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Capstone Thesis

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Music Therapy

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Abstract

The purpose of this community engagement project was to explore the use of music and imagery activities to support the racial-ethnic-cultural identity development of youth in a community music program. Using music, how do youth navigate identity development in their social-political-cultural context? The workshop structure and approaches were grounded in the liberatory approaches of Paulo Freire, with the aim of shifting power dynamics and expanding the critical awareness and consciousness of participants. In an unjust society in which marginalized groups are disproportionally burdened, the exploration and development of racial-ethnic-cultural identity and consciousness are protective factors and should be important topics within education. Six second-generation adolescents participated in eight workshops, which included music and imagery activities focused on participant-identified topics related to racial-ethnic-cultural identity: food, lifestyle, culture, traditions/cultural stories, music, language. Participants connected with emerging themes of family and heritage. The workshops offered space for a creative and expressive release during the Covid-19 pandemic and allowed participants to embrace and take ownership of artistic and developmental processes during challenging times in the world, inviting an unfolding exploration of and connection to one’s self, family, culture, and heritage through music. There are opportunities to further explore what music therapy-inspired liberatory approaches and experiences could support identity development both in educational settings and in clinical and therapeutic work.

Introduction

In a world where stressors and traumas from the personal to the global disproportionally fall on the oppressed, how might community music educators use artistic processes in the classroom in marginalized communities to support a critical developmental step for adolescents: that of developing identity and answering, “Who am I”? According to Erikson (1950), this is the key negotiation for adolescents. It is the responsibility of educators to consider how to be supportive of these unfolding processes, and particularly crucial when working with youth from disempowered and historically marginalized communities in a quickly changing world.

This community engagement project explored and addressed the following key questions: how can music and imagery workshops in a community music program support the process of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development among adolescents, and how do youth navigate identity development using music in their social-political-cultural context? Through the project, adolescents in a community music program were invited to engage with themes of identity through a series of music and imagery-based activities, with each week’s workshop focused on a different facet of racial-ethnic-cultural identity.

The social-political-context includes the cultural diseases of racism/ethnocentrism/nativism/xenophobia and the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic as well as the lived experiences of adolescents in the world today. Most students in the program were second-generation Latinx/e and Chicano/a youth. The majority also qualified for free or reduced-price meals at school due to family income level. On top of historical marginalization and disenfranchisement, additional stressors impacted families and children such as financial and resource inequities during a global pandemic and economic dive, status as youth, risk of wildfire around the community, and the individual-yet-global sense of powerlessness in the face
of an ongoing pandemic. This context of disempowerment, chronic stressors, and potential trauma, particularly resulting from systemic forces, necessitated a liberatory approach.

This project explored how a liberatory process of identity development using musical activities could take shape, particularly in the context of an after-school community program that used music as a vehicle for youth development. In this program, youth participated tuition-free in small and large group music classes and ensembles, generally over multiple years, and learned how to play an instrument. The program emphasized support of social-emotional growth of students and development in areas such as leadership. Through building skills on their instrument over multiple years, students had the opportunity to further develop a musical facet of identity and gain confidence in and from their skills.

The community music program taught a variety of types of music, including Western classical music, with the aim of building equitable access to music learning opportunities. Traditionally, classical music education systems include gatekeepers; the world of classical music is not known for being inclusive. This program sought to open doors to full participation within the world of music, part of which is frequently only accessible to those with substantial financial resources, while at the same time working towards decentralizing the traditionally Eurocentric nature of how music is often taught in US education systems. To develop competitive skill on an orchestral instrument would otherwise generally require an individual to take years of expensive private lessons, in addition to participating in ensembles, whether in or out of the school environment.

Participation in long-term group music learning experiences offers a host of neurologic and social-emotional benefits to those who can access it, from increased empathy to enhanced processing of speech and speech-in-noise perception (Rabinowitch et al., 2013; Kraus et al., 2014; Slater, 2015). In socioeconomically disadvantaged children, it also helps counteract
declines in literacy (Slater et al., 2014). Musicians may feel intimately connected with their craft; being a musician can be a salient part of one’s identity, especially during adolescence.

**Situating the “Crisis of Adolescence” in 2020-21**

Erikson proposed that identity vs. confusion was the main developmental crisis for adolescents (Erikson, 1950). Tatum (2017) extended: “Perhaps the most critical task facing the children of immigrants is reconciling the culture of home with the dominant American culture” (p. 244). The unique social-cultural-political elements of 2020-21 further add a layer of complexity and nuance to developmental processes. These elements include widespread impacts of the prolonged Covid-19 global pandemic, increased visibility for the Black Lives Matter movement with protests coming to a head alongside growing awareness of systemic racism and violence particularly against Black people, and a tense and pivotal U.S. presidential election with an insurrection of the U.S. Capitol and a politically divided nation. It is important to note that these issues, while especially pertinent in 2020-21, are long-standing. In this context – the world of school-at-home and video hangouts with friends – students still navigate the struggles of growing up, namely the key question of “who am I?” and the quest for developing identity and navigating cultures and belonging.

Self-identity is generally explored and construed in relation to others rather than in a vacuum; the group is thus an important setting for this community engagement project, and the essentiality of the peer group to adolescents is a common fact. Tatum (2017) referred to the group as both a resource and coping strategy. The exploration of “who am I?” perhaps becomes more pressing and confusing in a world that is constantly changing and fraught with additional life challenges. It would make sense that stay-at-home orders and practices during the Covid-19 pandemic would complicate the process of identity exploration and development.
There is an opportunity for in-school and after-school programs to provide support in these areas. Tatum (2017) referenced Phinney’s work regarding the four outcomes for coping with cultural conflict – assimilation, withdrawal, biculturalism, marginalization – and asserted:

These alienated young people, relying on their peers for a sense of community may be at particular risk.…. School programs that help bridge the gap between the culture of home and the culture of the dominant society can reduce the risks of alienation. (p. 245)

Tatum suggested the educator questions: “What curricular interventions might we use to encourage the development of an empowered emissary identity?” (Tatum, 2017, p. 149).

The Need for Reflection

Throughout the fieldwork for this project, the writer reflected on personal roles and identities, alongside the participants’ explorations of their own identities. It was critical to engage in ongoing reflection and learning to explore personal privilege, racial-ethnic-cultural identity, power dynamics, and potential blind spots and biases, particularly as a White person. Ryde (2009) stated:

The idea that whiteness is the normality from which others deviate is such an insidious and subtle idea that it may well be the biggest single factor that keeps white privilege in place.…. White people ‘name’ or ‘mark’ others, and this is such a powerful position to be in. (p. 38)

Sue and Sue (2015) exposed and characterized “Whiteness” as the following: the perception of un-bias, the perception of working towards social justice, and this self-image impeding the realization that one also holds prejudice and bias. Culturally conditioned monoculturalism means that one will undoubtedly learn biases and other aspects of white supremacy (Sue & Sue, 2015). Critical reflection and consultation with peers and mentors throughout helped support the responsible undertaking of this project.
It is critical to develop awareness around power systems and liberatory practices especially when teaching classical music. Scrine (2021) emphasized:

Where music and the arts in general are assumed to be safe havens and sanctuaries detached from trauma and harm, we fail to recognize the power dynamics inherent in these spaces. Music can and should be understood as a tool through which to actively name and respond to these dynamics. (p.9)

In supporting and increasing access to classical music for marginalized groups, doors open, allowing participants to claim some of the associated power, but one remains “in the system.” When the arts and music are taught in Eurocentric systems and colonized, values are transmitted via a power structure that communicate cultural superiority and inferiority, with ramifications on individual and group cultural identity development – an identity that is colonized. As oppressive systems are pervasive throughout society and in arts and education settings, one must take care when teaching music to not perpetuate oppressive techniques. Alternatively, there is a pressing need and opportunity for increased liberatory practices and experiences in both the arts and education.

**Awakening the Possibilities**

In exploring liberatory practices, one undoubtedly encounters the foundational work of Paulo Freire. Freire asserted that action plays a key role and is necessary along with critical reflection in a liberatory education, describing: “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2014, p. 79). In grounding this project with a Freirean perspective and process, the writer anticipated that participants would engage in critical reflection and action around themes of identity and increase their awareness and consciousness.

The writer hoped that this project would help clarify, bring light to, and affirm the developing identities of participants and sense of self, helping to awaken their developing social-cultural-political consciousness, implement liberatory processes and experiences to help
reshape the distribution of power and empower children, and inspire participants to continue using the arts as a tool for their wellbeing and growth. Furthermore, it was hoped that this project would build tools and processes that might inspire and be of use to staff and teaching artists in similar community music programs.

Through giving space to experience ownership of artistic and developmental processes, participants might feel a sense of control and confidence during a tumultuous time in the world, potentially building connection and engagement among children who could be experiencing burnout from online school and traditional teaching practices. Finally, in exploring the usefulness of music and imagery with adolescents in an educational context around the theme of identity, it was anticipated that there might be take-aways that could offer new information to the clinical practice of music therapy and support the writer as a developing music therapy clinician and mental health professional. Furthermore, exploring the implications of Freire’s work and the use of tools such as problem-posing in relation to therapy would be worthwhile.

**Literature Review**

**Racial-Ethnic-Cultural Identity Development**

This project focused on racial-ethnic-cultural identity, opening doors to more fully access and explore the many interrelated and intersectional facets of identity. While some researchers and theorists look primarily at racial, ethnic, and cultural identities and identity development individually, Tatum (2017) proposed the examination of racial-ethnic-cultural identity, noting how racial and ethnic identity can intersect and describing the importance of culture in group membership.

Sue and Sue (1990, 1999) proposed a five-step model of Racial/Cultural Identity Development within counseling, intended to reflect the patterns of development that individuals of oppressed groups in the U.S. would experience as a result of their lived experiences: conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness.
Ruiz (1990) presented a different five-step model specifically for Chicanx/Latinx ethnic identity, proposing the stages as causal, cognitive, consequence, working through, and successful resolution. Phinney’s (1993) model of ethnic identity development, which is specifically for adolescents and has foundations both in Erikson’s model and research, described the following steps: 1) unexamined ethnic identity; 2) ethnic identity search; 3) achieved ethnic identity.

Tatum (2017) examined Phinney’s model along with models by Cross and Helms, writing about the commonalities: “the idea that an achieved identity develops over time and that race-related encounters often lead to the exploration, examination, and eventual internalization of a positive, self-defined sense of one’s own racial or ethnic identity” (p. 236).

Estrella (2017) explored the idea of music as a cultural legacy for families, noting: “Given the many ways families manage immigration and acculturation, biculturalism and assimilation, music may be one way that clients retain, regain, or remember their cultural identities” (p. 47).

**Paulo Freire on Anti-Oppression**

In considering which foundation for this project would affirm and reinforce the developing racial-ethnic-cultural identities of the participants – and furthermore be anti-oppressive and oriented towards social justice – the work of Paulo Freire presented an interesting opportunity. Freire asserted that the oppressed are not outsiders: “The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (Freire, 2014, p. 74). Within education, he referred to this concept as student *conscientização*, or consciousness.

In Freire’s seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a foundational text of critical pedagogy, Freire described approaches to help raise this consciousness, including problem-posing methods and dialogue between the “teacher-student” and the “student-teacher” (Freire, 2014). Freire contended that reflection and action are both integral components to the process, explaining: “Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the
world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (Freire, 2014, p. 81). Beck and Purcell’s (2013) research offered ideas for how a problem-posing approach could be applied with youth, using generative themes, to encourage community action.

Perhaps identity is at the heart of conscientização, reflection, and action. Freire alluded to the importance of identity and knowledge about the self in relation to others, writing: “the form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world” (Freire, 2014, p. 83). The student’s experience is intimately connected with the world around them, influenced by the systems they are part of and their social-political-cultural context; reflection helps situate the self, create meaning, and find feet on which to stand.

Some research has examined the impacts of racial-ethnic-cultural identity development on adolescents, looping in ethnic group consciousness. Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) summarized: “it is a period of increased meaning-making around the complexities of ethnic and racial group membership and, consequently, potentially increased significance for adjustment” (p. 41). Mathews et al. (2019) supported the case for exploring identity along with the development of consciousness as protective factors among adolescents, offering an overview of research on these two areas and their congruence. While the researchers stated that little has been written about this overlap, they proposed: “it is imperative for scholars to consider these important links that can expand working theories of positive youth development” (Mathews et al., 2019, Conclusion section).

Mathews et al. (2019) noted how both ethnic-racial identity and critical consciousness particularly develop around adolescence, arguing that both are involved in how adolescents process and manage racism and discrimination, with identity buffering against the effects of discrimination and consciousness helping them to analyze experiences and be empowered to take action. These assets help youth manage their challenging social-political environment
(Mathews et al., 2019). The researchers referred to a host of links between critical consciousness and academic, occupational, and other outcomes, even asserting: “raising youths’ critical consciousness has been deemed an ‘antidote for oppression’” (Mathews, 2019, Critical Consciousness as a Promotive... section, para. 2).

While some music therapy clinicians and researchers have delved into anti-oppressive and liberatory practices and may embrace theories or approaches such as community music therapy, social justice, resource-oriented approaches, feminist theory, or critical race theory among others to further these practices, the field is in need of growth and increased consciousness. Norris (2020) called music therapy clinicians to action to examine complicity in using approaches that cause harm: “the unexamined utility of racially sanitized music therapy approaches within practice settings circumvents clients’ personhood and puts into practice tools of dehumanization that serve to superimpose devaluation and psychological assaults upon Black clients” (p. 3). Norris provided recommendations on the removal of specific practices and the use of critical reflection in personal and professional practice. Recent scholarship by Scrine (2021) presented the case for music therapists to embrace approaches that encourage resistance and consciousness-building with youth, instead of resilience-focused and trauma-informed paradigms, noting the potential harm that trauma-informed approaches can cause “through assigning vulnerability, reinscribing colonial power dynamics, and reinforcing individual responsibility” (Scrine, 2021, p. 9). Scrine provided a case example of how music therapy groups can use tools such as songwriting and improvisation to explore power dynamics, encourage political agency, and contextualize the perceived vulnerabilities of young people within the systemic forces (Scrine, 2021).

**The Importance of Empowered Identity**

There is a natural human instinct for growth and understanding of the self and world. However, when one has not yet developed a solid sense of self and experiences ongoing minority
stress, one may be more vulnerable – vulnerable to the influence of the dominant group, and for internalization of this influence. Within systems of oppression, dominant groups may define ways in which it is acceptable or not acceptable for the marginalized to behave and grow, complicating the question of “who am I?” Importantly, explored identity buffers against various impacts of discrimination and oppression. In a meta-analysis on internalized oppression and the many related negative mental health and physical health outcomes, Gale et al. (2020) described: “Internalized racism has been described by some scholars as the inverse of racial identity development wherein POC reject majority group stereotypes and establish an independent and positive view of their racial group” (p. 499). James (2017) assessed internalized racism, ethnic identity, self-esteem, and major depressive disorder (MDD) among African American adults, finding that self-esteem and ethnic identity each moderated the connection between internalized racism and MDD.

In an exploration of literature about music therapy and Hispanic/Latinx clients, Estrella (2017) emphasized the impacts of colonialism on Hispanic and Latinx people, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness and loss of agency sustained over generations and across borders. Estrella explained: “The process of immigration, acculturation, enculturation, and assimilation always involves loss. Often immigrants (along with their children and grandchildren) experience the loss of a sense of rootedness, social status, history or sense of mastery” (Estrella, 2017, p. 40). Estrella (2017) noted that families frequently encourage bicultural skills as biculturalism is seen as connected with resilience, and furthermore, “youth who were more connected with their ethnic values (Mexican cultural values such as familismo, religiosity, or respect for elders) were more resilient, with reduced risks of negative mental health symptoms and increases in academic confidence” (p. 40). Explored ethnic identity also predicts the self-esteem of Latinx youth (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), and there is a relationship between ethnic racial
identity and increased academic outcomes, well-being, and psychosocial outcomes (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

**Music and Imagery**

Music is an important resource for adolescents (Miranda, 2013; Campbell et al., 2007; Laiho, 2004) – and especially for adolescent musicians in a community music program. Laiho (2004) described: “Through enhancing the satisfaction of different psychological goals music serves as an effective resource for promoting mental health. The importance of music as a device for promoting adolescent health in everyday life should not be underestimated” (p. 59).

Music and Imagery (MI) and Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) have been used in various capacities within mental health settings to elicit understanding and knowledge from the unconscious via listening and responding to carefully selected music in a relaxed state. One major approach in music therapy is the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (BMGIM), founded by Helen Bonny in the 1970s. This music-centered receptive approach uses music as a “co-therapist” within individual therapy and includes as part of the process an induction, a dialogue about the various images (including visual images, felt sense, auditory images, etc.) that the client experiences during the music, and an artistic process that may lead into verbal processing (Wärja & Bonde, 2014). Offshoots and variations on this approach include group music and imagery.

Research supports the use of particular models of music and imagery to aid with exploration of identity. Trondalen (2016) described how the Resource-oriented Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music benefited musicians and activated personal creative resources, finding that identity was an important part of the process in addition to self-awareness and self-agency. Thick description helped to enhance credibility. The common themes that emerged – group cohesion, something positive, able to be me, and opened a door – align with the aims of
this community engagement project. In exploring identity, one exercises self-awareness and moves towards self-agency.

While BMGIM traditionally uses Western classical music, some research has explored the use of culturally specific music as well as music outside of Western classical styles with clients in GIM and MI clinical work. Fuglestad (2017) compiled a GIM program consisting of arrangements for full orchestra of English pop rock music, asserting that familiar structures in the music help provide a safe container for the listener. In writing about pieces with embedded meaning, Fuglestad shared: “my experiences in general are that most clients use the music to their benefits and in the way they need there and then, related to their personal processes” (p. 352). Trondalen (2017) described the use of a specific Norwegian music program of developed by Aksnes and Ruud (2010) with a Norwegian client in their mid-thirties who came to therapy to explore feelings of sadness. In this case study, Trondalen demonstrated reflexivity through exploration of dual roles and prolonged engagement with the session texts and with the client. Trondalen described the client’s specific response to the Soundscapes program: “during the music-listening experience, Ann seemed to connect her inner soul-scape with the musical soundscape, and eventually nature and cultural images emerged” (p. 339), suggesting that “GIM could promote images and transformative experiences where nature and cultural belonging were at the very core” (p. 340). Aksnes and Ruud (2010) wrote about the development of Soundscapes, explaining how the listener can create metonymic associations between the “folk music inspired concerto and Norwegian nature and cultural artifacts; both categories belonging to the conceptual domain ‘the national’” (p. 50). The researchers noted curiosity about if Norwegian participants might experience feeling “trapped within the repertory of national stereotypes” (p. 55). Luckily, most were able to transform the national images and cultural associations into their own narratives, meeting their own needs.
Swamy (2018) explored ethnic and cultural identity specifically through music and imagery, developing Culturally-Centered Music and Imagery (CCMI) through their research with adults of Indian origin. Swamy used the methodology of portraiture to capture substantial nuance and detail from the experiences of the participants, providing thick description. Swamy found that the native music of the adults would evoke imagery related to ethnic identity as well as images related to the cultural unconscious, making the case for culturally centered work within music and imagery practices. Swamy noted surprise that the data in fact supported stage models of identity development; furthermore, Swamy contended that CCMI is an “effective process for assessing the fluid, multiple, and multi-dimensional nature of the ethnic self” (Swamy, 2018, Discussion section). When confronted with discrimination, Swamy asserted that that “CCMI could have been a valuable resource to help them with a sense of positive ‘ethnic esteem’ (Phinney, 2004)” (Swamy, 2018, Clinical Implications section). However, Swamy cautioned the reader that CCMI is not appropriate for all contexts, and that one should consider the referential associations of participants in selecting music.

Importantly, music and imagery approaches have been used outside of clinical and therapeutic contexts and in educational settings. For example, Powell (2007), a music educator who received training in the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music, assembled stories and musical selections to help strengthen self-esteem in school children. In their book, Powell encouraged a process described as Music-Inspired Creativity (MIC), which involves stories, relaxation, connecting to the story, music-listening, re-orienting to the room, and sharing. Powell’s intention was for this material to be used by teachers, caregivers, and parents alike, to help children “expand self-awareness, share personal experiences, and discover their values” (Powell, 2007, p.11). Powell reminded the reader of the power of imagination, the naturalness of its use in play, and its potential for self-knowledge.
It is important to note that music, with its link to the unconscious and pre-verbal parts, strong associations, and limbic regions of the brain involved in emotional responses, along with its strong healing potential also has the capacity to activate challenging memories or trauma responses and must therefore be used skillfully and carefully to ensure the emotional containment of clients or participants. One study of interest explored GIM as a tool for coping with trauma while also presenting steps for implementation of trauma-informed listening procedures - practices that would help inform the listening process in this project. Beck et al. (2018) evaluated the effectiveness of modified GIM to help refugees in Denmark cope with symptoms of PTSD, finding that participants were highly satisfied with treatment and there were large within-group effect sizes for all measures such as the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, Pittsburg Sleep Quality Index, and WHO-5 Well-being scale. Of particular interest were the adaptations to GIM by Beck et al. to meet the needs of “stabilization, safety, and control” of these adult refugees (p. 71), such as offering a few choices of songs to listen to and sitting upright instead of laying down. Warja and Bonde (2014) classified music used in GIM sessions into three main levels, supportive (offering more security for the listener due to its predictable nature, lighter moods, and basic form), supportive and challenging, and challenging. The use of participant-preferred genres and songs would also help build a sense of security in this project.

Images – from the un-expressed in the subconscious to the expressed – are powerful tools which can be used both to oppress and empower. Tatum (2017) described: “Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air” (p. 86). Yet, imagery can also serve as inspiration to become and to be, rousing the unfolding of the developing identity.

**El Sistema-Inspired Programs**

“El Sistema” refers to the network of children’s and youth orchestras administered by the Fundación Musical Simón Bolivar and founded by José Antonio Abreu in 1975 in Venezuela. El
Sistema engages children living in low-income communities in intensive and long-term music training, tuition free, within the context of the group or ensemble. It is said that more Venezuelans play music than organized sports. El Sistema has received its share of criticism, especially in regards to limited research, its complicated relationship or lack thereof with political figures and systems, and its arguably overly-enthusiastic followers – while also serving as a beacon of artistic and social hope and opportunity, an ideal that has inspired musicians, educators, and activists globally to dedicate themselves to “El Sistema-inspired” work in their local communities. El Sistema-inspired programs are aligned with a similar mission and general philosophy.

Creech et al. (2016) compiled a literature review that included research and evaluation on El Sistema and El Sistema-inspired programs, reviewing 277 of these programs from 58 countries and gathering research or evaluation papers from 44, many of which were in initial stages of their program or organization. Creech et al. noted that much of the research was small-scale and that more longitudinal studies were needed to better understand the diverse impacts of the program on participants. However, the researchers asserted that the findings support that participation in El Sistema-inspired programs support well-being socially, cognitively, and emotionally in a multitude of ways. Of particular note to this study, reports particularly from the Big Noise, Scotland program also indicated that participation bolstered a sense of individual and group identity. Another program reported a sense of musical identity among participants; numerous programs such as OrchKids and El Sistema Sweden intentionally foster this identity development, and some foster self-affirmation, openness and a focus on diversity. Creech et al. (2016) explored the relationship between El Sistema programs and classical music, referencing contrasting assertions: how instead of the music removing power such as in colonial times it can instead give power and amplify voices of the marginalized; the music can also be associated with
the elite and “as a result, disenfranchised communities equate performing classical music with a loss of their cultural identity and adoption of elite European values” (p. 101).

There is only one mention of music therapy in the literature review by Creech et al. (2016) – one program review suggested that ideas from other fields such as music therapy would be of benefit to El Sistema-inspired programs.

Eulacio-Guevara (2018) explored the empowerment needs of those experiencing socioeconomic marginalization. In particular, Eulacio-Guevara examined the theoretical parallels and potential synergy between El Sistema and community music therapy, examining common approaches, such as a focus on social justice and music as social capital, and common outcomes such as self-esteem, expression, and self-worth. Eulacio-Guevara noted how cultural and group identity can be formed and performed through music in *communitas*. Finally, Eulacio-Guevara asserted that music therapy would be of benefit to El Sistema-inspired programs, especially for students with disabilities, also mentioning their work as a music therapist in the El Sistema-inspired Union City Music Project.

Aleman et al. (2017) designed and implemented a randomized control trial as an experimental evaluation of El Sistema and particularly for children exposed to violence, measuring the effects of participation on four areas of development: self-regulation, behavior, pro-social skills, and cognitive skills. As little quantitative research on El Sistema impacts exists, a randomized controlled study added to the literature (Aleman et al., 2017). Aleman et al. shared that some results were unexpected. The effects for girls were low and there were some decreases in specific skills areas. However, for boys, and particularly boys exposed to violence, there were larger sub-sample effects on self-control and behavior. Researchers summarized: “The results suggest the importance of devising mechanisms to target resources to the most vulnerable children” (Aleman et al., 2017, p.865). Limitations within the study include the lack of long-term follow-up in a program that engages children for many years (Aleman et al., 2017).
**Methods**

In reviewing the literature on identity development and adolescence, the work of Paulo Freire, music and imagery, and the impacts of El Sistema-inspired programs, it became apparent that some areas have been heavily researched while others were lacking. Moreover, there was little research on the intersections of these topics, presenting an opportunity to examine some of the overlaps.

The workshop series focused on music, imagery, and identity and was facilitated with a Freirean lens, with an eye towards strengths-based and resource-oriented perspectives. Following the Freirean framework, reflection was a major component of the workshops, which included problem-posing approaches, and participants were also presented with opportunities to make decisions and take action. In the reflective stage, the writer first sought to understand the worldview of the participants as it relates to identity, exploring what they know, feel, or have experienced. Information about identity was presented to the group for critique and examination through dialogue. Participants shaped the areas of focus within the workshops, choosing the areas of identity that they wanted to explore.

**Recruitment**

The writer gained written approval via the community music program’s organization to complete this project. Middle and high school students at the program were invited through written and verbal communication to participate in a workshop series “on music, imagery, and identity, particularly racial-ethnic-cultural identity.” The grades of the six participants spanned 7-11.

**Observations and Analysis**

The writer was previously familiar with the community music project and the participants. With this familiarity came a unique perspective, including benefits such as
increased knowledge of the program; however, disadvantages may include personal observations that focus more on the positive with insufficient critique.

In order to document the process, workshop plans and alterations of plans were recorded. Following each workshop, observations, impressions, and thoughts about the process and personal reactions were recorded; the writer also undertook regular personal artistic exploration, such as musical improvisation, mandala drawing, or poetry, to further reflect upon and process the information.

Participatory approaches to knowledge-creation are integral in a Freirean framework. Fairchild & McFerran (2019) described the approach: “where children’s voices and contributions are viewed as essential to understanding their perspectives” (p. 89). At the end of this project, participants were encouraged to share openly about their experiences in the workshops. Theme identification techniques from qualitative research methodologies were used in examining the writer’s personal observations: identifying recurring words as well as thematic analysis, through coding of the observations in the memos, and generation of themes as related to the participant-selected topic of each workshop. Importantly, some observations were shared with participants for feedback and critique.

**Process**

True to the topic of navigating current social-political realities, the project was carried out in March and April of 2021 as a series of eight workshops over Zoom, as the community music program remained online during those months of the Covid-19 pandemic. The workshops were collaborative and participatory in nature, with the workshop’s structure, topics, and questions related to identity proposed to the group for feedback and shaping. As participant ideas and critique were sought, the process evolved through dialogue.

In the first meeting, group members were asked to participate in an opening icebreaker, create community agreements, and take part in an artistic activity in which participants would
noted facets of their personal identity. It was emphasized that they were the experts on their own identities; they could make choices about sharing information with the writer or other group members and share to the extent that they feel comfortable; other people’s ideas about identity would be shared, including those of psychologists and researchers, and participants would be encouraged to critique the ideas and make choices about whether or not to integrate them. Each participant was asked to individually journal about and share information directly with the writer regarding their musical preferences, their reason for signing up for the workshop, their description of their racial-ethnic-cultural identity (some example descriptors were provided), what has influenced this identity and how they have explored it previously, and family immigration patterns.

In the second workshop, participants were invited to share about their knowledge and wisdom regarding individual, familial, community and/or cultural identity, suggesting words and phrases that were populated into a group word cloud. Information regarding identity and identity development was presented to participants, who were invited to critique the information. Group members listened to brief portions of a variety of sample songs and pieces of music and shared their reactions and any associations; later song selections were influenced by musical preferences as expressed in these first workshops. Participants were invited to choose to just listen to the music or to respond to the impact of the music by drawing concurrently; this suggestion was made to encourage participants to increase their comfort levels with “putting color on the page” while listening. Finally, participants were tasked with choosing six topics related to racial-ethnic-cultural identity to explore in the remaining workshops.

The remaining workshops each focused on one of the six topics and followed a general structure: group discussion around a significant question/image/topic (a problem-posing approach), didactic information which the group would critique, group music and imagery process (brief relaxation/focusing activity, listening to a specific piece of music carefully selected
by the writer while filling in a mandala or journaling, brief sharing), individual music and imagery process (brief relaxation/focusing activity, listening to piece of music selected by the participant while filling in a mandala, brief journaling, brief sharing), closing. Participants were instructed to take breaks as needed and to listen to the music in a way that felt comfortable to them (e.g. with their eyes open or closed). Musical selections that the writer brought in were chosen based on careful listening, consultation, and research on the social-cultural context.

In the final workshops, participants were presented with an opportunity for critical action or continuation of the classes in some capacity if they chose; they were asked “what comes next” and opportunities for next steps were explored and decided on.

**Results**

**Personal Observations on Introductory Workshops**

In the opening workshop, participants were asked about their opinions and preferences regarding the use of video on Zoom. Participants were hesitant to initiate turning on their videos and wanted to be told when to turn videos on and to keep videos on when sharing art. Participants were actively involved using the chat function over zoom, though at times appeared more hesitant to share openly. Some participants appeared uncertain about their knowledge of identity or how they wanted to identify themselves. Others expressed their identities with more clarity and specificity.

In the second workshop, participants came alive when listening and responding to clips of different kinds of music, sharing enthusiastically about their connections to the music. A few selections, particularly songs connected with their heritage or ethnic-cultural identity such as Selena Quintanilla’s recording of “Como la flor” and the mariachi song “Guadalajara” were observed to elicit strong emotions and memories of family or roots from participants. Participants occasionally expressed a lack of connection to specific songs. When a song was determined to be “pre-Covid,” a question was posed by the writer: “then what is Covid music?”
The idea surfaced about how the pandemic gave space to dive into personal musical interests, without the shaping or influence of peers, allowing participants to more easily explore their preferences and connections.

In particular, six themes related to racial-ethnic-cultural identity emerged through discussion in the group about topics of interest, informing the areas of focus within the music and imagery work: food, lifestyle, culture, music, language, and traditions/cultural stories. Perhaps “culture,” for example, would seem broad; however, it was important to follow the lead of and respect the interests and wisdom of the participants.

**Personal Observations on Music and Imagery Workshops**

The writer played a more active role facilitating discussion in earlier workshops when participants were at times quiet. Participant feedback was requested at the end of the first music and imagery workshop, which helped inform that they were having a positive experience and seemed to enjoy reflecting on and connecting with the music. When tasked with identifying a positive quality or image related to racial-ethnic-cultural identity and the particular workshop’s topic, participants were able to select one and complete the group listening and imagery.

Memories related to family came up frequently in the workshops. For example, an image was explored while listening to Natalia Lafourcade’s recording of “Mi Tierra Veracruzana” of cooking and eating together at a family member’s house, during the workshop on food. Some preferred songs were included in the group music and imagery.

During the individual listening and imagery, participants chose songs that seemed to meet their holistic needs at the moment, whether it was connecting further with an aspect of their culture or heritage or allowing them to access motivation and perseverance through a difficult pandemic. Messages came up around balance in life, with themes of persistence and finding time for me/life. Feelings of peace, comfort, enjoyment and a sense of feeling free without worry surfaced during some of these listening experiences, feelings that participants
would take with them forward from the group. Other conversations appeared to focus on the experience of life and school online during the pandemic, including loss of friends.

Discussion around cultural appropriation seemed to be the way into active critical reflection for this particular group, through problem-posing methods focused around visual images. Some group members who may be further along in their exploration of identity, or further along in certain models of racial, ethnic or cultural identity development, seemed to help scaffold peers and led the way in discussion about this topic.

The sixth workshop felt like a breakthrough with more openness, trust, and participation among the group. Personal experiences and feelings related to discrimination and varied comfort levels around people of different ethnicities surfaced and were explored; the conversation easily turned to “what helps affirm your culture” and participants readily connected with different resources that could be a source of personal and cultural strength even in the face of discrimination. A sense of vulnerability was apparent in the group during this sharing about emotional experiences. Through these discussions, the group appeared to be leaning towards a re-educative experience within music and imagery (Swamy, 2021). With input from the group, the writer changed the pre-selected a piece of music – which was participant-preferred in terms of genre but not congruent with the participants’ ethnic identity – to a participant-selected song that fit the theme of cultural roots and connected with Mexican identity, which was then used for the group music and imagery experiential. Group members experienced culturally specific imagery, and in the closing activity, feelings of release and interest in the workshops continuing were shared.

Jumping off the discussion in the previous workshop, the penultimate workshop focused on the topic of music. Participants participated in a structured listening activity to the song “La Bamba Rebelde” by Las Cafeteras, reflecting on how music can send a message and help fight or counter discrimination and oppression. The music elicited feelings of being proud and inspired;
participants were interested in this music that was new to them. They opted to go deeper and complete a music and imagery process to participant-selected pieces of music, choosing culturally-specific music, such as a family member’s favorite song, when directed to find music connected with something positive related to immigration stories, being second generation, or their identity as a Mexican American or other identifier.

When participants were offered the opportunity to continue classes in some other capacity, complete a group project or action, or end the classes after the final session, participants were provided time to discuss amongst themselves and expressed interest in more classes on music and imagery with a focus on exploring music from regions all over the world. It was interesting that this idea followed discussion about a song with a message about not believing in borders. Or, perhaps, there were other reasons for selecting this particular focus.

**Summary and Response**

In the final workshop of the series (focused on language), participants were invited to reflect on their experiences from the entirety of the workshops, clarifying and amplifying this through the music and imagery exercise and sharing about the common threads they noticed. Participants reviewed the group word clouds created during each workshop and commented on themes they noticed, also agreeing that additional ones mentioned by the writer seemed to fit. These themes included tradition, family, heritage, color, dance, music, traditions, and culture during Covid. Some of these words were specifically expressed in a recurring way throughout the workshops: family, colors, food, traditions, culture, and music (see word cloud, Figure 1).
While the didactic and discussion portion of this final workshop focused on topics related to language from Spanglish to indigenous languages connected to family heritage, the participants reflected on their take-aways through music and imagery. Discussion ranged from a focus on traditions and visual images related to their culture to the idea of music as culture. Participants learned more about culture, traditions, and identity and expressed very positive feelings about the workshop series, as indicated via an anonymous survey. There was a suggestion for the inclusion of more visuals. One reflection referred to noticing differences in culture more with peers and connecting this to a greater appreciation of personal culture. Another shared about learning to creatively express through art and listening.

**Personal Learning**

Throughout this process, flexibility was used to try to meet the needs and interests of the participants during this complicated time and to integrate the wide range of topics. Specific counseling and educational approaches, such as meeting the participants where they were at and following their interests or lead on what they were ready to discuss, helped the process to unfold more organically. The participants were reminded they were the experts on their own
identities and experiences. With power dynamics in mind, efforts were made to provide space for and encourage empowerment.

When following the flow of the group in terms of topics of interest and increasing comfort levels around participation, the use of problem-posing methods within the workshops seemed to work. Before starting the music and imagery portion of the group, it was important to remind participants to focus on a positive image related to the topic. During sharing, it seemed that participants were able to maintain this resource-oriented focus during the music and imagery experiences. This successful integration of problem-posing methods and music and imagery activities in the same workshop was aided by attunement and guidance with thoughtful questions, and a returning back to positive sources of strength or resources.

It was inevitable that certain socio-cultural realities would surface within the workshops. Participants explored a loss of friendship during the pandemic, anxiety around going back to in-person school, and tapping into their personal strength and motivation to keep trying at school.

Discussion

Overview

Six participants took part in the series of eight workshops on topics of racial-ethnic-cultural identity in the community music program. Through various activities including music and imagery, inspired by approaches within the field of music therapy, participants explored the topics that were important to them: food, lifestyle, culture, traditions/cultural stories, music, and language. Additional themes that emerged included family and heritage. Numerous musical selections were connected to Mexico, with some pieces representing specific regions or regional genres and eliciting memories and feelings such as pride.

As demonstrated by their participation and engagement over time, participants were interested in and ready to explore their racial-ethnic-cultural identities in the context of the group, and in particular they were pulled towards exploring their ethnic and cultural roots. As
exploration of identity is an important step to achieved identity, and as participants took part in activities related to identity from discussion to music and art as well as provided positive feedback about their learning and experiences, it would be a logical conclusion that the workshops supported the racial-ethnic-cultural identity development of participants. Furthermore, participants demonstrated the use of music and art as a coping skill during the pandemic, as an outlet for expression and release of feelings related to the workshop topics, and as a tool for exploring themes connected with identity such as heritage, traditions, and family. Gradually, participants began leaning towards more culturally specific pieces of music for listening, which were connected to their families’ country of origin. Participants addressed personal points of connection to larger social-political-cultural contexts, exploring ethnocentrism, microaggressions, and pandemic-related stress and loss, as well as ethnic pride and friendship. Participants deepened their awareness of and connection to aspects of identity, exploring “who am I?” in their world. They delved into their personal musical preferences and connections to music more deeply during the stay-at-home orders and in the group facilitated over Zoom, which allowed for more privacy and independence of music listening. The workshops served as a needed self-care break from life stressors, helping buffer against burnout.

When highlighting music connected with the participant's racial-ethnic-cultural identities and heritage, there is different communication around cultural inferiority and superiority within the systems of music education – the transmission of values shifts and the identities of marginalized groups can start to be seen and affirmed. Through engaging in exploration of racial-ethnic-cultural identities, experiencing support from peers in a group, and receiving didactic information about topics of identity, it was hoped that participants would be one step further towards achieving what Tatum (2017) described as an “internalized sense of personal security, to be able to acknowledge the reality of racism and to respond effectively to it” (p. 158). Furthermore, in grappling with key questions and engaging within a liberatory
framework, it was hoped that participants would feel empowered, practice critical reflection and action, and solidify a stronger sense of self, identity, and power that would help them survive, navigate, and thrive in an unjust society.

It is unclear whether some of these hopes were or will be met as participants were not directly asked about their sense of empowerment, nor were they asked to conceptualize their identities in the final workshop. Rather, participants expressed connecting strongly with their culture, learning more about their culture and facets of identity, and experiencing freedom, release, and peace through music and imagery. Participants showed increased awareness and openness over time. Mathews et al. (2019) noted that in addition to critical reflection and action, ethnic-racial identity and group membership can play a role in conscientização. Participants expressed loving the class and wanting to take action to continue the workshops.

**Contributions to the Field of Music Therapy**

This project is an example of a creative response in an educational and music-based setting to diverse social-political-cultural factors impacting participants. These types of activities could be carried out within community music therapy, for example, or in individual therapy with adolescent clients to support exploration, affirmation, or clarification of identity. The duality and integration of security within the musical experiences and the awakening of consciousness is important to navigate; reinforcing a strong container in which participants can explore and express as well as emphasizing a resource-oriented focus throughout is recommended. Scrine (2021) emphasized the potential of music therapy to strengthen the political agency and resistance of youth and to reinforce structures of safety. Furthermore, the integration of liberatory approaches such as problem-posing methods and action in counseling could be interesting to explore, perhaps when working with internalized oppression, reflecting on how the social-political-cultural context can intimately impact the personal experience, or when aiming to increase awareness around the impact one has on others.
**Recommendations**

It is imperative that educational systems, including music and community music programs, support students in navigating and thriving in today’s society – in a complex and challenging social-political-cultural context – and explore supporting students in areas of identity exploration and development (Tatum, 2017). The use of music and the arts to accomplish this can be a valuable tool. However, it is critical for facilitators to have a thorough understanding of identity development and knowledge about areas of identity to be explored. Perhaps those with proficiency in facilitation and an intentional practice of personal reflection might consider implementing similar workshops and leading activities of music listening and responding, while taking measures to structure safety within the group. Finally, one must take care when working with participants who may be at different stages of identity development; however, in this experience, it appeared that participants helped scaffold each other and that the writer and participants found pieces of music and topics which were resonant with the group.

There is a wealth of possibilities for how activities and techniques from music therapy can be altered for educational settings and specifically to benefit students in El Sistema-inspired or similar music programs. It is recommended that more research be undertaken to explore the multitude of opportunities. Finally, community music programs could explore and envision what instruction might look like using Freirean techniques or approaches from liberatory and transformational pedagogies. For example, students could benefit from the use of empowering and engaging approaches such as problem-posing techniques at the start of class, providing feedback and shaping of information presented to them, or engaging in critical reflection around the topic of the musical canon. It is necessary for staff members and students alike to explore how power is shared or withheld within structures, from curriculum to teaching practices and musical traditions and beyond, and for students to take action on the matters of importance to them.
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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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