Studio Expressive Arts Therapy: Towards a Classroom Method That Incorporates Art and Music

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Studio Expressive Arts Therapy: Towards a Classroom Method
That Incorporates Art and Music

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Abstract

This thesis explored the ways in which expressive arts therapy (ExAT) could be incorporated into a small therapeutic high school’s visual arts program. Through the development and implementation of a method, intermodal exchange between visual art and music was integrated into both the school’s art program and its group counseling offerings. Informed by a literature review of studio art therapy (SAT) as related to ExAT, three different interventions were used to fit within the frameworks of the high school’s offerings. The first intervention focused on making music with a few students within art classes while the rest of the class continued to make art. The second intervention incorporated ExAT exercises into a bi-weekly group therapy session for students. The third intervention incorporated music therapy exercises into another bi-weekly group therapy session for students. The results and observations were recorded autoethnographically. The interventions were well received by the students and staff. Observed benefits included increased engagement in the arts by previously averse students, increased expression of emotional states by students, and increased social connectivity amongst students. This thesis hopes to support the addition of ExAT classes in schools to augment traditional art, music, and theatre offerings.

Keywords: Expressive Arts Therapies; Studio Art Therapy; The Open Studio Approach; ExAT in High Schools; ExAT Education; Music; Intermodal;
Studio Expressive Arts Therapy: Towards a Classroom Method That Incorporates Art and Music

This thesis explored incorporating a variety of expressive arts therapy interventions into a small therapeutic high school which served as my internship site. As visual art was the only arts offering at the school, I was very eager to see how an intermodal approach could be incorporated into the different models of art education and studio art therapy (SAT) that already existed there. My literature review, as well as my own prior education in expressive art therapy (ExAT), situated and informed the interventions I introduced to the students. The primary goal was to incorporate intermodal exchange between visual art and music making into the art education and group counseling offered at the school. I was inspired by the SAT approach and how this theory was incorporated into the school’s art education, and I wanted to see what an ExAT studio/classroom could be like. I hypothesized what this studio approach would entail. I created (planned) and carried out three different interventions related to this, and then observed how this shift from the AT studio to an ExAT studio impacted the students and the atmosphere of the school.

This literature review focused on the SAT approach to AT as opposed to the clinical model and how this related to different ExAT approaches. It also looked at the Open Studio model of an art therapy studio, as well as different other examples of ExAT studios, their history, and their scope. It compared art therapy studios, whether they were community art therapy studios or within hospitals, schools, social service agencies, etc., to other forms of art studios. It also looked at the community art studio movement and different models of community art centers/studios. In my experience “art studio” is a much more widely accepted and commonly used term than “ExAT studio”. As a result all of these different models of art classes and studios were taken as examples of what ExAT studios could be like. While there did seem to be a number of community art therapy studios incorporating music and possibly other forms of art, as
well as many ExAT therapists offering sessions within their personal studios, I didn’t come across many community studios that called themselves ExAT studios, nor many schools offering ExAT class. This could be a very nourishing and enriching development for our communities if more ExAT community studios and classes within schools were developed.

After contextualizing these approaches with theory and history of ExAT in the literature review, the methods section of this paper describes the chosen interventions. The results section lays out what was observed and felt through these experiences, and the discussion section details some of the different dynamics and implications of this method.

**Literature Review**

In order to understand the context of the art education offered at my internship within which I was incorporating ExAT interventions, this literature review focused on the history and theory of the model that the school used, that of the SAT approach. Despite the field’s current movement towards a more clinical and psychotherapy oriented model of AT, many pioneers of AT began their careers working with clients in art studios. Many of these early practitioners had strong backgrounds as artists themselves, and the foundation of their therapeutic work grew out of their engagement with the arts (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020). One of the early influential pioneers in the field, Margaret Naumberg, began incorporating AT into the psychoanalytically oriented school she founded in 1914 called the Walden School. Naumberg’s own art practice and theory was heavily influenced by her sister, Florence Cane, who was an artist and served as the Walden School’s art teacher (Rubin, 2010, p. 58). Another early leader in the field, Edith Kramer, started as a traditional fine art teacher and worked with “disturbed youth” focusing on the healing powers of the arts themselves. The title of “art therapist” was later given to her by the famed psychiatrist Dr. Viola Bernard in the 1940’s (“Reflecting On Edith Kramer: Art Therapy Pioneer And Artist,” n.d.).

In the 1970’s, influential figures in the field like Shaun McNiff, with his training in abstract expressionist painting, began working therapeutically when asked to start an art studio within a
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psychiatric hospital (McNiff, 2009, p.15). In the same way that these visual artists brought art into therapeutic settings, so did musicians. During the great depression in the 1930’s, the U.S. government funded a program to train unemployed musicians to play in hospitals and prisons in order to increase “relaxation” amongst struggling patients and inmates (Byers, 2016, p. 15). These musicians paved the way for the position of music therapist to develop. Continuing in this vein, therapists like Shaun McNiff often worked intermodally, as he relied heavily on his own music making within classes in order to augment his art teaching. I experienced this while taking one of his courses in the winter of 2019. While this course was titled “Art Therapy Studio”, McNiff used drums and a mbira to make live music that accompanied the class’s art making. He also led students in performance art making which incorporated theatre and dance into these art classes. This class could certainly be categorized within the ExAT realm, and this kind of intermodal work from therapists like McNiff lead to the initial development of the field of ExAT as a western profession.

As this unique blending between arts and therapy continued to develop, pressure grew to further define and delineate the field and the practitioners within it. As described by art therapist Pat Allen, in order to gain legitimacy and respect within a scientifically oriented culture, the field moved towards “clinification” (Allen, 1992, p. 22). Rather than continuing to focus the therapeutic work on the studio and the art process, art therapists strove to fit art making into the frameworks of clinical psychology and psychotherapy. Whereas studio art therapy would more likely be done communally with a group of people within the studio setting, clinical art therapy would more likely be done one-on-one with a therapist in an office. These sessions would be for a shorter amount of time, often the widely accepted 50 minute therapy session, while the studio sessions would often last hours in order to allow the participants enough time to immerse in the creative process (Malchiodi 1995).

Leaders in the field of AT such as Catherine Moon, Bruce Moon, and Pat Allen reiterated the power of the studio model and described it in great detail while working extensively within
this model. Pat Allen developed a particularly powerful and popular form of studio art therapy, that of the Open Studio (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020). Core aspects of the Open Studio included a studio space in which the participants had complete freedom to create whatever they wanted within the confines of the materials offered. The facilitator often made art alongside the participants, as less focus was placed on the hierarchical nature of client and therapist roles. By making art themselves facilitators acted as a model for the other participants, and added to the communal atmosphere of creativity. Thus the therapist emphasized a spirit of fellow artists collaborating when working with participants. The setting was often communally oriented, and individuals could use the group to meet their needs in varieties of ways, whether interacting more actively or just passively working in silence amongst each other.

Allen often incorporated different practices to direct the non interpretive and non judgemental witnessing of individuals’ artwork by the group. In fine art classes the exhibiting of art work often entailed a formal critique. In a clinical setting, feedback on artwork might have focused on an analysis and or assesment. Conversely within the Open Studio the group could spend time witnessing an individual’s art work while the individual recited a line of writing they did in response to their art piece. The other participants might have also made their own artistic responses to the person’s piece in order to further the witnessing process (Bram, 2016). Again this model could be taken directly into an ExAT context in order to nurture the unique capacities of all the different art forms. All of these aspects of the Open Studio make for a supportive and fertile atmosphere when applied to music making and intermodal exchange in general.

Variations amongst SAT models as well as Open Studio models included different roles the facilitator might take on while creating the holding space/psychological container for fostering safety and trust amongst the participants, which are co-requirements for therapeutic work. Other defining characteristics of the Open Studio model include the ways in which the group exhibited the art work, the nature of the group (whether the participants changed or were a specific and defined group, the length of time in each session and the duration of the group),
and different theoretical orientations (was the group more focused on the product or on process?) (Moon, 2002). Studio art therapy models were used in a multitude of settings, including hospitals, religious centers, homeless shelters, all types of social service centers, schools and universities, museums, galleries, and community organizations. (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020). The community based art studio movement was closely connected to the art therapy field and studio movement, and there were many different types of community based art studios as well as community based art therapy studios (Allen, 2008).

Across these variations of art and AT studios there were many commonalities, and while the focus on visual art making predominated, many did incorporate music and other art forms within their offerings. As noted by Knill, the crystallization process of moving a creative impulse from one modality to another can greatly deepen and augment the insights gained from the creative process as a whole (Levine & Levine, 1999, p. 47). While some connect more readily with visual arts, many others connect with music, dance, writing, or drama. Each modality also offers its own set of unique potentials, and all of these modalities are worked with in ExAT. This thesis’s method attempted to explore the incorporation of music into the studio art therapy model at a school, in hopes of moving towards ExAT classes in schools.

**Method**

**General Question and Development**

There were two primary research questions for this thesis. First, how did the art therapy studio model relate to my internship site’s art classroom as well as to ExAT in general? Second, how could my internship setting serve as an ExAT studio? The three interventions I used focused on hypothesizing what an ExAT studio would entail and then seeing how this shift from the AT studio to an ExAT studio impacted the students and the atmosphere of the school. While another ExAT intern and I did offer a few other modalities under the ExAT umbrella to the students, the primary intermodal exchange was between visual art and music.
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The first intervention centered around me playing an acoustic guitar during art classes. A few hand drums were available within the classroom, and occasionally a student or teacher would take a break from art making and join me on the drums. One student who joined the class towards the end of the year was a capable guitar player, and he would often join me or lead his own music making. Another student who was eager to learn the guitar also joined me on his own guitar and ukulele a number of times, and I occasionally gave him lessons during our art classes.

The second intervention took place within the context of the “clinical groups” that met twice a week at the therapeutic high school. These groups functioned as a group therapy session within a class period of the school day in which a mental health clinician served as the session’s facilitator. Another ExAT intern and I alternated running an ExAT group twice a week with a group of seniors who were preparing to transition out of the school the following year. My groups were typically focused around mural drawing and drumming and singing. As many of the students were also in our art classes, these ExAT groups as well as the music group described in the following paragraph felt directly connected to the school’s art program.

The third intervention also took place within the “clinical groups” but was an entirely music and music therapy (MT) focused group. While a different group of students composed this group, there still were many from our art classes, as well as a few from the original ExAT group. This group also offered nourishing crossovers between the different art forms and their therapeutic possibilities. This kind of free flowing interchange between the different art forms, from visual art to music and back again, within a school setting created a dynamic atmosphere of creative nourishment and community connection. The ways in which the students reacted to these ExAT and MT exercises often carried directly over into our AT classroom. As a result these groups offered great insight into the potentials of incorporating ExAT into the art classroom.

Setting and Population
The setting for these interventions was a therapeutic high school that served a rather large area of New England, yet had very few students, less than 50. The students came from a number of different public school systems, and they were typically not from the same town. If a public school system felt they could not meet the social emotional needs of a particular student, they would advise the student to apply to alternative schools that offered more support. If the student’s unique needs seemed to fit this particular therapeutic school’s offerings, the student would apply and the school’s head social worker would assess whether or not the student seemed like a good fit. In the past the school served students with more severe behavioral struggles. Yet at the time of this study, the school served students that were struggling socially or emotionally but were amenable to therapy and eager to engage with an alternative school setting in a positive way. Most of the students were dealing with depression or anxiety or ASD, rather than aggressive behavior or violent tendencies, etc.

The school followed a trauma-informed model of care and education, and a number of mental health clinicians were on staff. The teachers all practiced trauma-informed care and did their best to meet the unique needs of their students, sometimes well outside of what I understand the norms for high school education to be. Each student was assigned to a clinician whom they met with for at least 40 minutes each week (one class period). Each student also participated in a "clinical group" which served as a 40 minute group therapy session run by a clinician twice a week with approximately seven students per group. Each clinical group ran for two and a half months before switching participants and topics.

The overall atmosphere of the school was crucially important to the positive ways in which the interventions unfolded. The classes were typically less than five students, and five of the fifteen staff members were mental health clinicians. Most of the students were acutely aware of how unique the school was as most transferred from large public schools. The art class was run by two art therapists (ATRs), one of which was my supervisor. We rarely did actual art therapy projects directed towards students’ trauma or struggles per se. Yet the way in which the
the trauma-informed and therapeutically minded school contributed to the holding container for
the work made the general art classroom and art making resemble art therapy. Furthermore the
way the students interacted with each other and supported each other was different than I’ve
witnessed in most other schools and remember from my own high school experience. Rather
than ostracizing or criticizing each other over their exhibited difficulties, the students seemed
much more accepting of each other’s struggles and supportive. The camaraderie was strong
amongst the students from being in this healing milieu together. The term “therapeutic redo” was
so commonly said by students for all sorts of situations, somewhat jokingly but also sincerely.
This atmosphere made it natural for our groups to move from art class into a clinical music
group without losing the sense of support and confidentiality. Many other necessary guidelines
for a therapeutic art or music group that would need to be explicitly stated and modeled for
another group were already instilled in these groups. This was extremely helpful.

When I wasn’t working with clinical groups, I spent the majority of my time assisting in
the school’s art classroom, which was run by my supervisor, both a Licensed Mental Health
Counselor (LMHC) and a Registered Art Therapist (ATR). Another ExAT intern from Lesley
University also worked in the art room. While the art classroom was a vibrant and lively creative
space nurtured by both teachers and clinicians, the school had no music classroom and
essentially no music program. There was a two month long music elective activity that ran
previously but had not run in a year. As a result, it seemed like a natural addition to the art
classroom for me to incorporate a little bit of music. As a guitar player and singer, I often played
background music in different settings and did so at my previous internship at an assisted living
home for the elderly. My supervisor, the LMHC and ATR, loved music and wanted more in the
classroom but felt she didn’t have any musical talent or experience herself. She was eager and
supportive of me playing in the classroom. About once every other week I played the guitar
during art classes and a few students and or staff would join me on a djembe or hand drum.
These music sessions within the art classes continued throughout the year and served as the first intervention. They provided the most direct example of what an ExAT studio could be like.

During November, December, and January another ExAT intern and I ran one of the clinical groups with the assistance of our supervisor. Starting this group was the other intern’s idea, and this group served as the second intervention. It was composed of eight senior students who were preparing to graduate from the school that year. They were called the “transitions” group. As ExAT interns, it seemed natural for the other intern and I to run an ExAT group for these students and they informally agreed in another class that they would enjoy this. The students filled out a questionnaire ranking their interests and music scored highly. After a few sessions engaging in some other ExAT forms, the group expressed the most interest in our drumming and music sessions. As a result, the group focused entirely on drumming and music with mural drawing/art making for the final month of the group.

The third intervention was born out of this group. The interest in music within the group was so great that we decided to base the next clinical group entirely around music and allow any students who were interested to join. The other ExAT intern, who was less connected to music, ran a different group and the clinical director, a social worker (LICSW), ran this group with me. She led on Tuesdays and I led on Thursdays. The group ran from January through the end of the school year. This study only includes sessions from mid January through March.

**Intervention 1**

**Participants.** About 70% of the school’s student body attended an art class every day. These students were split up into different classes somewhat randomly based on scheduling needs and availability. Some of the art classes would have eight students, some would have only one or two students. I played music for most of these classes, so a majority of the students that had art class were present while I was playing guitar. About six of the students joined me either through vocals, a guitar or ukulele, or with hand drums. Two of the other staff members occasionally joined as well, primarily on the hand drums.
Materials and Set Up. My supervisor had a set of bongo drums that lived in the art classroom for years (but was rarely played, as reported by the supervisor). As a graduate of Lesley’s Master in Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program (Art Therapy), the supervisor enjoyed drumming in classes such as Principles and Practices of ExAT, and the bongos had somehow made it into her art room over the years. Meanwhile the school’s history teacher, who was a musician and ran the music elective the year prior, had a ukelele as well as a drum pad and drum sticks, bamboo drum sticks, and wire brushes (all used for drumming) in his classroom next door. He kindly and happily offered them to us when he realized music was being made in the art room. Finally I brought my clunker acoustic nylon string guitar, which I like but typically use when I think the guitar might get beat up by the situation I am playing in.

Activity. Occasionally the art teacher, who was also a clinician and my supervisor, would ask if I would play some music to the class once the students’ initial chattiness subsided. There was often a striking shift from the initial hubbub the students created upon their arrival in the classroom to the silence that prevailed once the students were immersed in their own individual art making processes. The shift in the atmosphere of the room was often so palpable, from a collective boisterous chaotic rough housing of sorts into a complete silence with everyone in their own personal creative worlds, with no sounds except those of the art materials being used. This silence always felt potent to me and somewhat special. As a result I would try to play music that really harmonized with the atmosphere and was quite deliberate, not just some mindless or self absorbed noodling (which I might often do while playing on my own). I would typically play what I felt were soothing chords and melodies, no vocals, all on the acoustic nylon string guitar. The songs were typically played with a combination of finger picking and strumming that started more quietly and climaxed at some point before quieting down again. The songs/chord progressions/improvisations in whatever key were usually about 3-8 minutes long. This would typically last for the final 15-30 minutes of the 40 minute class. If a student seemed interested or wasn’t continuing with their own art work I would ask them to join on the djembe or they would
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do so without being prompted. Everyone who joined played along quite nicely, never played too
aggressively or loud or disruptively. Sometimes the supervisor would join quietly on the djembe
as well. One student in a smaller class enjoyed telling made up stories/rapping while I played.

**Recording of data.** I recorded the data in my journal and in my memory. The journal
was kept safe away from other students and to the best of my knowledge was never looked at
by anyone else. I had the consent of the students to take clinical notes through the paperwork
they filled out when enrolling at the school. I tried to remain very aware of what students and
staff verbalized the day before, during, and the day after music sessions. I also tried to be aware
of my own feelings and senses of what was happening, and how the students and staff were
responding, whether it was in their body language, their art making, their accompaniment of the
music, their side conversations, or my perception of their level of focus.

**Intervention 2**

**Participants.** There were eight senior students in the first ExAT clinical group that I
co-ran. These students were together in another group for the entire school year prior to our
group’s start in November ‘20. It was called the “transitions” group as they were preparing to
transition out of high school and into whatever their next step would be. Half of these students
were also in our art classes, and we often would have art class with them either directly before
or after the clinical group. This created a very helpful continuity and supportive atmosphere
which was fostered within the art classroom and reinforced in the group. These students were
the school’s most engaged and most amenable to following teachers’ instructions. As a result
we felt this group would be the best suited for an ExAT group, whereas some of the groups,
particularly of younger students, might be averse to engaging with ExAT exercises based on
their avoidance of art making in our art classes.

**Materials and Set Up. Music Supplies.** 1 Djembe drum, 1 set of bongo drums, 1 pair of
tabla drums, 1 drum pad, 3 sets of drum sticks (sticks, bamboo, and wire brushes), 1 metal
bowl, 2 plastic buckets, 6 paint brushes (used as drum sticks), 4 shakers/egg/maraca like instruments

**Art Supplies.** Large sheets of black paper from a 4’ roll, 3 containers of oil pastels, 3 containers of chalk pastels, markers

**Set Up.** The room was rather small and covered with gymnastics mats as it also served as the school occupational therapy (OT) room. The students typically sat in a circle so I laid out some of the drums in front of certain seats and left some of the drums in the middle of the circle for the students to pick and choose from. I rolled out a 10’ piece of the mural paper onto the ground in the middle of the room. The room was small enough that the paper was only an arms length away from each student’s seat on the ground.

**Activity version 1. Opening.** While sitting in a circle the group opened with the “glow and glum” exercise in which each participant told the group something that they were happy about, their “glow”, and something they were struggling with, their “glum”. After speaking the participant did a quick drum beat on their instrument and the rest of the group echoed that drum beat back. Afterwards the facilitator (me) described some of the benefits of therapeutic drumming, such as stress management, rhythmic self expression, attunement, embodied connection, and communal connection/communication.

**Activity.** The facilitator (me) started a simple drum beat, then the person seated to the facilitator’s left added onto that drum beat. Then the next person seated to the left added another bit to the beat, and so on until every person was drumming together. After the group drummed together for 5 minutes or so, whenever it felt like the group could use a boost, the facilitator invited the members of the group to play more loudly. After exploring this for a minute or two, the facilitator invited everyone to play as quietly as they could while still maintaining a beat. After bringing the group back to a medium volume of drumming, the facilitator invited the group to drum in as playful a way as possible, maybe hitting the drum with different body parts, hitting the walls and floor to make a drumming sound, drumming on thighs or bellies, etc.
As explained during the activities introduction, the facilitator then invited half the group to start drawing on the large piece of paper in the center of the room while the other half of the group continued to drum. The prompt given to guide the drawing was for the participants to draw from their bodies and with the drum beat, like they were dancing but with the art materials on the paper. They were also invited to “dance” with other participants' artwork by adding their own drawing onto others’ if they were interested in doing so. After about seven minutes of one group drawing, the groups switched and the drummers started making art and the drawers returned to drumming. The facilitator continued drumming throughout the activity and through the switch. After about seven more minutes of drawing and drumming, the facilitator called for the drummers to slowly quiet down to a halt.

**Closing.** The group took three grounding breaths together, then closed with each person offering in a sequence a word or a gesture or sound based on how they were feeling. The group mirrored this back to them.

**Version 2.** Opening and initial drumming exercises were the same. Additional listening and drumming instructions were given- participants were invited to explore what it was like drumming and listening with their eyes closed, and were invited to try listening from their bodies and their guts. Participants were invited to “play from your gut (or body) and not your head (or mind)”. Another instruction was given, that of “feel what it is like when you are really trying to sync up with the group versus when you are more focused on your own drum beat and less focused on the group”.

The mural drawing was offered to anyone who wanted to do it at any point during the drumming rather than splitting the group into halves with one drumming and one drawing.

**Version 3.** Opening and initial drumming exercises were the same. Additional instructions were given in the drumming exercise for each participant to focus on another person in the room and try to play with following/mirroring and leading the other person, as though the two were doing a mirroring exercise while the larger group continued to drum. The
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instruction to “have a quick conversation with your partner” was given. Participants were also invited to try and lead the group into new rhythms if they felt called to do so. They were instructed to notice what developed out of these shifts and how people responded to them. They were also invited to notice how they felt trying to start something different, and how the others responded to that versus trying to add on to what was already happening. They could explore how the group leadership dynamics unfolded within the drumming, and could take the opportunity to see their own tendencies within group dynamics. They could use the session to explore different ways of interacting within groups than they were used to.

These themes were carried into the drawing exercise. Whoever chose to draw was invited to see what it felt like to interact with another person’s drawing, and to play around with who led whom. After the drumming and drawing were brought to a stop, the group discussed what all these different exercises and prompts felt like for them. Same closing was used.

Recording of data. Same as in Intervention 1 and 3. See Intervention 1 for description.

Intervention 3

Participants. The third intervention was used for another clinical group named the “music clinical group”. Every student filled out a preference sheet to rank different group possibilities such as a mindful movement group, a talk therapy group, and a music group. Based on this polling, eight students who all expressed interest and/or a background in music were assigned to the music clinical group. I led this group on Thursdays and a social worker with a background in singing led the group on Tuesdays. The eight students were varied in age and grade, and two of the students were also in the previous ExAT group. Two of the students were practicing pianists and three were singers. The other three had no formal musical training but enjoyed music. All but one of these students were also in our art classes, and a few of them had art either directly before or after the music group. As a result, the group functioned somewhat like a continuation of the art classroom.
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Materials and Set Up. **Percussion Instruments.** 1 Djembe drum, 1 set of bongo drums, 1 pair of tabla drums, 1 drum pad, 3 sets of drum sticks (sticks, bamboo, and wire brushes), 1 metal bowl, 2 plastic buckets, 6 paint brushes (used as drum sticks), 4 shakers/egg/maraca like instruments, 3 tambourines

**Other Instruments.** 1 nylon string acoustic guitar, 1 keyboard, 5 new harmonicas in different keys

**Set Up.** The room was rather small and covered with gymnastics mats as it also served as the school OT room. The students typically sat in a circle and I laid out some of the drums in front of certain seats and some of the drums were left in the middle for the students to pick and choose from. The guitar and keyboard were positioned next to or in front of the people who already knew how to play them.

**Activity.** I based the first few sessions of the music clinical group on the same drumming activities as in the ExAT group without the mural drawing. In addition to the "'glow and glum" intro, the other facilitator added an intro exercise of each student finding a song that was meaningful to them. Then at the beginning of each session one of the students would play the song for the group (on their phone) and then say something about why it was meaningful to them (if they wanted to).

**Drumming exercises.** Same as the first drumming activity in Intervention 2. See *Intervention 2- Activity* for description.

**Vocal exercises.** Some vocal exercises were added into the group sessions typically after starting with the drumming. Each person in the group was invited to make a sound, anything from a laugh to a dog bark, that related to how they were feeling. Then the facilitator would make their sound over and over in a rhythmic way, and the group followed the same pattern as with the drum activities. The person to the facilitator’s left added another sound and so on until the whole group was making sounds in rhythm together. Another activity similar to this was the “sonic bath” in which each person continually sang a certain pitch or tone and the
whole group joined together each person singing different tones to compliment or add tension to the group sound.

After four sessions of progressively more complicated drumming and vocal exercises, we started adding guitar and piano into our circle drum progressions. Whereas before when the facilitator started the drum beat and then each student added something in succession, now the facilitator added a C F G chord progression strummed on the guitar in rhythm with the group’s drumming. Then the student with a piano background started also playing a C F G chord progression on the piano. Similar invitations from the original drumming exercises were made as the group got louder and quieter, and then as playful/creative as possible. The people playing the instruments also explored different chord progressions and improvisations together.

After a few sessions of the group becoming more comfortable drumming and playing instruments together, we added the vocalizing activities on top of the music. Finally the students chose songs they liked and we would play them together with guitar, piano, and hand drums while two of the students sang the lyrics.

**Recording of data.** Same as in Intervention 1 and 2. See Intervention 1 for description.

**Results**

**Method 1**

The music playing within the art class was well received. No students objected, except for one student in one extenuating circumstance. Most of the students were not shy in expressing their disapproval of what went on in the art room, so if they were actually opposed to the music I think the majority of them would have been happy to say so. In one instance two of the students put their headphones on once I started playing. In about 75% of the music sessions I played alone, and in 25% someone joined in while I was playing. This was a better percentage than I was expecting. I really hoped people would join in, at least if they were going to add in an engaged/non disruptive way. And every time someone joined it was always a positive experience. There were six students who joined, and one staff member, my supervisor.
Three of them joined on the drums, two on their own guitars and or ukelele, and three with vocals. The majority of these were unplanned and spontaneous. I would make sure to have one of the hand drums next to me while playing and if a student looked interested I would ask them to join me. Sometimes they would just join without being prompted, which is what happened when my supervisor joined. Two of the drummers both went back and forth between saying they were bad drummers, to drumming along with the guitar quite competently, to putting it down after a song or two and saying they were bad at it. I would try to continually tell them how great they were doing, which was true, but their self defeating defense mechanisms continued regardless.

During the first few sessions some very positive comments were made, mostly by staff and some by students. The dean of students once joined the room for a few minutes and said how much he loved hearing the music down the hall in his office, and that he felt there was almost a “mystical vibe” in the air. This was during one of the earlier sessions when the music was new and one of the students was drumming particularly passionately and in sync with the guitar playing. Meanwhile the rest of the class was doing large abstract paintings. During the session before this, the supervisor as well as another clinician, also an ATR, said how wonderful the atmosphere was and that “this is what it should be like!” referring to the overall atmosphere in the room. It seemed as though the more I played the more people became accustomed to me playing alone, and the less others joined, which was a little bit disappointing. One of the students who played guitar and joined the school later in the year continually asked to play with me, and this reinvigorated the music making in the art classroom.

During an abnormal day before winter vacation, in which no classes occurred, I played the guitar off and on for numerous periods. After a long time playing I heard one student, who was often notably sensitive to noises, and also generally confrontational and irritable exclaim “can you just stop!?” in a slightly joking but deliberate tone. I immediately did, and one of the other students retorted “Why? He’s actually really good at it.” She responded, “just stop”. I said
something like, “yes sure, of course, sorry.” I felt like she was perhaps a little bit overstimulated from the school atmosphere in general and wanted to have the room be as actionless as possible. I also think I was slightly relieved to stop playing at that time, as I don’t always know how long to play, how much to push myself, etc. At another point the student who reacted to the student’s objection of my playing said to me, “you’re really good at guitar, Mike.” We had somewhat of a disconnected relationship, so I was happy that he seemed to both appreciate the music and want to connect with me over it.

One student who was quite difficult to engage in art was immediately drawn to the guitar, and we had a number of nice sessions together. This felt like a great breakthrough as he was completely opposed to many of the art projects we tried to engage him with. His interest in the music making was varied, sometimes he was excited to play and other times he was dismissive of it. We ended up playing together approximately once a month.

One wonderful breakthrough occurred with a student on the autism spectrum, who almost always refused to engage in any art making. He would often go on verbal monologues about random subjects, per his ASD. Yet one class while I was playing the guitar he said, “this sounds like some kind of a country story,” and then proceeded to rap/do a version of spoken word poetry or story telling with a southern accent over the music I was playing. He did this for around seven minutes, while I and the other classmates encouraged him. He told an interesting story about finding his home in the countryside, and his speaking was very immersed in and in tune with the song. Afterwards, as we all were, he seemed surprised by himself and that he could turn his usual ranting into a piece of art. This was extremely exciting and his demeanor changed after this session quite noticeably. He had much less of a class clown demeanor and became more of an earnest interlocutor when I continued talking to him.

Unfortunately, the next time I tried to engage him with the music making he wasn’t interested. Regardless he did always seem to love talking about the music he was currently interested in when I asked him about it. I think in order for him to continue with this sort of
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creative work he would need to have a more secure environment, i.e. an individual therapy session without his classmates witnessing him and with a trusted therapist. We had never worked together one on one, but I had glimpses of his relationship to his primary therapist, my supervisor. I could imagine if I had developed a strong therapeutic relationship with him, and he felt comfortable and in charge of the direction of the work, like when and how we did it, then he might have been willing to continue.

Method 2

My consistent sense of the ExAT group was that the students enjoyed and appreciated the sessions. I led probably seven sessions during the months of November and December ‘20 and January ‘21. One of the early sessions was over zoom due to a covid exposure at the school and was entirely verbal. Another one of the earlier sessions was focused on meditation, walking in nature, and creating a group sculpture out of natural elements that we related to our personal values. The first group that involved music was all drumming, and the final four were intermodal between drumming and visual arts as described in the method section. After the first few drumming sessions (some of which were led by my co-leader during the Tuesday group), the group requested that we only focus on music and drumming as opposed to some of the other possible ExAT activities that we originally discussed as possibilities, such as mindful movement, photography, dance, etc.

Key Observations within sessions. The students always seemed very willing to express a “glow and a glum”, which I wasn’t anticipating. They also all seemed to enjoy giving a beat afterwards to be mirrored by the group. Once the drumming began the students were generally focused and seemingly immersed in the music making. Some students would be more engaged with their bodies, either swaying along with the beat or really striking the drums with their whole body behind it. Some would look less sure of themselves, and perhaps only add a very small sound to the group or look generally tense in their bodies. One of the students with a music background would have his body in such a relaxed lounging position as though he were
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about to fall asleep, but would simultaneously be the loudest and most supportive drummer to my initial rhythm (I typically started the beat). This was very common for this student, as he had a condition where he would typically sleep upwards of half the school day while in classes, fading in and out repeatedly.

Students who were often averse to drawing in art class seemed to naturally and happily start drawing when they were prompted to during the drumming. This was very heartening for me to see. While the instructions were to draw with the rhythm as though one was dancing, probably 75% of the students drew a variety of more literal drawings. These drawings included animals, flowers, foods, an underwater scene filled with fish, landscapes, and all sorts of abstract designs. A few of these were collaborative, with different students adding fish to the same grouping and a few of the abstractions interacting with each other.

During the closing one student put her hands up in a stopping position and said “done”. As the group mirrored her she said “yes, I’m done”. I felt the tone was one of her having enjoyed the session but that she was tired and ready to move on. Some of the other one word or gesture expressions from students during the closing were “relaxed”, “calm”, “hungry”, “tired”, “happy”, “loud”, “energized,” “annoyed,” and so on. They were generally 75% positive 25% sort of neutral or somewhat negative.

In one early session a student who was not typically within the group joined us. She was a student with one of the most severe diagnoses in the school, and was often quite resistant to partaking in a group. While at first she seemed very excited and engaged by the drumming, when we got to the prompt to play as loud as possible she stopped drumming and covered her ears. After we slowed down she said she had a headache and needed to leave the group. Unfortunately, despite telling her we wouldn’t play loudly again and that maybe we could work through her overwhelmed feelings together, she opted for a walk and left the group. This was a very common occurrence for her and often in art classes she would become agitated and leave the class as well. These walks usually did seem to help her reground. This intervention wasn’t
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ideal for students like this one, with extremely variable moods, nor students that were very sensorily sensitive, like people with ASD.

During its final session the students expressed a lot of appreciation for the group. Many of them gave enthusiastic expressions of gratitude to me for having been a part of the group and for bringing in some of my own personal drums. I was very grateful for the nourishing time we had spent together and all the creativity and positivity that the students had offered.

Method 3

While the ExAT group was generally enjoyed or at least pleasantly tolerated by the students, the music group seemed to be actually looked forward to by the students. Whereas the ExAT group was for a group of senior students who hadn’t specifically requested an ExAT group, the music group’s students had specifically requested it. I think because it was specifically music and had a clearer curriculum described to the students, they felt like they were part of something special, whereas the ExAT group felt a little bit more random. For example, the students in the music group knew in the early sessions that they were working on becoming more comfortable with drumming so that we could add other instruments and then play formal songs together. The ExAT group never had that end goal of playing songs, it was more in the “low skill-high sensitivity” realm (Fuchs-Knill & Knill, 2015, p. 33). After the music clinical group started playing songs together, some of the students who were also in art class together would figure out which songs they wanted to play while together in art class. They would brainstorm which song they wanted to play and then practice together while in art class. They would go back and forth between their art making and their music making. This furthered the sense of intermodal exchange and an intermodal atmosphere within the art room as well as the school in general.

Observations in the group. In general the students were focused and engaged in the group and occasionally made some wonderful music. Everyone except for one student naturally joined with the drumming. When prompted to improvise further with the drum beats some
interesting developments organically occurred, and the students were receptive to allowing these shifts to occur while moving and growing with them. I particularly remember prompting the students to “be as playful as possible” during their drumming. The entire group ultimately started clapping and using their bodies as drums with some interesting and complex rhythms that were never used before.

The vocal exercises were also well received. The group readily made all sorts of noises including screams, dog barks, hysterical laughter, chirping, crowing, etc. and wove them together into a collective sound. The vocal exercises that were more focused on harmonizing together were also well received. Students responded to the closing exercise in a range of ways. Some of the one word responses were “tired, excited, annoyed, silly, alive, happy, hungry, and ready.”

**Observations outside of the group.** Students would often seemingly excitedly ask me when I would run into them in the hall if I was “ready for music group.” When asked by another teacher how the music group was, an older student said, “it was great.” While the student did know I was listening and could have been pandering to me, she did seem to speak sincerely and also seemed to enjoy the group meeting which was earlier that day. These positive responses signaled to me that the group was being enjoyed by these students. I felt like nurturing the students’ connection to the arts was extremely important, and these positive responses were a good sign that this was happening. If these groups could instill or further a love of the arts for the students that would carry into the future, I felt this would have lasting healing power for them. Another student who was a particularly aggressive drummer (I had to ask him to drum more gently numerous times) said the group was “loud” and then shrugged his shoulders and continued walking when another teacher asked him how the group had been.

The students were again very receptive towards the “glow and glum” and drum beat exercise, as well as the song sharing exercise. One student shared a recorded song that her mother, who was a professional musician, used to sing to her when she was going to sleep. The
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students gave a powerful description of the song’s meaning to her and how this song soothed her when she was enduring difficult times.

Discussion

Co-facilitation and Supervision

The staff support I received within the school was important to the success of these interventions. For the music making in the art class my supervisor was almost always present. If I were playing music, she was overseeing the entire class and taking care of the vast majority of the students’ needs. Whether they had questions or needed help or needed to be redirected, she attended to it. I typically only played once the students were immersed in their art making, which decreased the need for staff involvement with the students. Having the supervisor overseeing and tending to any needs or conflicts that arose was extremely helpful. It made it feel as though I could focus almost entirely on making music that harmonized with the class. If I were alone, I would need to be much less absorbed by the music making and much more ready to jump in and intervene if the students started misbehaving or became distressed.

As for the ExAT group again my supervisor was typically in the room with the group. While this was helpful, I was alone for probably three out of nine of these sessions and I did appreciate feeling a little bit freer and more intimate with the students in those sessions. However, particularly when the group was larger (one was ten students), it really helped to have the supervisor there for disciplinary support. The students were less likely to misbehave when she was there. If they did misbehave she would do the majority of the redirecting and refocusing for the students. She might tell a student they would need to go to the “support center”, an open room next to the dean of students office, if they continued to misbehave. Or she would just kindly but authoritatively tell the students they needed to re engage with the group in a positive way. This could be extremely helpful, especially as dangerous situations did seldomly but definitively arise in the school when students got into fights with each other or self harmed. Apart from disciplinary support, she also brought her wealth of knowledge and expertise in
working with adolescents in the arts, and while she wasn’t leading the group this was still an
invaluable support to have in the room.

In the music group, the head clinician at the school, a LCSW, was typically with me and
she facilitated the group on Tuesdays when I wasn’t at the school. Similarly this was extremely
helpful much of the time, yet I did feel freer and perhaps closer to the students and the group
process when she wasn’t there. In both of these groups I felt like the staff support occasionally
interrupted me or made a comment I felt was unwise, but generally they were very supportive
and helpful, and I really appreciated having them there.

**Students’ Responses**

For a number of the students the addition of music seemed to snap them out of a lull or
boredom that accompanied their expectations of art class or clinical group. This was particularly
evident when these interventions were first introduced, yet this effect continued even after
student’s became accustomed to the music offerings. I witnessed six students who typically
refused to make art within our art classes, and were continually begged by art staff to try
something, fully engage in music making. One student who refused to make art saying “it was a
waste of time, and the [class] room had too low energy,” happily drummed for a few minutes
while I played guitar. Another similar student, who month after month refused to make any art
rapped passionately for 5 minutes in art class while I played the guitar. Many of the other
students who were much more disruptive or disengaged in the art classroom or in the school in
general were surprisingly focused and supportive while in the music clinical group. I think the
music group, because it was more of a special, limited time offering, with some interesting
instruments, made the students more focused than they typically would be. The music also
acted as a means for establishing verbal communication with students. Some students who
were typically less interested in conversing with me did open up verbally after we played music
together.

**Identity**
I felt a palpable shift amongst both the staff members, the students, and my own feeling in the school once I started playing music there. The shift was from feeling like I was generally overlooked and seen as unimportant or irrelevant, to feeling like I was somewhat special and talented. A number of the teachers seemed particularly excited about the clinical music group as that had never been done before. It felt like there was a little bit of a buzz around the group. As we were pooling together different instruments and talking about what the group would entail, I felt this air of the students and teachers thinking I knew something special that they didn’t. I was given more respect because of that, and I never felt that in the school before. I think they generally thought I was a little bit more experienced than I actually was or at least felt.

Part of the aura I was given came from me bringing in my own drums for the classes. My supervisor told this to the students and thanked me for it numerous times. I brought the djembe, a west african drum, and the tablas, a set of indian drums, all of which made wonderful sounds and looked intriguing or maybe somewhat exotic, and they were not from my own culture. I think this air of specialness may have helped get the students to focus on the music instead of dismissing it in the way that adolescents can easily do with anything. Yet I think this specialness could easily be used to unknowingly or knowingly harm others. It could misguide the trajectory of the interventions, or could be disrespectful or appropriative of other cultures. As an educated white male in a school with an entirely white staff and a somewhat diverse student body, all of the different aspects of my identity were deeply interwoven with the authority and freedom I was offered within the school. I was a white male often leading groups with the assistance of a powerful African drum, and I never discussed this dynamic with the students or staff. Also the type of guitar music I typically played was laden with cultural significance. The kind of music I was playing with an acoustic nylon string guitar was slightly classical sounding, slightly jazzy sounding, but primarily acoustic folk rock. If I were playing heavy metal songs or all rap songs and had a different identity, I wonder how the teachers and students may have responded to what I was doing.
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Further research/next steps

For furthering this work, I think it could be very beneficial to have a class that was regarded as ExAT class. As the school where I interned did not have a music program, I think one class room that was considered the expressive arts room could be a wonderful addition. Even if the school did have a more defined music program, I think the idea of combining art and music in one room could be very positive. I don’t think it would work to have a formal music class in the way I remember music class being when I was in high school, with a large band or chorus of singers preparing a group of pieces for a recital or other performance. If it were more casual and focused on free expression with music, I think it would be wonderful to have more access to instruments and music making in an art classroom. The class could have the atmosphere of the students being able to choose to make art or some sort of music and they could switch back and forth. Perhaps if there were one teacher supervising the music, as I was in this classroom, so that it wasn’t disruptive to the art making it could work well.

I think the model of an ExAT room/class period in schools, focused primarily on music and art, (poetry and writing could easily be included, as could dance/movement therapy, but I think drama therapy might be more difficult), could make students more likely to engage and see the arts as a dynamic means for their own authentic self expression, however it was presenting in the moment. Rather than being forced into one form of expression that they might or might not be interested in on any given day, the students could develop a more inclusive and lively relationship with all of the different modes of creative expression. Similarly I think having community based ExAT studios would be a wonderful addition to any community or art therapy studio as well.

Arts-Based Research Into My Thesis Process; Personal Art Making

Throughout the thesis process I continually relied on my own arts-based research (ABR) to manage my stress, enrich my understanding of what I was researching, and gain insight into what direction I wanted the work to move. Before and during most of my writing sessions, as
well as research sessions, I would engage in 2-10 minutes of dancing/moving. During a dance session, as I tuned into my body and then brought to mind the thesis project, I would allow my body to move in whatever way it wanted. Often I would sweep my arms around as though I were clearing away all the confusion and extra mental junk that had accumulated. I sometimes curled up into a ball on the ground and then tried to break out and moved into some larger gesturing up towards the sky. Or sometimes I just rocked and swayed and gently moved around the room with a calming dance. Regardless of what the movements were, they consistently brought me from a state of confusion into some clarity of what I needed to do to further the project, take care of myself, and understand what I really wanted out of the work. This was an invaluable practice. I also had a few longer sessions of ABR, some including the guitar and 2d art making in order to figure out what I wanted to do in the earlier stages of the project.

**Conclusion**

After looking at the different aspects of my internship site’s art room and the ways in which it followed the SAT approach, I strove to turn this already nurturing and vibrant classroom into a slightly more ExAT oriented atmosphere by adding music. I began my literature review by focusing on the SAT approach as it pertained to the school’s art program and how this related to ExAT. I then looked into the history of AT and ExAT and the ways in which these fields used the arts as their primary methods and frameworks for healing. I developed three different interventions with the hopes of incorporating ExAT into the school’s offerings. First was the addition of live music making within the art classes. Second was an ExAT clinical group for a group of seniors. Third was an exclusively music therapy oriented clinical group. All these groups were with students who were also in our art classes; as a result, these three interventions helped add intermodal exchange as well as music in general into the students’ creative lives. The three interventions were well received and I observed benefits explicit as reported by students, and implicit in the ways I sensed the students internalized the work we were doing. The music brought added life to the art making and gave a number of disinterested
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and avoidant students a new means of expressing themselves that they were more amenable towards. The music seemed to both excite and soothe students and staff members, and added a nourishing and meaningful dynamic to the school’s typical offerings. These interventions point to the beginnings of what an ExAT classroom and program could be like in a school. This experience increased my confidence as a facilitator of music making and inspired me to continue working intermodally with students. Connecting with the students and the music, through the music, was very heartening for me. It revealed to me more of the unique powers that the arts hold.
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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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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.

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Ara Parker