Structured Songwriting in Special Education Group Music Therapy from a Humanistic Lens: Development of a Method

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Structured Songwriting in Special Education Group Music Therapy from a Humanistic Lens:

Development of a Method

Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

This capstone thesis project explored a method of structured group songwriting through a humanistic approach. While there was compelling research of songwriting with various populations in music therapy there was noticeably less documentation of work with developmental disability and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) populations (Baker, Wigram, Stott, McFerrin 2008). There was also limited research available on specific songwriting process elements and the theoretical framework behind such music therapy interventions (Stewart, 2016). More data on this topic would be beneficial to music therapists, particularly young professionals, who frequently use songwriting as an intervention with this population. Based on research and experiences, I adapted a songwriting intervention and facilitated it over three consecutive sessions. The intervention was facilitated with a group of four pre-adolescent boys with varying impairments in a special education setting. Through implementation, observation and review of lyrical content, I found that songwriting structure and musical material must be provided based on client abilities and needs. This adapted songwriting method can be examined by its structure, for instance using a repetitive Chorus/Verse form, while using flexible refining limits such as directive questions. This project provides an example of an adapted songwriting method used in a group music therapy session and additional support for the continued use of songwriting with students with special needs.
Structured Songwriting in Special Education Group Music Therapy from a Humanistic Lens: 

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Introduction

Humanistic philosophy values individuality, creativity, and authenticity, as well as “being and becoming” (Baker, 2015, p. 223). Western therapeutic approaches may inherently come from the notion of humanism, as the ultimate humanistic therapeutic objective is the development of the self. Humanism made a pivotal impact on the field of psychology in the late 1930’s (Wheeler, 2014). Music therapy formally emerged as a profession in the 1950’s and intrinsically addressed a variety of person-centered needs (Wheeler, 2014). A Humanistic Music Therapy approach means putting the interests, goals, and abilities of the person at the center of the decision-making process (Noone, 2008). Understanding interventions through a theoretical framework are critical to the further development of music therapy approaches and techniques. The presence of theory in music therapy, “shapes and is shaped by practice and research” (Bruscia, 2014).

There has been increasing use and interest in the application of songwriting as an intervention in music therapy over the past two decades (Baker, 2015; Baker & Wigram, 2005). However, many songwriting methods have not been connected to specific therapeutic orientations. Furthermore, they are not typically outlined in a format that other therapists could easily apply or recreate in their own practice (Baker, 2015). While many forms and structures can be utilized in therapeutic songwriting, all songwriting techniques require key musical and clinical elements from both the therapist and client.

At the core of therapeutic songwriting is the relationship between therapist and client. One of the main roles as a music therapist is to foster a positive songwriting experience so the
client can experience self-expression and feel heard. Overarchingly, songs are noted to “convey information - through lyrics and music, songs tell stories or express feelings” (Baker, 2015, p. 13), which makes it an adaptable and useful intervention and tool in music therapy. The presence of self-expression in the songwriting process reflects humanistic theory by providing an opportunity for self-actualization or, “the maximal expression of human potential” (Wheeler, 2014, p. 152).

Depending on the needs and abilities of the client, the therapist may adjust how they facilitate and structure a songwriting intervention. Wheeler (2014) points out that Humanistic Music Therapy has its own, “unique character and configuration, based upon that which is indigenous to the nature of music therapy practice” (p. 151). During a songwriting session with a self-aware and cognitively skilled client, that client may choose the majority of the song elements including key, meter, lyrics, and instrumentation with little guidance.

Music therapists who work with clients who have significant physical and/or cognitive impairments may adapt songwriting structure and techniques to accommodate their client. If a client needs more assistance in making choices the therapist may provide options, prompts or modeling while allowing the song process to still be designed by the client and serve them with a humanistic approach. A humanistic understanding of songwriting in this sense requires recognition of what and how the particular client demonstrates self-expression. Songwriting is innately individualized because it exemplifies the client’s unique characteristics and ultimately reflects the humanistic approach.

While songwriting is certainly utilized during individual music therapy sessions, many clinicians only have the opportunity to see clients in a group therapy context, particularly those working in mental health, rehabilitation, and special education settings (Baker, 2015). Group
songwriting entails a slew of different factors on top of the already complex process of songwriting. Clients struggling with social and emotional difficulties may find songwriting to be a unique opportunity to address those difficulties. As songwriting tends to be a somewhat narcissistic process naturally (Baker, 2015), group songwriting becomes a challenge for group members to not only listen but contribute, work on collaborative skills, as well as other necessary social and self-regulatory skills.

Through this project, I aimed to provide insight in how songwriting can be structured and used in group music therapy with students with complex developmental, physical, emotional, and behavioral needs in a special educational setting. I was able to work with an established music therapy group at my internship site that frequently used group songwriting as an intervention.

Music therapy in a special educational setting provides a unique and challenging opportunity for a music therapist to explore interventions that develop from the clinician’s theoretical perspective while addressing student needs in school. In order to reach a better understanding of songwriting with this specific population, I used key elements and structure of a formerly developed songwriting process that the group was previously exposed. Using a familiar songwriting structure with the group allowed me to further focus on the clinical understanding of the process as well as my theoretical perspective while leading the intervention.

**Literature Review**

The literature reviewed for this project provided valuable information in adapting a songwriting method with special needs pre-adolescents. The process of organizing this research solidified my knowledge and experience to help form an effective method incorporating other’s theorized and professional perspectives.
**Therapeutic Songwriting.** Songwriting has become a widely known intervention used in music therapy. Therapeutic songwriting was defined in 2005 by Baker and Wigram as, “the process of creating, notating and/or recording lyrics and music by the client or clients and therapist within a therapeutic relationship to address psychosocial, emotional cognitive and communication needs of the client” (p. 16). This definition highlights the central elements of therapeutic songwriting to include meeting the songwriter’s needs with an emphasis on the songwriting process. The definition also highlights the importance of both lyric and music content playing key roles in the development and outcome of the intervention.

Research has documented therapeutic songwriting interventions across various populations including children, adolescents, adults, and older adults (Baker, 2015). The most predominant research done on songwriting focuses on adolescents and adults with noticeably less documentation of developmental disability and Autism Spectrum Disorder (Baker, Wigram, Stott, McFerrin 2008, p. 107). One explanation for this absence in literature could be, that a “large number of respondents working with these populations is less clinically experienced” or possibly, “the bulk of the work with these populations is more developmental in nature and only innovative or novel areas of work such as the more psycho-emotional objectives are considered interesting to publish” (Baker, 2008, p.118).

Songs can take on many forms and structures. Pop song forms are often used in the music therapy setting because they are sectional and repetitive. Common pop song forms include: Strophic, AABA (32-bar), AB (Binary form, Verse/Chorus), ABABCB (Verse/Chorus/Bridge) and Pre-Chorus (Massicot, 2012). Baker (2015) proposes ten specific songwriting methods that can be used in therapeutic context. These methods range from being highly structured, like fill in the blank songs, to improvised/unstructured songs. Survey research of music therapist’s process
of songwriting indicated that most music therapists used a common process of brainstorming the topic, creation of lyrics, music creation, and performing/recording the song (Baker et al., 2008, 2009).

Songwriting in a therapeutic context usually breaks down the amount of focus on lyric creation, music creation, or lyric and music creation (Schmitt, 1983; Baker, 2015). A therapist may choose to use a specific structure based on the abilities and needs of the client. There may not always be a question of whether words or music come first but how much structure is needed, taking into account such aspects as the client’s expressive language skills, level of musical sophistication, and emotional content of the subject of the song (Schmitt, 1983).

**Group Songwriting.** Therapeutic songwriting can be utilized in both a 1:1 and group settings. Group settings with a focus on student wellbeing both create and explore social connections and identity (Kate, 2019). When used in a group setting songwriting has been shown to develop group cohesiveness, encourage social interactions, enhance self-expression and self-esteem, and develop insight into feelings and needs, both of self and others (Edgerton, 1990; Baker, 2005).

Group therapy provides verbal processing not only with the therapist but with peers. Verbal processing can occur before, during and after musical experiences and can be used to increase awareness, understanding, or insight. It can provide opportunities for transfer from musical settings to everyday settings and allow personal connections to be made. It may also promote increased awareness of the present moment or facilitate psychoeducation (Gooding, 2017).

**Music Therapy in Special Education.** A great deal has been written about the value of music therapy for children who have special needs (Rickson, 2007, p. 40). Music therapists who
work with students with special needs in school settings are often working on a collaborative team toward student-specific goals. The team may include an occupational therapist, who might measure outcomes in physical terms; speech and language therapists; and classroom teachers who might measure outcomes in cognitive or social terms (Rickson, p. 41).

Students who have special needs often benefit from structured routines. In research on group music therapy on enhancing social skills with students with Autism, LaGasse (2014) contextualized that, “the rhythmic and structural components of music stimuli may provide an external cue or anchor to further help children with ASD to organize, predict, and respond to their environment” (p. 253). Music therapy interventions can provide opportunities for students to work on their goals within meaningful and flexible treatment since music experiences are inherently structured, yet creative.

In the music therapy setting students with special needs are often working on social and behavioral goals. Brownell’s (2002) study found promise in continued research when they examined using musically adapted social stories to enhance social learning and behavioral appropriateness with students with Autism. Particularly students with poor sensory modulation, as common with ASD, have a more difficult time with social interaction opportunities (LaGasse, 2014). Exploring social skill opportunities within music contexts can provide a creative approach to address this goal (Baker, 2008).

**Theoretical Framework.** It is essential that interventions be studied concerning the specific goal they are addressing and the theory surrounding those interventions (Stewart, 2016). I adapted and approached the current songwriting method through a humanistic theoretical framework; however, I also incorporated an educational framework that was natural due to the environment of the site where the current method was utilized. I found it of great importance to
examine the theoretical framework that preceded this intervention as theory naturally shapes music therapy experiences.

Robbins (1991) poses the idea of the ‘music child’, referencing the innate musicality in every child. He describes that in order for the “music child” to function, “the child must be open to experiencing himself, others and the world around him.” To the students served with physical, cognitive and social disabilities, it is imperative to have a general understanding of how these specific students may be perceiving and understanding themselves and other perspectives.

**Method**

To further my understanding of the songwriting process with special needs students, I adapted a songwriting method based on research and experience. With permission from the students and their families, I worked with them for three consecutive sessions on this working method. Observational notes and lyrics were reviewed to provide an opportunity to explore and synthesize the applicability of the intervention.

**Project Design.** I was provided an opportunity through my role as a music therapy intern in a special education setting to facilitate an adapted songwriting intervention under the guidance of an experienced and respected music therapist (supervisor). I chose to work with a group of four students that I had begun working weekly with to implement such an intervention. I met with the group of four boys for three consecutive sessions on March 14th, 19st and 21th. Each session was thirty minutes long and already incorporated into their weekly class schedule.

The residing music therapist had previously developed a structured music therapy session routine with the group when I arrived in the fall of 2018. The general routine included a hello song, theme song, instrumental jam time, and a goodbye song. The routine, as well as the songs, were easily adjustable and adaptable based on the needs of the group.
My supervisor used the “theme song” time to often song write with the group. Several of the boys had worked with her for multiple years and were accustomed to her style of songwriting. It typically consisted of original songwriting within known musical structures that focused on lyric content. This structure of songwriting became familiar to the boys and included varying levels of choice of keys, discussion of topics, melodic development, individual lyric contribution to the chorus, and time to share personal experiences in a single verse. The focus put on the chorus section and use of cadences were identified as central structural components of the process. The overall song structure was a repetitive Chorus/Verse form where the verses could be musically extended to give each student time to share and the chorus became familiar and grounding.

I became attracted and fascinated by the idea that meaningful and complete songs could be written in short periods. I was inclined to explore the structural basis of how and why songwriting can and should be done even within short sessions while accommodating our complex needs students. I chose to engage in an adapted songwriting project with the boys using the same songwriting method that they were accustomed to but adding two variations. Instead of songwriting in one session, which was typically done in the group, we would write a song together and revisit the same song for three total sessions. Each session, I planned to expand the boy’s knowledge and understanding of the main topic by approaching the same song with a different perspective.

I understood the intervention based on several levels of structural support. The levels of structure identified included from macro to micro: the structure of the physical environment, structure of the session, structure of the song form, and the structure of individual responses. The environment included the same members in a relatively quiet and familiar space during each
Each session began with a hello song and ended with a goodbye song. The form of the song was a repetitive chorus/verse, and each verse was preceded with a specific directive question.

**Participants.** The participants in this method observation consisted of four boys in a group music therapy class in a special education setting. Their ages ranged from eleven years old to thirteen years old. The four boys have well developed friendships with each other and regularly participated in group activities together.

Their diagnosis varied but had several common factors that made them an appropriate educational and therapeutic group fit. Each student had a varying levels of visual impairment ranging from three students with low to moderate functional vision and one student who was blind. All the boys had varying cognitive, developmental and physical abilities such as challenges in mobility; however, they all walked independently.

All of the boys had a neurological basis for deficits in social, emotional and behavioral functioning, therefore, the main goals of the group addressed the social, emotional and behavioral challenges the boys experienced. This presented in varying ways such as lack of; self-awareness, perception, inhibition, emotional identification, self-regulation and others. The general disposition of each group member was consistently friendly, engaged, and motivated throughout the year.

Specific needs of the group included group and individual rules and routines. General group rules included: being respectful to others by giving positive feedback, not talking while other people are talking, keeping personal space, and staying focused. Individual needs included extended processing time, review of directives and sequencing, and reminders to stay on topic.
The need for routine was met through the same hello and goodbye song that opened and closed every session and provided a container for the boys’ emotional and behavioral needs.

**Intervention.** Using the previously mention levels of structure I adapted the songwriting intervention to examine a familiar topic from three different perspectives. When presenting the project, I individually confirmed that each client was comfortable participating and allowed for any questions or concerns to be addressed. While I provided much of the musical structure, the construction of the chorus was built using the client’s exact words. I utilized discussion to help refine their lyrics into a working chorus section. The verse sections were used for each client to wholeheartedly share personal experiences without criticism or judgment. The open-ended questions were used as a prompt to facilitate personal responses. These verses focused on the individual self and were reflected on through peer interactions.

**Procedure.** During each thirty-minute session, we followed a similar format that took place in the same music therapy room. Sessions began with the same familiar hello song specifically written with this group at the beginning of the year. After the hello song, we began working on the songwriting project. Each session concluded with the same familiar goodbye song.

Based on previous knowledge and observations of the group there were several factors considered to facilitate a well-structured session. Verbal creation and content of the chorus were of particular focus as the chorus served as the core and connecting section of the song. This was reinforced by the harmonic structure that naturally leads us to finish a sentence. Likewise during the verse section the boys were hearing the guitar chords alternate between the I and V chords which feels open and provides a natural space for verbal processing. The intervention was
songwriting with a lyric focus in a known musical context. The song structure was that of Chorus/Verse that provided the familiar structure for group members to work.

I provided the theme or topic of “what makes a good friend?” While the boys were capable of brainstorming topic ideas, I wanted to focus on a general and accessible topic. I was unaware of the extent to which they had discussed this topic in other classes or at home except that is was a topic that had been brought up in previous sessions. The goal for addressing this topic was to create a better understanding and self-awareness of how a good friend behaves, how to be a good friend and personal experiences of friendship in addition to the previously mentioned group goals. I wanted to provide the boys an opportunity to understand a topic from multiple perspectives and demonstrate how a topic can be expanded.

I provided the key and the instrumentation of the song. I considered my guitar skills while writing songs quickly and felt that I would be able to attune faster to the boys’ verbal responses if I was playing within a comfortable key. The key of D major was determined as a culturally assumed bright and happy harmonic structure that also aligned with our topic of friendship. It was additionally a healthy and easy range for the boys to sing in. I felt guitar was an appropriate instrument for this intervention because I played proficiently on it; it allowed me to physically stay in the circle with the boys and easily change dynamics. The guitar served as a harmonically supportive instrument that provided a positive musical foundation for our voices and verbal sharing.

One of the overarching structural supports of the songwriting process was the Chorus/Verse form. The chorus section was built as a group and solidified the unity of the boys’ ideas and connections as a class. Building a chorus was an opportunity for individuals to give
input, disagreements to occur, compromises to be made, and support given by both peers and therapist.

I played the chord progression for the group first so they could hear what it sounded like, orient themselves to the style and make any wanted adjustments before adding words. The chorus was eight measures, in 4/4 time and used a common pop strumming pattern (Down, Down, Up, Up, Down, Up). The chorus followed a standard pop chord progression of I, IV, V, which in the Key of D major equates to D major, G major, and A major.

We wrote the song together by having each student contribute a line. I asked in order based on who raised their hand first and had an idea to share. I was wary that the majority of the students would need assistance in adding, subtracting or rewording their phrase to fit with the musical structure. I planned to pause playing the guitar and write down each student’s line as we developed it to keep a written record.

For the verse section, as with previous songwriting experiences, the boys took the time to talk through and share a personal experience and how it relates to the topic while I continually strummed on the I and V chords. In order to stay on topic and provide a directive to follow I developed several questions that I might initially ask, refined during the moment. Since the boys occasionally struggled to focus on the main points of their experience, they didn’t typically fit into an 8-bar verse. Thus, I extended the playing for as long as necessary to share the experience while using verbal prompting to stay on topic. I used both verbal prompting and musical cues, like going to the V7, to transition back to the chorus section after each shared.

Following each session, I evaluated what might be a natural progression of exploring the topic in the next session. My goal for session one was to discuss the idea of friendship, what it means to be a good friend and create a chorus. My focus for session two and three was to have
the boys share personal experiences about times that they had experienced having a good friend and being a good friend.

**Data Collection.** Through observation, detailed notes and review of lyrical content I was able to reflect on each session and their progression. While audio recordings were permissible by my internship as part of music therapy intervention and for supervisory purposes were utilized, they were not used as a data collection tool for this study. Recordings were played back as a music therapy technique for clients to experience pride in their musical product.

**Results**

For this project, each thirty-minute session followed a structured process that utilized an adapted songwriting project as a primary intervention. I observed how the group and individuals responded to the amount of structure provided, questions asked, and self-reflection.

**Session Analysis.** Session one began ten minutes late due to a fire drill from the previous period. Once everyone settled in their assigned seats, my supervisor introduced the idea of working on a special songwriting project to the group of boys. My supervisor typically led the group once a week and I led a second session during the week, so it was a change for me to run three sessions in a row and we wanted to check-in to make sure they were all comfortable. The boys were all agreeable and excited to participate in a “special project” that would help me, as was characteristic of their enthusiastic, and genuine inclination to be helpful. We reviewed individual rules and group rules that were needed and moved into the hello song.

Clients inquired about the project and I explained that it was similar to previously written songs that we had created together, but I would provide the topic, we would revisit the song for three consecutive sessions, and think about the topic in different ways. The number of questions posed by participants requesting more knowledge of the new song, informed me that the clients
may not fully comprehend the task or I may not have presented it clearly. I tried clarifying by reiterating that we would be writing a group song together similar to previous experiences that included a chorus that we would write together and then an opportunity to share personal experiences. I did not give them extra information about the future sessions, as it was a lot to process and potentially confusing. I limited my thoughts in this sense for the structural benefit of the group and to stay in the present songwriting process.

I presented the topic of the song by saying, “I’d like us to write a new song together about friendship and what it means to be a good friend.” The question was met with vocal excitement and clients reacted with familiarity of the topic of friendship. Clients asked whether we would discuss rules about being a good friend. I responded by including that there may be rules about being a good friend and I reinforced their notable knowledge of being a good friend.

At times clients were seemingly distracted from the topic provided. One client requested to write about love, however, I incorporated his suggestion into the current process reminding him that love can be part of friendship. I prompted the client to explore the ways love could be part of the topic of friendship and redirected the conversation back to the group by asking everyone if we could get started on our chorus together.

I began playing in the key of D major, and strumming the chord progression to the chorus section. The boys naturally took the musical cue of the guitar starting and were quietly listening to the chord progression. I reiterated our theme and main question while I continued to strum. I asked whether a client could provide the first line of the chorus. I called on a client with the knowledge that he was already a comfortable singer and had demonstrated positive self-expression through singing in the past. He sang his line in the key of D major in rhythm and the class repeated it, in a form of call and response. The line reflected the initial statement of what it
means to be a good friend in question form. I gave one big strum for the second chord of the progression, cueing for the next line and asked for the next idea that another client sang. The second line was an altered version of the first lyric focusing on activities with best friends, again as a question. I asked for the next line from another student and was provided with a third sung line posed as a question that focused on what to do with a new friend. The last line was sung by the remaining student who posed a question about what you could say to a friend.

In my excitement, I went to write down the words of the newly written song and forgot the correct order and words. Thus, when I asked the boys to help me sing it through again, we all got a bit confused with the words. Some of the boys were beginning to get frustrated and I tried to calm the moment by admitting my mistake not writing them down from the beginning and asking if we could choose new words. Though the boys appeared discouraged that their new song had just been changed, they were cheerfully willing to continue and offered encouragement to me after my mistake. I asked them to repeat their lines again, and other group members tried to help them remember. I also recognized that there were too many words in the original chorus to smoothly fit into eight-bars. Thus, a second version of the original chorus was created after considerable group discussion and agreement. I helped the boys condense the chorus to fit into a comfortable eight-bar melody that contained only slightly different verbiage than the original. The new chorus maintained the integrity of the boys’ expressions.

We repeated the second version of the song several times as a group. Writing the chorus took approximately twelve minutes then we moved on to the verse section. Because of the limited time I chose to structure the verse by asking them to answer one direct question. I asked them to give an example of one thing you can do to be a good friend. Client’s were excited to share their experiences and began offering multiple examples. I had to limit the boys to one
example each in order for everyone to get a turn. This provided an encouraging limit on extraneous information. Even though this limit was provided, some students still provided an example of a positive action and a potential negative action.

While I repeatedly strummed the verse chords two students spoke their experiences, then we repeated the chorus before the last two students spoke their experiences. Examples of being a good friend included: saying nice things, playing together, giving feedback and listening. I made sure to provide validating responses to each student before moving on to the next verse. I also allowed for short peer reflection or commentary if it was in relation to the peer’s experience. We closed with another chorus. This was a form of Chorus, Verse, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Verse, and Chorus.

Session two started later than planned from unavoidable interruptions from other students. Once the boys were settled, one of the boys began crying from a personal situation that happened previously in the day. The other group members were empathetic toward their friend and the situation was addressed verbally before we started the hello song. Once the group refocused we sang our hello song and reviewed the progress made last week including writing a chorus, and singing about actions of a good friend. I let the boys know that in my mistake of not writing down the original version the previous week I did have the audio recording we made of the song. I asked if they would like to listen to the original audio of themselves singing, then the second version and decide which one they would like to use for the remainder of the project.

We listened to each recording, and they felt pride hearing themselves sing as evidenced by singing along to the recordings and joyful commentary. Upon asking which version of the chorus they liked better there were disagreements. I proposed that we make a compromise and
the boys agreed to sing the original version during this session, and sing the second version during the next session.

As we sang through the original chorus the boys started singing along but appeared to have trouble remembering the words. Even after singing it three times the boys did not catch on. The original lyrics were wordy and I too, felt discomfort trying to cram in extra words that did not fit musically. None-the-less the boys were eager to have the familiar opportunity to share a personal experience in the song. After singing the chorus I continued to strum for the verse and posed a new question in relation to the topic of friendship. I asked them to think about a time that they might have been sad or needed help and a friend did something that helped them or made them feel better.

At first, the group members responded to only the first directive of a time they were sad. I asked more direct questions specifying who they were with and what that person did to make them feel better. After clarification of the two-part directive the boys seemed to catch on. Examples of response experiences included topics such as offer a tissue when someone is crying, listening when someone is crying, having a disagreement and making a compromise, and standing up to bullies. The majority of the students shared experiences from the current day. I told the group how proud I was that they were willing to share these experiences and how they were all thoughtful friends for listening to each other in this way. We followed the same song structure of Chorus, Verse, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Verse, and Chorus.

Session three began with an overview of the previous work we had done on the special project. When I told the group we were going to work on our special project some of the students asked about what project it was. I clarified for them that it wasn’t a new project but the same one we had worked on the previous two weeks. To see what they remembered I asked them what our
theme was, and they were able to successfully express the theme of friendship as well as the topic of what makes a good friend. We reviewed listening to both recordings of the chorus that we created and the compromise to sing the original last week and the second one this week. I offered the boys a chance to listen to the recording of the second version of the chorus, which they excitedly agreed to.

We verbally reviewed talking about what makes a good friend in the first session, and what a friend has done when you were sad the second session. The group unanimously asked to share about a time they may have felt sad or down, and a friend did something to help them feel better again. It seemed natural to follow this group led suggestion and I began strumming the introduction. We jumped into singing the chorus and the boys seemed to catch on quickly. By the second time singing the chorus the boys did not have any difficulty singing all the words in rhythm.

This time when I went to ask the question for the verse I shared first and provided an example experience. I shared, “the other day I made a great bowl of cereal to eat and I dropped it all over the kitchen floor! Yes, I was very sad, the milk went everywhere. But my sister came over to me and told me it would be alright and got me another bowl so I could make a new bowl of cereal.” The boys were vocally empathetic to my sadness and identified my sister as also being my friend. We acknowledged that our friends might also serve different roles in our lives such as siblings, parents and teachers.

Examples of response experiences during this session included topics such as a parent providing a hug when crying, a family member settling a disagreement, a family member providing options, and a family member offering an alternate solution to a problem. The boys
required prompting and support to answer the full question. We followed the same song structure of Chorus, Verse, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Verse, and Chorus for the last session as well.

**Summary.** In the first session, the group accomplished writing a chorus about the theme and provided personal examples of what it means to be a good friend. It was clear that the directives often seemed challenging even in a familiar song structure. It was difficult for individuals to stay focused at times, yet all provided personal experiences in relation to the topic and received feedback from peers. The second session showed that repetition was necessary for the client’s understanding of the posed questions. Session three solidified that the group benefitted from musical repetition and structure in order to cognitively grasp the concept during the session and weekly.

**Discussion**

I observed that songwriting with special needs students can produce positive self-expression, social interactions, and skill building given thoughtful structural construction and flexibility. The intervention reinforced that it was possible to create songs written in ten to twenty-five minutes that included meaningful and self-reflective commentary using multiple perspectives on a topic. While the group developed a fully formed and meaningful song in the first session, the client’s presented thoughtful developments as it was used again in following sessions. The chorus, cadences, and pauses in the music contributed to the non-verbal cues that reflected beneficial structure while songwriting. After reviewing the observational notes and lyrics, I was pleased to see the areas of success and challenge for both myself and group members.

It was difficult to capture the nuances, abilities and characteristics of these students and the environment simply through typed word. My focus in these sessions tended to lean heavily
on addressing presenting emotional and behavioral concerns. While I believe the structure of the group and songwriting process aided in addressing these concerns, several unavoidable interruptions ultimately helped the learning process of developing appropriate songwriting techniques and questions for this population.

After completing these sessions, I gained a better understanding of the therapist versus client role in the songwriting process. While I did my best to allow the students to complete the song without my input, the students clearly benefitted from having a facilitator. As the therapist, I provided a container through music for authentic expression and experience to shine through. The students provided the material with which to process and the intervention aesthetic.

In the review of the sessions, I observed that while using songwriting within a special needs population the therapist must be incredibly mindful of the student’s abilities and present state of being. There were many challenges and successes in my practice and the group process observed during the sessions. Through these observations, I recognized promising outcomes in group and individual processing in relation to structured songwriting as well as a positive music-making process.

**Predictions vs. Reality.** I recognized after the first session that observations from each session would help inform how I structured the following session. I did much more problem solving and adjusting between sessions than I anticipated. This included refining chordal accompaniment, lyric simplification, and generating questions that best addressed different perspectives and understanding of the topic.

I had been working with the boys for several months before these sessions and observed many of their cognitive abilities and limitations when it came to sharing experiences and social interactions. I was surprised that the multiple environmental disturbances did not seem to affect
the overall performance of the students while songwriting. When we occasionally had to address student needs during the songwriting process all the boys were redirectable and able to continue. All students were also present for each session except for one session when there was a late student arrival. I felt happy as a facilitator that the group was willing to take three full sessions to accomplish this project. They proudly and successfully wrote a group song together that they could reference in future sessions.

I had planned for the second session to be focused on a time that they might have been sad and a friend did something that made them feel better, and the third session be a time that they were a friend to someone else. When we reached the third session the boys asked to repeat the question from the last session. By the third session I felt that the group understood the concept of the song and had the autonomy to request answering the same question as before in order to share new information.

**Challenges.** Several unforeseen circumstances began each of the sessions, some of which the boys were affected by and others not. I found it difficult to center myself during these sessions and tried my best to give my full attention to the songwriting. When the third session began with a personal student situation, my inclination was to address personal needs verbally, though it was a spontaneous challenge to incorporate those needs into our theme of friendship.

The chorus/verse structure became both helpful in keeping personal emotions and experiences contained to a verse but also felt somewhat constricting to limit the individual’s expressions. After observing the outcomes of the intervention I realized that my feeling of constriction was likely one of therapist insecurity and that putting expressions into a music container was likely helpful to that student.
Maintaining focus was a big challenge for this group and proved to be a difficult aspect of the songwriting process. I needed to move quickly so that the boys were not bored. Responding to the group needs and facilitation was also a major challenge throughout each session. I felt that the flow of songwriting was often halted with extended commentary that I had to limit in order to reach every student. I observed that prompting and examples provided helpful structure and focus on the topic.

Checking in with myself about this project also proved to be more challenging than expected. When addressing my own expectations of this project I found myself struggling to find a balance of planning the sessions and allowing them to form themselves from the students. I found comfort in the structure and insecurity in times of improvisation and vulnerability. Though even when I made mistakes the boys were encouraging and we reflected positively together.

**Successes and Shortcomings.** The boys showed great insight multiple times throughout the sessions. They offered me encouragement after I made a mistake and reinforced that we all make mistakes. They were able to verbally reflect their personal experiences related to the topic and asked empathetic questions to peers. They also identified their relationships and ideas of friendship in relation to other roles such as parents and teachers.

The need for simplicity and repetition with this group was clear from the number of times that I had to repeat or reframe questions. I often found myself posing a general question and then frequently repeating central words to receive a full answer. It was similarly obvious that in comparison of performance between the original chorus versus the secondary chorus, the secondary chorus had fewer words, was easier to grasp and fit into the chordal structure that was pleasing to the ear.
The chorus provided a valuable connection in the group and served as a grounding structure of the song. It could be referred to between verses to provide a natural break and was a musical reminder of the topic. The chorus and topic connection was reinforced by the harmonic structure in the pop chords that naturally lead us to feel whole and satisfied. Likewise, during the verse section the boys were hearing the guitar chords alternate between the I and V chords that felt open and provided a natural space for verbal processing. These musical structures provided clear cues and support that the boys responded to.

The boys felt comfortable sharing personal stories in the space provided during the verse sections. Part of this could be due to the positive peer friendships and therapeutic relationship established in the group. They were able to articulate their own experiences given extra processing time and prompting. They also supported each other by giving feedback or asking questions. Though this ease of personal sharing was likely due to the familiarity of the song structure and previous songwriting experiences, they reflected on a new topic and confided in a less familiar therapist.

**Generalizability.** Though the outcomes supported the potential benefits of client-adapted structured songwriting with special needs students, research is needed to support these findings. The musical and verbal flexibility in the structured activity should be further explored. I also had the option to meet with the same students multiple times and many music therapists do not have that opportunity. Our group addressed student specific social, emotional and behavioral goals and is thus limiting to compare with other generalized goals.

**Further Considerations.** If I had an opportunity to conduct this intervention again there are several interesting options that I didn’t choose that could be helpful in furthering my understanding of songwriting with this population. An option could be applied having the
students make more musicality decisions like key, instrumentation, and style and see how this made for a more or less impactful song. They could also choose their own theme and what aspect of the theme to focus on.

If I were to work with an individual on this project, more time could be spent on lyrical analysis. It is likely that if this songwriting structure is used with varying special needs clients, the therapist will need to tailor the facilitation to that unique client. In the future, I would like to explore continued flexibility and adaptability when it comes to songwriting in sessions.

This thesis capstone project provided me the opportunity to practice research and clinical skills that may be beneficial in my career. I was able to focus on the client’s group process and provide a musical container where they could confide and share ideas with their peers. I identified areas in songwriting where students easily express themselves and areas where they needed more structure and assistance to feel successful.

The outcomes of this intervention long for continued research in songwriting with special needs populations. If there is focus given to the client’s needs, the songwriting process should develop appropriately for that client. Researchers and clinicians should be encouraged to study this topic as my observations suggest that special needs students are capable of using songwriting to facilitate self-expression, social interactions and building on skills and goals with the right facilitation and structure.
References


THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Student's Name: Katherine C. Marsh

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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