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“Can iPods Help Students Raise Their Grades?”

One of the most popular Christmas gifts of 2006 for middle-school and high school aged children was Apple’s version of the MP3 player, known as the iPod. Over 21 million iPods were sold over the 2006 holiday season, according to Apple Inc., and since the debut of the iPod in October 2001, a total of 88.7 million have been sold (Apple, sec. hot news). These numbers do not account for many MP3 players also sold. An iPod, or a MP3 player, is a portable media player, and the majority of owners are school aged children. A student survey compiled in January of 2007 showed 59% of high school students currently own an Ipod or MP3 player (Jackson). So, how can educators and parents utilize this popular technology to help children succeed in school, rather than *tune* school out? Many students are not as successful as they could be because their non-traditional learning styles are being ignored and neglected. Studies have shown that some students, especially right-brained students, perform better on tasks when they have been allowed to listen to music. In order for educators to reach all learning styles of this younger, high-tech generation, school systems must allow a variety of new technologies into the classroom. The school system, educators, and parents should allow some students with different learning styles to listen to their iPods while working on assignments or studying, because research suggests music can help with task completion, enhanced learning, anxiety reduction, and therefore, higher grades without disturbing students with

more traditional, left-brained, learning styles (Abikoff and Courtney; Fracassini; Hallam; Smith).

The education system and most curricula are designed to reach the left-brained thinkers. These students are auditory, linear learners. Because this is the style most teachers use, it is referred to as the “traditional learning style,” which uses mainly words. Conversely, right-brained thinkers are visual learners, who think in pictures. Most all children diagnosed with ADD/ADHD are right-brained. These visual students like to see the whole picture and then go back and fill in the informational gaps. They also tend to be very imaginative and creative; therefore, some tend to day-dream, especially if they become bored with traditional teaching. “While most experts will tell you that 5 to 10 percent of the juvenile population has ADD, it’s interesting to note that within individual classrooms and schools the percentage varies wildly, from none to almost half the students” (Freed 24). Many educational specialists and doctors agree that listening to music while working on tasks can help this type of learner because it helps to alleviate the boredom and keeps him more focused. The music can also act as background noise, also known as white noise, which can block out random noises that can be disturbing to this type of learner, especially a student with ADD or ADHD whose nervous system is usually on overload (Freed; Tobias).

A recent survey of 40 teachers and one assistant principal at Simon Kenton High School in Independence, KY, showed that 85% believed that listening to music while working on assignments or studying could help some students stay on task and make better grades in school. The survey of the aforementioned high-schoolers reported that 65% listen to music at home while they study or complete homework. Of the 150

students surveyed, 19% had been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, and 68% of those students listened to music during homework. The most repeated reasons from students who listen to the music were these: it helped them to concentrate or stay focused, it calmed them down or helped them to not get as angry about the homework, or it made the homework more fun (Jackson).

In spite of this data, there are still those who disagree. Dr. Mel Levine, a professor of pediatrics and co-founder of All Kinds of Minds, does not support the idea of listening to music, especially modern music. He states, “Much of the music to which children are exposed tends to make use of very brief themes or melodic lines, which keep on coming back monotonously. As a result, the ability to retain patterns in memory is not strengthened through music” (44). Most of the 15% of teachers in the previous mentioned survey against the iPods felt strongly that the music only created more distraction and did not reinforce a student’s ability to focus. Some comments on the student survey of the 32% that had ADD/ADHD and did not listen to music during homework and studying said they didn’t because the music was a distraction and it broke their concentration (Jackson). This implies that all students are different, even those diagnosed with ADD and ADHD. This suggests that educators, parents, and children should experiment to determine what methods of task completion and study habits work best for each individual, instead of applying a blanket technique over all.

Besides the surveys and opinions, many studies have been done to investigate the effects of music on the memory and arithmetic task performance of students, and also what type of music is the most productive. One study by Texas A&M University found that when a child listened to music during the initial exposure to information and the

same music was played 48 hrs later, the recall was better than when no music was played (Smith 591-603). This study only used instrumental music, so what about other types of music?

Another study by two cognitive psychologists reports that brain scans show that rock music can increase brain power as well as or better than classical music. The study showed that less mental energy was needed for task completion for those who listened to their favorite type of music (Fracassini). On the other hand, a study by the Institute of Education, University of London found calming music worked better than no music or arousing music for students working on arithmetic performance and memory recall. The study showed more math problems were completed with the calming music, although the accuracy did not improve (Hallam 111-122). Keep in mind that many students are graded on homework completion rather than accuracy. This method would help some students make better grades because they would complete more homework regardless of the accuracy.

Finally, a study published in *Journal of Learning Disabilities* showed the results of arithmetic performance of students with ADHD. Forty boys were studied, twenty with ADHD and twenty without any disabilities. They were given level appropriate math problems in three different testing situations: a silent background, a speech background such as the news on a television, and background of their favorite music. (Incidentally, 98% of the children picked rock or rap music.) Interestingly, the children with ADHD got 33% more math problems correct with their favorite music playing compared to background silence and 23% better with the speech background. There was no significant difference in the accuracy of the math by the non-disabled boys (Abikoff and Courtney

238). It should be noted that all of these studies reported their findings were not completely conclusive because of all the variables that come with each child. Children and their learning styles should be evaluated on a case by case basis. There is enough evidence, however, to conclude that listening to music while doing homework or studying can help some students reduce stress, cue memory, and complete tasks with better accuracy.

It should be noted that if a student is singing with the music, watching television, instant messaging, or texting while doing homework or studying, she may be at risk for bad grades. Many parents report that their children are multi-tasking during homework and while they are studying. A study at UCLA by associate professor of psychology, Russell Poldrack, examined the relationship between this type of multi-tasking and learning in the brain. He found that information is stored in different areas of the brain and not as readily retrieved if stored during multi-tasking (Ghessemi). It can be compared to a document on a cluttered desk; while you know it is there, it can take a while to find it. Just listening to the music is considered passive action and, therefore, not multi-tasking.

Obviously, music can help some students, especially right-brained and those with ADD/ADHD, but not necessarily every student. Fortunately, most kids listen to their music privately nowadays, through earpieces or headsets. MP3 players and iPods are small and come with the dual earpieces which would work effectively in the classroom. Once instruction is over and a teacher gives an assignment, students could have the option to use one earpiece and listen to his own style of music. This way, if the teacher needs to give further instruction, the student should be able to hear her and turn off his

music. Also, Apple offers a sound control device to keep the volume of iPods below the damaging decibel level. Another proven personal rule for volume control is, “If the teacher or mom can hear the music, it is too loud and must be turned down or the student forfeits its use.” This way, different learning styles could co-exist in the same room.

Unfortunately, most schools have bans on iPods, similar to cell phone bans. The students can have them, but they must be kept out of sight during school hours. On the contrary, many colleges and universities are embracing the iPods on their campuses. In 2005, Duke University handed out a free iPod to every new freshman. They have since modified their iPod program due to criticism of wasting funds, but they still give out free iPods to some students (Duke). iPods have many educational features such as podcasting, portable hard drives, and audio recorders that can help students. Apple has done an excellent job of expanding the features of the iPod to include educational resources. Apple’s website offers an *iTunes U* option similar to their iTunes music site, where professors can transfer lectures and other supplemental materials that students may retrieve in case they have to miss class and/or for better understanding of class instruction. These are just a few of the extra educational benefits the iPod can offer the student beyond its capabilities of holding over two thousand songs in the space of a pocket calculator. School administration and teachers must begin to accept the iPod, initially as a music device that can help some students concentrate on school work, then gradually incorporate the many other organizational benefits and educational tools into the daily school routines and study habits of all students. Our students will be better prepared for higher education.

The future may hold other potential benefits of allowing students to use technology, such as the iPod, in the classroom. With the daily advancement and improvements in technology, it may be possible to someday use iPods to redirect daydreaming or sleeping students without interrupting instruction. Special education collaborative teachers and assistants may be able to use a small microphone and direct their voice through the earpiece of specific students in order to regain the lost attention without walking around the room and tapping shoulders, which can be disruptive to other students as well as the classroom teacher. In fact, even the classroom teacher could use this device when she does not have collaborative teachers or assistants. Similar devices are currently being used for students with autism for redirection and personalized attention. Although this equipment can be very expensive, many students already own iPods or MP3 players. If the iPods could be utilized for this purpose in the future, many students would benefit and it would be cost effective. iPods could then serve another purpose in the classroom, in addition to the benefits of music.

To sum up, all children are different and so are their learning styles and preferences. As Dr. William Stixrud, a neuropsychologist who also teaches study skills, put it:

There is no fixed rule for what works best...For some kids, music functions like white noise, drowning out distractions. For others, it can have an emotionally soothing quality—especially if the thought of school increases their anxiety—or it may even help some tolerate boredom associated with their work. And those with attention deficit disorder, who are constantly seeking stimulation, some distraction may be what they

need to concentrate on their studies. If listening to music makes doing homework more enjoyable for kids, then it's probably a good thing on the whole. (qtd. in Ghessemi)

This advice can also work in the classroom where there can be over 50 percent right-brained thinkers. Music does not work for everyone and it is important for educators, parents, and students to know what works best for each student, individually, and not deny some students the access to tools that can enhance their learning abilities. Since listening to personal music can help some students complete more tasks with better performance, ease anxiety and boredom, and make better grades, then school systems, educators, and parents must give it a try.

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