hence we can assume that most of the children with septo-optic dysplasia who could play an instrument were self-taught and that, since none used any form of music notation (in braille or large print), they learnt pieces by ear or through visually copying what others did or both.

Although ten of the children with septo-optic dysplasia with additional needs were said to find music important as a source of stimulation or comfort or to promote wider development or understanding, only four of them received (or had ever received) music therapy.

Recommendations

In general terms, the study strongly suggests that music provision – educational and therapeutic, for children with septo-optic dysplasia could in many cases

be much improved. And since it is highly unlikely that this insufficiency is specific to the syndrome, it raises the question of whether blind and partially-sighted children (including those with additional disabilities) are, as a group, suffering discrimination in terms of the music services they are offered. The accounts of parents strongly suggest that, despite the unusually high levels of musical interest and ability that their children apparently display, those with septo-optic dysplasia have fewer opportunities to access specialist therapy or tuition than their fully-sighted peers and are far less likely to have their achievements publicly recognised.

The study also suggests the following specific areas for action:

Those devising and delivering educational programmes, particularly in the early years (and across a wider age range of those with learning difficulties), should ensure that due account is taken of visually impaired children's likely interest in sound and the important role that music may play in their day-to-day experiences and wider development.

Children and young people with septo-optic dysplasia should have access to appropriate music education that meets their needs and enables them to fulfil their potential. Such input may well start from an early age when many of the foundations of auditory development in the domain of music are being laid.

Music services should work to ensure equality of access for all children with disabilities to specialist instrumental and vocal tuition, including those in the early years; and that appropriate government

agencies should monitor the take up of such services by children with special educational needs nationally, to identify and celebrate good practice and to discourage discrimination.

Parents, teachers and therapists should keep in mind the possibility of exceptional musical development among those with septo-optic dysplasia, and seek expert guidance as necessary on how best to foster particular abilities in the context of disability.



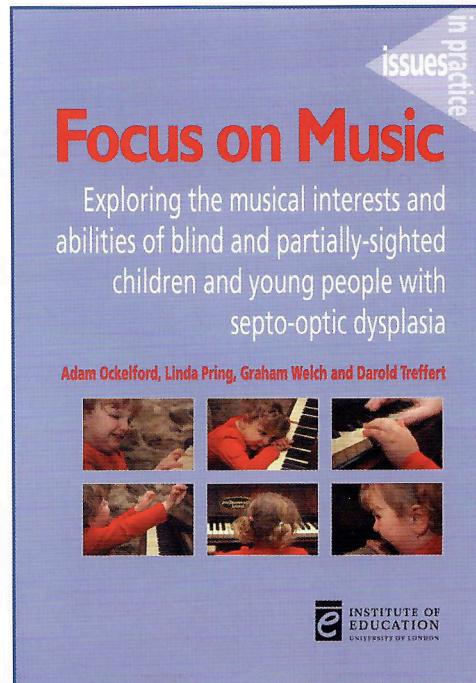
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Music examination boards should be vigilant in ensuring that the materials and approaches to assessment that they develop do not unwittingly discriminate against those with disabilities, and that, through a prevailing philosophy of inclusion, they actively promote widening participation.

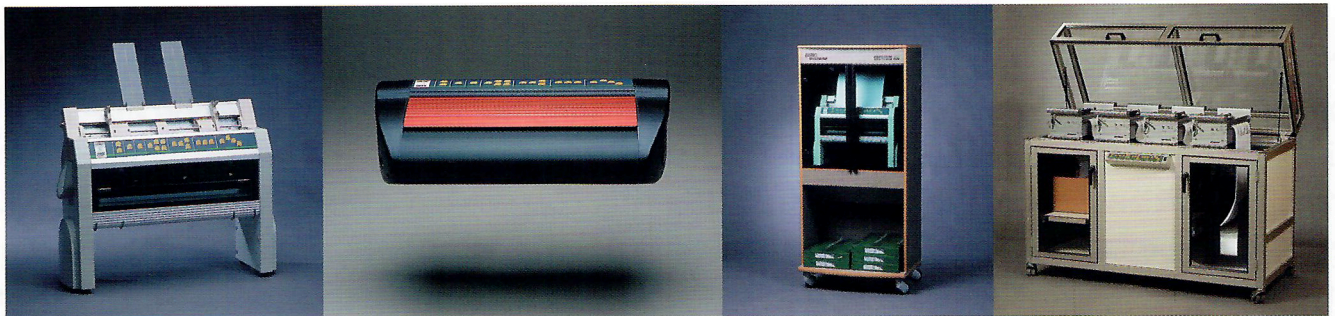
At national level, music therapy and music education organisations should work to promote greater clarity in the distinct though related nature and function of the two disciplines, and to raise awareness of the importance of both music education and music therapy for children with special educational needs.

Music therapy organisations should lobby at national, regional and local level to ensure access to music therapy for all children with disabilities for whom it would be beneficial.

Further research should be undertaken into the musical interests and abilities of blind and partially-sighted children, including those with additional disabilities, to understand better how different medical conditions and differing levels of functional vision may impact on auditory development.



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