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A Critical Approach to Resilience and the Need for Community:

Anti-Oppressive Music Therapy at a Homeless Shelter during COVID-19

A Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2021

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Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected death and infection rates of racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, immigrants and refugees, and those experiencing poverty, amplifying the racial, socio-economic, and systemic inequalities that already existed in the United States of America. People experiencing homelessness often do not have the privilege to shelter-in-place or work from home; the same goes for essential workers who must work in-person to provide social services. This community engagement project challenges the notion of individual resilience through the lens of critical race theory and a systems approach to oppression observed in an emergency homeless shelter serving mostly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The author examines how to uplift marginalized communities utilizing the tenets of Community Music Therapy and the principles of an anti-oppressive practice through the creation of a musical performance highlighting the talents of both children and staff of the homeless shelter. Lyric analysis and a charted documentation of challenges, strategies, and community responses to the showcase are discussed. Major themes that surfaced were the need for community to sustain a sense of resistance and resourcefulness instead of individualized resilience, the importance of community care in the infrastructure of an institution, the dangers of neoliberalism, and the act of fostering joy as means of resistance.

*Keywords: Anti-oppressive, Community Music Therapy, BIPOC, COVID-19, Resilience*
A Critical Approach to Resilience and the Need for Community:

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Introduction

The ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic forced humanity to rethink and redefine the concept of community engagement. Many spaces built to foster a sense of community such as libraries, schools, places of worship, neighborhood centers, club houses, sports arenas, museums, concert halls, coffee shops and pubs were required to close their doors, deflating human interaction to a single transaction or a Zoom link. These “third places” outside of the home and workplace where members of society gather to participate in civic engagement (Oldenburg, 1989) no longer remained safe spaces due to the great risk of contracting SARS-CoV-2, the invisible and highly infectious virus that causes COVID-19 (Lee et al., 2020). Virtual online meetings have become the new norm in lieu of in-person gatherings. As leaders and organizers across all populations obliged to search for alternative means and creative solutions of how to engage in community, the new normal of physical distancing, mandatory face covering, and social isolation currently has no end in sight.

COVID-19 also amplified the racial, socio-economic, and systemic inequalities that already existed within the fabric of society in the United States of America. Percentage rates of death from the virus are 2.3 times higher in the Hispanic and Latino populations and 2.1 times higher in the Black population compared to non-Hispanic white people (Lee et al., 2020). Long-standing socioeconomic inequities in the American health care system which influences life expectancy, underlying medical conditions, and access to medical care play a crucial role in risk for COVID-19 exposure, illness, and mortality (Hsu et al., 2020). Racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, immigrants and refugees, those experiencing poverty and homelessness, those who
are disabled, and those with certain chronic medical conditions are among the most vulnerable groups during this pandemic according to the National Institute of Health (Kuy et al., 2020). Essential workers and lower-wage earners show up to their jobs and continue to risk their health to serve those with the option to work from home. Students without access to a steady internet connection, computers, laptops, tablets, and have parents or guardians without the option of working from home risk failing out of school. While the federal government enacted a coronavirus relief bill that distributed several stimulus checks to most Americans who qualified, others are left out- particularly undocumented immigrants, refugees, some dependents, and those without a social security number or identification card (Hsu et al., 2020). Marginalized populations that rely heavily on their community resources to access basic needs suffered the most during the government-ordered lock-down.

At the same time that COVID-19 put the United States in a state of emergency, I was actively searching for a second year music therapy graduate internship. My experience as one of the only people of color in my graduate music therapy program and in most regional music therapy conferences opened my eyes to the vast racial and systemic inequalities that exist in my field of academia. A 2018 survey by the American Music Therapy Association showed that 88.4% of their members were white compared to Asian/Asian-American members that made up 4%, Latinx/Latinx-American members that made up 2.7%, and Black/African-American members consisting only 1.8% of the total population (American Music Therapy Association, 2018). After experiencing racial discrimination and micro-aggressions in predominantly white academic spaces, I intentionally pursued a field training site within mostly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) populations. Informed by the frameworks of community music therapy (Ansdell and Stige, 2016), anti-oppressive practices in music therapy (Baines, 2013), and
critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), I sought an internship with the hope of making a positive impact in my immediate community of historically marginalized people. I felt ready to transform my academic paradigms into cultural and clinical practice.

I joined the clinical services team at an emergency homeless shelter near my Boston neighborhood where most of the families and staff identify as Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, or bi-racial. Ecstatic to finally have an opportunity to convert my theories into practice with a familiar population, I jumped right into the in-person internship that boasted a commitment to social justice, equity, and systemic change for low-income mothers and their children on their website. I soon realized the devastation of COVID-19 to the shelter infrastructure which affected both staff and the families who lived there. Even though the emergency shelter stayed open as an essential business, only half of the staff worked on-site while the rest worked virtually. Technological complications made communication with shelter participants difficult as not everyone owned a computer or had stable internet. An array of COVID-19 outbreaks instigated fear and mistrust in the shelter’s ability to regulate safety and security. In the nine months I was there, one-third of the staff quit, leaving the rest overwhelmed with extra work and responsibilities they were not trained to handle. The lack of community cohesion and the accumulating stress sparked multiple conflicts between families and staff often without an opportunity to resolve tension. After a few months of experiencing frustration and disappointment from the effects of constant disruptive change, I questioned my motivations for choosing my internship site. The regular list of folks seeking therapeutic services was almost depleted leaving me with no consistent clients even though I recognized how useful mental health counseling could be in the setting. Nonetheless, I continued to show up and so did the staff who remained. Daily operations at the homeless shelter were challenging, unconventional,
and oftentimes chaotic, but we kept showing up. As a case manager graciously expressed to me after a particularly challenging day, “I need them, they need me, and we need each other to survive.”

This capstone thesis takes a critically conscious approach to exploring the meaning of resilience and community during the COVID-19 pandemic observed in an emergency homeless shelter where the intersections of race, class, socio-economic status, and cultural norms contribute to individual and collective processes of overcoming adversity. After listening to the needs of both participants and staff of the shelter, I opted to create a community engagement project investigating how the framework of an anti-oppressive practice could be utilized to uplift and empower the members of the shelter by promoting not only resilience, but resourcefulness and resistance. A review of literature discusses the framework of my political viewpoints, their connection to relevant theories of music therapy, the psychological effects of COVID-19, and concepts of resilience. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results, lessons learned, and implications for future practice.

**Literature Review**

**The Personal Is Political**

The phrase “the personal is political” stems from second-wave feminism starting in the 1960’s under the context of anti-war protests, civil rights movements, and the rise of self-consciousness in marginalized populations in the United States (Taylor, 2012, p. 9). An essay titled *The Personal Is Political* published in the anthology *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation* states that “there are no personal solutions at this time; there is only collective action for a collective solution” (Hanisch, 1970). It was a rebuttal to the patriarchal concept that a woman’s problems were individual incidences of failure with no connection to the systemic
inequalities in a male-dominated society. The Combahee River Collective, a Black socialist and feminist group based in Boston from 1974 to 1980, expanded the notion of “the personal is political” in their collective statement by voicing the exclusion of Black women by white women within the Women’s Liberation Movement (Taylor, 2012, p. 13). They asserted that feminist rhetoric must consider the intersectionality of race, class, and sexual orientation in order to fight for true equity because “no one before [had] ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women’s lives […] we realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us” (The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977).

Critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017) builds on the ideas of radical feminism by addressing the relationship between power structures, race, and oppression. Racism and all other “-isms” are not only individual experiences or an interpersonal prejudice; rather, oppression occurs systemically and institutionally. The framework of critical race theory “dares to look beyond the popular belief that getting rid of racism means simply getting rid of ignorance or encouraging everyone to get along” (Harris, 2017, p. xv) and instead challenges the structures of oppression and capitalism that allow racism to be normalized. A recent example of this occurred with the amplification of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020 which sparked a national and global protests against police brutality (Samayeen, Wong, and McCarthy, 2020). Protest signs and rallying cries to “Defund the Police” and to “Say Their Names” proved critical race theory’s growing collective consciousness that Floyd’s murder was not a singular, isolated incident but a result of an inherently racist policing system.

Understanding and developing political theories is foundational to achieving social change, but without practice, theory is just words. Kannen (2008) describes the possibility of an
anti-oppressive practice which attempts to combat, disrupt, subvert, and undo oppressive barriers of marginalized groups. Anti-oppressive practices are intersectional, based on egalitarian relationships, and centers the voices and needs of marginalized communities (Baines, 2011). Burke and Harrison (2003) add that anti-oppressive practices are flexible without losing focus, analyze the oppressive nature of organization culture, include continual reflection and evaluation, and utilize multidimensional strategies that incorporate concepts of networking, user involvement, collaboration, and participation. Power dynamics occurring in the dominant systems that govern our societies are challenged. The principles of an anti-oppressive practice influenced my decision to intern in a BIPOC-led setting. These are the practices that I wish to carry with me into my own frameworks of music therapy and mental health counseling.

**Relevant Music Therapy Frameworks**

Baines (2013) was one of the first published practitioners that adapted the language of anti-oppressive practices in social work and social justice movements into the context of music therapy practice. After a critical analysis of the three most popular music therapy methods at the time (activities music therapy, improvisation, and guided imagery and music), she discovered that historically, each of their models were rooted in Eurocentric philosophies of psychological theories from Western Europe or the United States; further, their music traditions were also rooted and encultured in Western European music definitions which “ultimately defined music therapy practice in a relatively narrow way” (Baines, 2013, p. 3). Fansler et al. (2019) acknowledged that music therapy as we know it is limited to “rigid roles and structures, including fixed teacher/learner identity categories, systematized hierarchies of knowledge and communication, cultural and musical gatekeeping practices, and standardized musical, clinical, and professional competencies” (p. 1). They challenge music therapy practitioners to move from
binary and hierarchical ways of practice into a more liminal space coined as the “borderlands” as a way to experience radically inclusive relationships (Fansler et al., 2019). This also means that an anti-oppressive music therapy practice does not look just one way which historically is based on Eurocentricity, heteronormativity, middle or high-class status, and femininity. Hadley (2013) ties these ideas together by suggesting that our personal identity affects our professional identity because social and cultural groups affect power dynamics, so therefore we must remain vigilant to work for a fully anti-oppressive practice against invisible dominant narratives. I understand this to mean that as a music therapist, I am also an activist for my client.

When I began writing this capstone thesis, I used the term “unhoused” instead of the term “homeless” to describe my clients because of the derogatory connotations and socialized assumptions of the latter. Word choices matter when their meaning and content comes from socially structured practices and historically situated circumstances that create our social lives (McConnell-Ginet, 2020). The socialized stigma against the unhoused population can be utterly dehumanizing. Phrases like “you look like a homeless person” persist in colloquial American English language, creating a harsh, oftentimes incorrect painting of a human being’s struggle. The term “unhoused” also implies that having a place to live is a basic human right and focuses on the systemic and societal factors that contributed to the situation instead of blaming a single person for their past actions and decisions. However, none of the staff or participants at my internship ever referred to themselves or the shelter as “unhoused.” I decided to change my wording to match my clients’ terminology. Though I believe that words have power, imposing my ideas onto a community without collaboration, participation, or consideration of the community members’ culture felt similar to colonialism. The negative social stigma surrounding homeless people is the problem, not the actual words “home” and “less.” Centering the voices of
a marginalized community and acknowledging their humanity includes taking a step back to recognize that academic theory and neo-liberal ideology, no matter how well-intentioned, still uphold structures of privilege and oppression.

Elements of an anti-oppressive music therapy practice appear in other music therapy frameworks that follow.

**Person-Centered Supportive Music Therapy**

A supportive music therapy practice uses music experiences to stimulate or support psychological adjustment or growth, relying largely on the client’s existing resources (Bruscia, 2013). Typical goals include building ego strength, lessening the psychological impact of negative events or situations, strengthening coping skills, acknowledging the use of client’s own resources, and improving the emotional quality of life (Bruscia, 2013). Music creates a container and a framework for achieving client goals, but because of the short length of therapy, music cannot be the primary vehicle for transformational change.

Inspired by the humanistic approaches of Carl Rogers (1959), a person-centered supportive music therapist should have an empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference while experiencing unconditional positive regard. The therapist does not aim to change who the client is, but rather uses musical experiences to “acknowledge and respect them… an almost aesthetic appreciation of the uniqueness and otherness of the client” (Grant, 1990, p. 1). Not only are clients’ voices centered, but power dynamics between therapist and client become leveled. Under the frame of person-centered music therapy, the aural aesthetics of Western music practices and musical proficiency of an instrument come second to the act of self-expression and celebration of uniqueness in the client.

**Community Music Therapy**
Community music therapy, or CoMT, ties together a group of people that share a commonality through the use of music by a mental health professional (Pavlicevic and Ansdell, 2004). Stige (2002) wrote that community music therapy is ecological, music-centered, and value driven. Because every community’s ecology, culture, and needs differ, there is not one wrong or right way to practice community music therapy. Ansdell (2002) warns practitioners against the mistake of polarizing music therapy with an individual experience on one hand and CoMT on the other. Rather, he stresses that the personal experience is part of the social experience and the two exist on a continuum. Individual human beings exist within the cultural, political, and societal realms in relation to community, so therefore, humans are social beings that have personal experiences with broad social implications (Ansdell, 2002).

Ansdell names some shared features of a CoMT practice including: moving from receptive work to participatory work, a focus on interpersonal relationships, centering inspiration from the community, centering music as an agent of health promotion and change, and flexibility (Ansdell, 2002, pp. 5-7). Ruud (2009) explains further:

To me, an awareness of systemic or ecological aspects of therapy also seems to be the distinctive feature of community music therapy. Further, a variety of music therapy methods or approaches such as playing, singing, or improvising are valid, but they need to be taken into a context of performance in order to be negotiated with the larger social context. This is because the essence of community music therapy lies in the use of music to negotiate the space between private and public, the client and the institution/other staff, or the client and the community. Therefore, I stress the emphasis on performance as an essential part of community music therapy. (p. 129)
Performance is understood in a broad sense of musicking in a public or shared space within or outside of institutions. The difference between community music making and CoMT is the latter involves “the reflexive use of performance-based music therapy within a systemic perspective” (Ruud, 2009, p. 129). Ruud elaborates that CoMT should give clients a possibility for action by promoting acts of solidarity and social change, building identities as a means to empower and install agency, humanizing institutions and infrastructures, and fostering health and mutual caring (Ruud, 2009). CoMT intentionally considers the culture and context of the community as well as an ethical and psychological dialogue of performing, whereas community music making may or may not have therapeutic effects. However, both practices use music to enhance the quality of the relationships between participants, staff, and other members of the community milieu (Aasgaard, 1999).

One observation I made in reading the many theoretical and practical definitions of CoMT was that all of the authors (Pavlicevic and Ansdell, 2002, 2004; Stige, 2002; Ruud, 2009; Aasgaard, 1999) gave examples or spoke from the viewpoint of a music therapist entering the community space as an outsider. Each author is white and writes from a Eurocentric point of view. Some have described the notion that indigenous cultures have always used music as a form of community healing (Ruud, 2009; Ansdell, 2002; Stige, 2002), but not much literature exists in the realm of music therapy about these indigenous cultures from the perspective or writing of members of the indigenous cultures themselves.

Comte (2016) analyzed papers from eleven music therapists working with refugees of varying cultural backgrounds. What emerged from her critically interpretive synthesis was a construct of a neo-colonial music therapy practice. The idea of neo-colonialism “denotes the way in which values belonging to the dominant Western cultural group are often imposed upon
the cultural group who form the minority” (Comte, 2016, p. 2). Her analysis also exposed that 10 of the 11 music therapists defined the refugee population as a homogenous group characterized by one narrative of trauma instead of allowing their clients the agency or opportunity to choose their own cultural identity. Because most music therapy literature is written and studied from a Western, Eurocentric context, it is imperative that a music therapist entering a community different from the dominant cultural group find ways and means to actually center the voice of community members or else they may fall in danger of perpetuating a system of inequality and disempowerment.

**Resource-Oriented Music Therapy**

Rolvsjord’s (2010) resource-oriented approach to music therapy involves the nurturing of strengths, positive qualities, and potentials of an identity by viewing an individual within their social, political, and cultural context. Resources are both internal and external objects with music as a resource for collaboration rather than intervention. This empowerment philosophy holds value the self-determination and participation of an individual to have a voice in the therapeutic process; it also carries an awareness of mutuality between the music therapist and the individual based on respect, shared responsibility, and responsiveness (Rolvsjord, 2010). The music therapist’s role should not be to fix anything about the client. Instead, the music therapist helps and guides the client to fully realize their internal and external resources that already exist. Clients have the ability to be agents of change instead of passive recipients of help (Rolvsjord, 2015).

**Resilience**

Simply put, resilience is the ability to bounce back from difficult situations. Sisto et al. (2019) reviewed 129 unique definitions of psychological resilience throughout literature in order
to identify shared elements and move toward a transversal explanation of the term. The researchers concluded that psychological resilience is the ability to adapt positively to life conditions. “It is a dynamic process evolving over time that implies a type of adaptive functioning that specifically allows [people] to face difficulties by recovering an initial balance or bouncing back as an opportunity for growth” (Sisto et al., 2019, p. 14). This “dynamic process” implies that people are not born being resilient but instead develop traits of resiliency throughout their lives (Sisto et al., 2019, p. 14). Koliou et al. (2018) orient this definition in the context of community resilience and suggest that social systems should build constructs of resilience into their organizations to reduce impacts or consequences, reduce recovery time, and reduce future vulnerabilities.

MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) argue that “the processes that shape resilience operate primarily at the scale of capitalist social relations” (p. 255). The competitive and scarcity model of capitalism forces some folks to keep getting knocked down and keep having to bounce back again instead of addressing and changing some of the systemic factors that may cause adversity. In place of resilience, which privileges the restoration of existing oppressive systems instead of transforming them, the authors offer a framework that fosters community resourcefulness. Resourcefulness does not function as an internal trait of an individual or community but rather, “resourcefulness is a material property and a relational term that seeks to problematize the often profound inequalities in the distribution of resources by the state that further disadvantage low-income communities” (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012, p. 264). Members of the community are the experts of their needs and also the experts of indigenous or folk knowledge that may determine alternative methods of how to access community resources. Lastly, MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) acknowledge the importance of cultural recognition that “promotes a sense of
confidence, self-worth and self- and community-affirmation that can be drawn upon to fuel the mobilization of existing resources and argue for and pursue new resources” (p. 265). Cultural recognition can validate community status on the basis of commonality and a shared understanding that the community is worth preserving and uplifting.

Similarly, Scrine (2021) articulates the limits of resilience and the need for resistance in the scope of music therapy. She takes a critical approach to trauma-informed practices in music therapy by naming the disproportionate levels of racial and generational trauma experienced by Indigenous people in Australia through the violent colonialism of settler nations (Scrine, 2021). Additionally, she recognizes that the psychological definitions of trauma-informed practices are still dominated by white, Western perspectives:

While trauma is increasingly at the center of literature and practice from social work, psychology, psychiatry, other therapeutic disciplines, and educational contexts, it is still rarely acknowledged that its definitions and theoretical frameworks are rooted in a raced, classed, abled, gendered hegemony (Scrine, 2021, p. 4).

Resilience under this model falls into danger of being romanticized by the neoliberal idea of saviorism and redirects social responsibility into individual responsibility, personal failure, or incompetence. Grit and adaptability of at-risk populations to the dominant narrative is celebrated. The function of grit is further explained in the context of at-risk young people as “a pedagogy of control that is predicated upon a promise made to poor children that if they learn the tools of self-control and learn to endure drudgery, they can compete with rich children for scarce economic resources” (Saltman, 2014, p. 43).

Instead of resilience, Scrine (2021) emphasizes the need for a music therapy theoretical framework centered in an anti-oppressive practice and promotes resistance to the oppressive
structures that affect not only individual experiences, but community attitudes. In practice, music is a tool used to name and respond to power dynamics inherently built in both dominant systems and therapeutic spaces. It is then the responsibility of the music therapist to build a structure of safety that “continuously navigates consent, creates opportunities for clients to exercise choice and control, and remain curious about acts of resistance in the face of oppression” (p. 9), consequently moving from passivity to active participation (Scrine, 2021).

**Pandemic Trauma and Stress Experience**

Bridgeland et al. (2021) examined the relation of COVID-19 to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder by conducting an online survey with a sample of online participants \(N = 1,040\) in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The researchers measured general emotional reactions, participant exposure to COVID-19, and media exposure to COVID-19 content. Participants also took four assessment tests: the PTSD Checklist (PCL-5), the 5-item World Health Organization Well-Being Index (WHO-5), the Brief Inventory of Psychosocial Functioning (B-IPF), and the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21). After twelve days of data collection, the researchers analyzed results through Null-Hypothesis Significance Tests using digital processors. They found that participants overall reported PTSD-like symptoms to events that had not yet happened. Further, data showed that participants reported PTSD-like symptoms whether they were directly or indirectly exposed to COVID-19. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic does not fit into any diagnostic criteria of PTSD, it can be understood as a traumatic stressor event capable of eliciting PTSD-adjacent symptoms.

The psychological consequences that intensify during a national and global pandemic are defined by the American Psychoanalytic Association as Pandemic Trauma & Stress Experience,
or PTSE (Meyerhoff, 2021). It is a set of expectable, individual, family, and community reactions to the enduring COVID-19 including an adaptation of a “new normal” filled with uncertainty, fear, and loss which increases individual and community experiences of depression, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, relational conflicts, substance abuse, and violence (Meyerhoff, 2021). Communities experiencing PTSE may find a sense of decreased community cohesion, overburdened infrastructures, constant disruptions in community norms, and a loss of financial or human resources. While PTSE is not a diagnosis or a disorder, if left untreated, can lead to Anxiety Disorders, Depressive Disorders, and/or Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders outlined in the DSM-5 (Bridgeland et al., 2021).

As I witnessed both the families and the staff at my internship display symptoms of PTSE, I realized that I was also not immune to the pandemic trauma and stress experience myself. I started to wonder how the idea of community music therapy could be utilized to provide some relief to the members of the shelter. The process of arriving at a community engagement project will be described in the following section.

Method

A significant part of the process of choosing a community engagement project was being unsuccessful in implementing my original idea of creating a method for my thesis. I originally created two music groups consisting of 12-week one-hour sessions for the youth and the teenagers at the shelter. I adapted a hip hop method I created with another graduate colleague that used songwriting, hip hop beat making, and freestyle rap to promote emotional and state regulation. After spending a few weeks with the children of the shelter, I learned that many were familiar with the hip hop, rap, and R&B songs I played on my speaker. I thought that working
with the youth and teens was a perfect opportunity to test the method I had been building for about two years.

Unfortunately, a set of COVID-19 outbreaks forced the youth and teen space to close numerous times, including the first three weeks of music group. The teen coordinator left her position in the middle of these COVID-19. Consequently, the teens stopped coming to the teen space. As families were able to find permanent housing, some children I worked with would be gone the following week while others stayed at the shelter for years. My efforts to create music therapy support groups and programming failed due to the lack of attendance and my inability to build rapport with many of the teenagers. I mistakenly did not factor in the role of constant disruptive change when adapting my hip hop method to the homeless shelter youth. After much debate, I decided to discontinue my hip hop method and start from scratch. Though I felt disappointed, I also felt grateful for another chance to approach a method that centered the needs of the members and staff at the shelter instead reinforcing my preconceived notions of what might or might not be beneficial based on the thesis requirements of my graduate program. I replaced my rigid, planned-out, and very specific hip hop method with a Spring Showcase, a musical performance highlighting the talents and gifts of the members of the shelter.

**Participants and Setting**

Participants of the community engagement project included the children of the youth program at an emergency homeless shelter and the staff who work there. The children, ages six to 12, lived in the shelter and were all part of an academic support program during the hours of virtual school. Eight of the children chose to participate in the community engagement project. All eight are children of color who identified their ethnicities as Haitian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, or Black American. Five of the eight kids spoke Spanish as their first language. Two of
the children’s families found permanent housing while preparing for the community engagement project and continued to return to the shelter for academic support and music activities despite not technically being homeless anymore. The teenagers of the shelter and the parents of the children were invited to Spring Showcase as audience members and support to the performers.

I also invited the staff at the shelter to participate in the community engagement project. Some have been working at the shelter for nearly 20 years and others only a few months. Some staff I saw regularly at the shelter and others I had only met through our weekly Zoom conference meetings. All of the staff identify as women of color with ethnic backgrounds from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and the United States. While all the staff spoke English, about half of them also spoke Spanish and two staff members spoke Haitian-Creole.

The Spring Showcase took place in the backyard of the emergency homeless shelter. It is not a very large space—about 50 square feet, or the size of half of a full basketball court—but it is a space that is familiar to the children. More importantly, it is outside, so the possible transmission of the COVID-19 virus decreased significantly.

Process and Procedure

In preparing for the Spring Showcase, I decided to make myself more available to the youth by physically situating my work station in the youth space. When they were not in a Zoom class, I gave them the option to participate in music appreciation activities during the duration of their break. In these one-on-one or small group activities, I informally asked each youth what they were missing the most and their biggest struggles about navigating school, home, and their social lives during quarantine. A majority of the youth shared the same struggle: not being able to see their friends and not being able to engage in extra-curricular activities they
used to be involved in. A few communicated that they miss hugging their friends and family members. Two of the children, who were developing into pre-teens, revealed that they were bored every day and missed being outside because their parents would not allow them to leave the shelter walls due to fear of contracting COVID-19.

During one of our weekly case conference meetings, I shared my idea to build a Spring Showcase to all of the staff. I had recently been asked by my supervisor to provide a separate in-service presentation to the staff on stress management which revealed that many of the staff felt unsupported, alone, and burdened by the extra work load they were forced to carry. I thought that creating an event where members of the community could safely gather together might relieve some of the feelings of isolation, separation, and added pressure they were experiencing. My idea was met with excitement from the staff, especially the Chief Operating Officer, who oversaw all the different staff departments. She suggested that I formalize my idea into a written project proposal.

The following week, I wrote an official project proposal outlining the specific details of the Spring Showcase including the description, a timeline, a proposed budget, my needs from the staff, the measures I would put in place to determine the success and safety of the project, and my motivation to create a community engagement project (see Appendix A). I hypothesized that the event had the potential to connect community members with a shared lived experience and help them feel appreciated and supported under COVID-19.

I also determined that the project would not cost any financial expenses because we would be using resources that we already had at the shelter. Mandatory face mask regulations would be enforced, various hand sanitizing stations would be set up in three different places in the backyard, and every attendee would be screened with a head thermometer before entering the
space. Also, I would not be utilizing microphones or shared instruments to decrease the chance of transmission between performers. My project proposal was accepted by both the Chief Operation Officer and the Chief Executive Officer. This step in the process was significant because the Spring Showcase was required to be shared on social media and the shelter’s calendar website. Further, all of the staff knew about the community engagement project and offered their support for its success, so I was not alone in the organizing, building, and managing the show.

After my project proposal was approved, I met with the community specialist and the project development staff to discuss how we could tap into some possible resources for the showcase and if they had any suggestions on how I could reach out to members of the shelter about attending. The community specialist shared her experience of providing material goods like prizes or food to encourage participation, stating that what the families in the shelter get out of it must be greater than the risk of attending a group function during a global pandemic. Keeping that in mind, I utilized the shelter’s directory of local community partners to find possible donations from Black-owned restaurants, businesses, and community groups in this Boston neighborhood. I wrote e-mails, called their businesses, messaged them on social media, and offered to advertise their business at the showcase as a community partner. One community partner, a Black-owned bakery that also specializes in glamorous make-up products, agreed to provide cookies, brownies, and samples of her product. When the Chief Operating Officer learned that community partners were stepping up to my call for resources, she tapped into some funding originally used for field trips and community outings which had all been cancelled and used the money to provide more food and snacks that the members and staff could take with them after the showcase. I created a colorful flyer advertising the Spring Showcase (see
Appendix B) to be distributed to not only the children’s families, but also to the staff and the other members of the shelter whose children did not attend the youth program.

A substantial part of the process was preparing the youth and the staff for the performance. For three months, I spent time with the eight participating youth during their school breaks and after-school time to explore their preferred music, hidden skills or talents, and visions for the Spring Showcase. Instead of coming to our sessions with a very specific plan, I allowed each youth member to decide how they wanted to spend their time with me which informed my method of preparing for the showcase. Giving the youth agency to choose their own adventure revealed some incredible talents that were previously unknown to me, the youth staff, and even the parents of the children.

One example of this occurred with E (pseudonym). E is a 10-year old Dominican-American boy whose first language is Spanish and had been living in the shelter for almost one year. He had fallen behind significantly in his academics and without an English tutor, was in danger of failing his grade. One day, I was tuning one of the three guitars in the youth space that had not been played in months. E sat down next to me and asked if he could try holding the guitar. After sanitizing our hands, I showed him the different parts of the guitar, explained to him how and why guitars are tuned, and demonstrated how turning the knobs on the guitar head changed the pitch of each string. He listened and watched me intently, observing each tiny detail of my movement- how I held the guitar, which direction I turned each tuning knob, how I gently strummed the strings after tuning it- and copied me. Afterwards, I taught him one chord by demonstrating it first, then helping him position his fingers on the fret board and finally strumming the strings a few times. To my surprise and delight, he not only imitated me to successfully play the chord but added a different strumming pattern to make it his own. Seeing
how quickly he picked up the first chord, I taught him a second chord that was harder to place on
the fret board with his little fingers. Again, he copied my hands and played it seamlessly. E and
I ended up continuing our guitar lessons every week until the showcase.

Three of the girls in the showcase formed a girl group and chose two songs by female
singers to choreograph into a dance routine. My time preparing the girl group for the showcase
involved teaching the girls how to take turns, suggesting dance moves based on the lyrics of the
song, and providing unconditional positive regard for their creative efforts. The girl group
originally consisted of four girls, but one of the girls, 9-year-old J, quit the group two weeks
before the Spring Showcase. When asked why she quit, J shrugged her shoulders and said “I
don’t know” in Spanish. Instead of trying to convince J to rejoin the girl group, I spent that
afternoon sitting with her and exploring music through her Chromebook laptop. She showed me
some music she composed in her virtual online music class at school and I discovered that she
had an affinity for electronic beat making on the website, Google Music Labs. I asked her
would be willing to share her electronic music instead of dancing in the showcase and J gave me
an enthusiastic thumbs up.

The week before the showcase, I spent every day with the youth preparing last-minute
details and specifics for the performance and anticipating that part of the preparation would be
managing feelings of anxiety and stage fright with the kids, many of whom had never performed
in front of an audience before. All eight of the children and I sat together in a group the day
before the showcase, shared our feelings about performing, and offered suggestions to quell the
apprehension and fear. I also asked them to create the order of the set list for the showcase.
Taking into consideration all of their opinions and concerns, we made a physical program
together to be printed and distributed to all guests at the showcase. Additionally, I reached out to
each staff member through e-mail to ask them if they would be sharing something at the showcase and if there was anything, I could do to support them. Three staff members responded to performing and the rest of the staff offered to assist in setting up the space. One of the youth leaders offered to print picture and video consent forms for parents to sign before the showcase. The community engagement project was slowly coming together.

The Program

The Spring Showcase took place on Tuesday, April 13, 2021. In the morning, two staff members helped to clean up the backyard, set up chairs for the guests, and decorate the performance space with balloons, streamers, and artwork that the children made. Our community partner set up the food and beverage table. Arriving an hour before the performance, most youth were able to do a final dress rehearsal and hear some last words of encouragement before showing their hard work to their families, friends, and the staff. My notes on the program follow. All names used are pseudonyms.

*Spring Showcase 2021: A Showcase of Community Engagement, program order*

Corrine introduces the show and each performer

1.  **S** – “The Wobble” (V.I.C., 2008) – a line dance demonstration  
   
   S is a 21-year old youth leader whose job is to assist and support the needs of the youth in the academic space. Because she has dance experience, S offered to demonstrate a popular group line dance created by New York rapper V.I.C. By kicking off the show with a group line dance, I was attempting to set the tone of participation and collaboration for both the staff and guests by inviting them to dance along.

2.  **M** – “Stand Up” (Erivo, 2019) – song and dance  
   
   M, 7 years old, performed this song by Cynthia Erivo from the *Harriet* soundtrack (. She mouthed the words while doing an improvised dance that she made up on the spot.

3.  The Girl Group – “Dance Monkey” (Tones and I, 2019) and “Run the World (Girls)” (Knowles, 2011) – dance
The three girls—B, 7; G, 7; and N, 8—performed their choreographed dance routines to songs by two female artists they admired. They coordinated matching outfits and painted hearts on their cheeks.

4. **C**—“Stitches” (Mendes, 2015) – song

C, 8 years old, memorized the words to her favorite song by Shawn Mendes and performed an acoustic version of the song while I played the guitar. M joined her on the stage to as a backup dancer at the last minute. It is worth noting that C had not attended the youth program for three weeks before the showcase because her elementary school opened back up again.

5. **E**—“Lean On Me” (Withers, 1972) – guitar performance

E and I played guitar to the famous Bill Withers song and halfway through his performance, the audience sang and clapped along.

6. The Girl Group, C, M, E, and youth coordinator **A**—“Remember Me” (Bratt, 2017) – song

A, one of the staff who spoke Spanish, supported the girls by singing the words to the title track from the bilingual Disney movie, *Coco*, while E and I played guitar. They sang the first verse in Spanish and the second verse in English.

7. **T**—“The Biker’s Shuffle” (Big Mucci, 2009) – group line dance

T is the community specialist at the shelter. She explained it was by African-American biker gangs to dispel the myth that both motorcyclists and Black people are threats or criminals to society. At this point in the program, parents, staff, and the children all joined her in the dance.

8. **J**—original electronic beats

J closed the showcase by playing her original beats through the loud speaker while the guests congratulated the performers and helped themselves to food.

After the program ended, I played some dance music on the loud speakers for the folks that remained. About 10 of the children, staff, and community members stayed for one hour dancing and being in community with each other in the shelter backyard before cleaning up the space.

**Observations**

Information and observations were collected through detailed process notes after each music rehearsal, one-on-one session with the youth, and the final showcase. I also kept a
personal journal of my experience throughout the whole process. After the showcase, I reviewed pictures and video taken by the staff to observe details that I may have missed as the facilitator and MC of the showcase. I created two tables to show my examination of significant events and occurrences centered around the theme of resilience. Table 1 is a lyrical analysis of the songs used by the performers and their implication to the theme of resilience. In the left column, I chose specific lyrics from the youth’s performance and in the right column, explain how they relate to theme of resilience. Table 2 is an outline of the challenges faced by me the youth I worked with, how they overcame those difficulties, and the community response to their performance based on my observations and feedback from the guests and staff after the show.

E-mails, texts, and verbal responses to the showcase from the staff the days and weeks after the event were also taken into consideration. My findings from the tables are included in the results section.

Table 1.

Lyric Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performer, Song, and Lyrics</th>
<th>Implications to Resilience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>M: “Stand Up”</strong> *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I been walking, weight on my shoulders, a bullet in my gun. I got eyes in the back of my head just in case I have to run.”</td>
<td>- Narrator is from the point of an enslaved person during the Underground Railroad. “I been walking” means that this is not a new struggle, this person has been through many tough times before but this time, she is prepared to escape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That’s when I’m gonna stand up, take my people with me, together we are going to a brand new home.”</td>
<td>- Narrator envisions what a new future would look like not only for herself, but for her people. <strong>But the road to freedom will take action, not just vision.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Far across the river, can you hear freedom calling… gonna keep on keepin’ on, I can feel it in my bones.”</td>
<td>- Freedom is near but still very far. Narrator will never give up walking towards that freedom even though her physical body suffers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t mind if I lose any blood on the way to salvation, and I’ll fight with the strength that I got until I die.”</td>
<td>- Freedom is so crucial for the narrator and her people that she will risk death to get to salvation. She also acknowledges that it will take all of her strength to win.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C: “Stitches”***
“Got a feeling that I’m going under, but I know that I’ll make it out alive.”
“Tripping over myself, aching, begging you to come help… I’ll be needing stitches.”
“Gotta get you out of my head, needle and the thread, gonna wind up dead.”

- Narrator is someone going through a rough heartbreak. Narrator knows that this heartbreak will not kill him and he'll somehow make it to the other side.
- The road to recovery is painful, but the narrator will need stitches to sew up the wound. Stitches help the body to eventually heal.
- The process of healing involves learning how to manage his thoughts about his former lover. If he is unsuccessful, it will kill him more than the actual heartbreak.

E: “Lean on Me” ***
“Sometimes in our lives, we all have pain, we all have sorrow. But if we are wise, we know that there’s always tomorrow.”
“Lean on me when you’re not strong, I’ll be your friend, I’ll help you carry on, for it won’t be long ’til I’m gonna need somebody to lean on.”
“Please swallow your pride if I have things you need to borrow, for no one can fill those of your needs that you won’t let show.”

- Narrator is someone giving advice to a friend going through a tough time.
- Painful experiences do not last forever. Tomorrow is a brand new day.
- Narrator offers his support to his friend who is going through a tough time because their relationship is one that is mutual- he knows he can lean on his friend, too.
- The pressure to be a strong person (in this case, a strong man) can be detrimental to healing if they never share their struggles with their friends. The person suffering has a support system that will be there for them if only they can recognize that they need help in the first place. We are not alone.

* (Erivo, 2019)
** (Mendes, 2015)
*** (Withers, 1976)

Table 2.

Challenges, Strategies, and Community Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Strategies to Overcome</th>
<th>Response to Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- difficult time focusing on her own performance, often tried to direct other kids</td>
<td>- created a minute-by-minute schedule of our practice sessions for her to follow</td>
<td>- audience exclaimed “yeah!” and “you go girl!” during her performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interrupted rehearsals with other kids, tried to insert herself in their performance</td>
<td>- remained open to her artistic direction and did not show frustration at her last-minute changes, instead encouraged her to do the best she could with the skills we worked on together</td>
<td>- some staff sang along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- changed her song the day of performance</td>
<td>- quote from audience: “it was powerful.” “she made me believe!” “she needs to perform again!”</td>
<td>- quote from M: “Can we do this again next month?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A CRITICAL APPROACH TO RESILIENCE AND THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

The Girl Group

- not all members were at all rehearsals each week
- group dynamics: B wanted to be the leader and often seemed frustrated when the other girls did not follow her directions
- extreme stage freight the day of the show, almost quit
- some staff watched their rehearsal and tried to give feedback that intimidated and discouraged the girls

C

- stopped attending program three weeks before performance
- often asked to rehearse the song multiple times until it was “perfect”
- sometimes lied to me about completing her school work so she could spend time in music rehearsal

E

- did not own a guitar at home and was not allowed to bring shelter guitar home, so he could only practice during the after-school program
- transportation issues to the program, was often absent
- father put pressure on him to play sports instead of music
- often did not complete his school work so he did not “earn” music time with me

- the youth coordinator filmed one of the rehearsals so the girls could practice when not all three were present
- we all sat down and I explained that B’s ideas are great, but G and N also had something valuable to contribute and should be given the opportunity to show their ideas
- we did deep breathing before the show and I assured them that I would be right up front and center to support them the entire show
- I asked staff to not attend rehearsals. I also told the girls that the most important thing is to have fun, not be perfect, and I was already proud of them for trying something new
- kept her on the program of performers even though unsure if she would make it to show
- tried to emphasize that her self-expression was more important than perfecting the song. Also forced her to take quick breaks between rehearsals as to not overwork herself
- asked why she lied instead of punishing her. She explained that zoom classes were wearing her down and she was tired of looking at screens. Included the youth coordinator in the conversation to figure out a plan for C’s success
- lent him one of my old guitars, wrote a contract on how to maintain it and when he would return it, E signed the contract and was able to practice at home
- printed out chord sheets and charts, shared YouTube links of guitar lessons so he could practice on his own time
- invited Dad to sit in one of our rehearsals so he could see the progress E was making
- asked E why he was having trouble. He said he was not understanding the material because of the language barrier and was embarrassed to tell anyone. Roped the youth coordinator into the conversation and found a Spanish speaking male mentor for E

- lots of applause from audience
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- lots of applause from audience
- mother of G almost in tears after the show: “She never performed before and she was amazing.”
- a daughter of one of the staff members asked to be part of the girl group
- staff suggested they enter online dance competitions
- staff who criticized them during rehearsal came up to me afterwards and said “I was wrong, that was great.”
- quote from the girls: “I feel happy!” “I am so excited to dance again!” “I am proud of myself!” “I didn’t think I could do it but my friends helped me feel confident!” “Everyone cheered for us!”
- audience very vocal, yelling things like “Ok C!” “Get it girl!” and “Wow!” during performance
- C asked Mom if she could come back to attend the after-school program for the remainder of the school year
- quote from C: “I feel alive!” “I think I did pretty good” “Everyone else was really good too!” “I like that M was on stage with me, she was my backup dancer!”
- 12 members of E’s family attended; Dad was the ringleader of his fan base, high fived E and recorded his whole performance from the front row
- I shared that E had only been playing for about two months and asked the community to keep supporting him when I was done with internship. They responded with an enthusiastic “YES!”
- quotes from the audience: “amazing! He’s only played for two months?” “WOW” “I can’t believe how good he is!”
- quote from E: “Playing guitar relaxes me. I want to keep playing and get really really good.”
A CRITICAL APPROACH TO RESILIENCE AND THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

J
- extreme stage fright and anxiety being around strangers
- language barrier, I only know some Spanish
- often absent from the program so we did no rehearse her set before the performance
- instead of forcing her to be part of The girl group, pivoted to another musical talent that did not require her to stand up in front of a crowd
- used Google translate on my phone and asked her to help me with my Spanish annunciations which made her giggle
- reassured her she was going to perform great and she did not need a rehearsal to express herself musically
- mother had no idea she could make electronic beats or had an interest in music in general
- many guests got out of their seats and danced to the music
- quote from Mom: “Thank you, thank you so much for helping my daughter.”
- quote from J: “Making beats makes me happy. I want to keep doing it. Can you help me?”

Note: Challenges, strategies, and reactions were observed in rehearsals and on the day of the Spring Showcase by Corrine Mina

Results

Music is a Resource for Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Whether it was a choreographed or improvised dance, lip synching, singing with a background instrumental track, singing with a live musical instrument, or sharing their original music, the youth were given freedom to choose their songs and how they were performing. Never once did I try to persuade them to purposefully choose music with inspiring lyrics; rather, I suggested that they choose songs that spoke to them in the moment. As displayed in Table 1, many of the songs contained lyrics or messages about never giving up, overcoming difficult obstacles, being a support for their friends, and hope for the future. Not only were their songs a reflection of their preferred music, but also became a narrative of their self-expression and who they are as growing, young adults. It also demonstrated that the youth are connected and aware of the socio-political happenings of their cultural heritage and environment.

M’s choice of performing “Stand Up” (Erivo, 2019) displayed her talents of embodying the powerful message of never giving up in the struggle and also gave homage to former enslaved Black people of the United States. Being a young Black American herself, M’s performance reminded the audience that she is standing in front of them today because of the sacrifices and the lives lost by enslaved people who fought for their freedom under the most
extreme circumstances. Black people were forced to endure legalized slavery and violence for decades. While generational and racial trauma still affects Black communities today, they also are part of a legacy of enduring pain, fighting back, and helping liberate other enslaved Blacks through the Underground Railroad. Her improvised dance contained movements similar to hip hop and lyrical ballet. At one moment in the song, she linked her hands together as if she were cuffed in chains with a sad, downtrodden facial expression before “breaking free” by throwing her hands in the air, as if thanking the heavens for real and metaphorical emancipation. M became the voice of the youth and a living example of the resilience bred by her ancestors. Her powerful song choice evokes the idea that liberation takes action, not just vision.

E approached me to learn how to play the guitar on his own will. Not only did he learn a skill that boosted his self-confidence and helped him remain disciplined during a time of constant disruptive change, but he verbally shared with his family, peers, and staff that playing the guitar makes him feel relaxed. E attained a new healthy coping skill to regulate his emotions and to temporarily escape from his reality of being homeless, not measuring up to the expectations of school, and his Dominican father’s cultural value of machismo, a strong sense of masculine pride. Furthermore, after the showcase, E started teaching other children who usually did not engage in music activities how to play guitar chords. He is truly embodying the message of his song, “Lean On Me” (Withers, 1976), by passing along his new skills to his friends so they too may learn healthy coping skills. He is showing them that they are not alone. Using music as a resource to connect with his peers, E became a leader in his direct community and realized that he possesses the ability to empower his community members in a positive, collaborative way.

Instead of quitting, J chose to remain involved by pivoting from a dance performance to something less anxiety-provoking. Though language barriers often make it difficult to self-
express in words, J’s voice emerged in her electronic music. Her mother approached me after the showcase and thanked me for “helping her daughter” break out of her shell. She was truly shocked that J created such music. I replied that J had been making electronic music on her own before I discovered her affinity for technology and I did not help her make any musical choices in her songs. My role included supporting her by offering words of encouragement and positive self-regard which in turn created a space where her identity was celebrated. When provided an environment shaped by principles based on an anti-oppressive music practice (Baines, 2013; Fansler et. al, 2019; Hadley, 2013), the youth discovered how to resource music for themselves.

**Expressive Arts Promote Community Care**

For the first time in almost one year since the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States, the members of the shelter were allowed and able to foster a sense of community by physically being together. Normally, the shelter provides outings or field trips for the families, but they were all cancelled due to the global pandemic. However, the Spring Showcase was the first time that all staff, families, children, and local community partners shared the same space to celebrate each other. It was the first time many of the staff met the children and their families in person. Instead of being a case file or a phone number, names were finally matched up to faces. The community engagement project encouraged members to literally see the humanity in each other and not reduce people to a job title, label, or housing status. They clapped, cheered, laughed, sang along, and danced together. It felt like a family backyard barbecue without the grill.

The Spanish-speaking youth represented their culture and heritage by singing in both Spanish and English. A large round of applause after they sang “Remember Me” (Bratt, 2017) validated their existence not only in the youth program, but as immigrants to this country. I
witnessed N, one of the shyest girls in the youth program with limited English skills, stand proudly on the stage in front of strangers because she could sing in Spanish perfectly and because youth coordinator, A, sang right by her side. I also witnessed parents of different children speaking to each other for the first time in their native dialects after the show. Hearing one’s native language not only spoken, but also celebrated by the community is a way that one can feel at home at a homeless shelter in a foreign country.

Seeing staff of the shelter engaged in their performances conveyed to the children that the adults in their community support their talents and are invested in lives. Though attendance was limited due to social distancing regulations, the enthusiastic audience of about 30 people demonstrated to the children that they matter and that they can rely on community is a resource for the future. Since the showcase, the youth director and I have been researching options for guitar lessons, voice lessons, and dance classes so the youth may continue their artistic journeys after my internship ends. One youth performer has already been accepted to a local dance studio and received a scholarship after impressing the dance instructors. She is one step closer to her dream of becoming a professional dancer because a staff member was blown away by her ability at the showcase and advocated for her to the youth director who arranged the audition.

Expressive art can create possibilities of transformation—both internal and external—that may have not been realized without community engagement.

The day after the showcase, the staff and I debriefed about what happened and they shared feedback. Every single staff member including the Chief Operating Officer and the Chief Executive Officer communicated that they had a blast, but what stood out was that every staff member also agreed that this type of event should happen again. Staff started to brainstorm how to improve the logistics of the performance “for next time,” even assigning possible themes and
dates for the future. After learning that three staff members could dance and sing, the C.O.O. requested that they start every weekly conference meeting with a song or dance to set the mood. I believe that seeing and experiencing the shelter community supporting each other demonstrated to the C.E.O. and the C.O.O. that the expressive arts are an accessible, effective, and cost-efficient way to bring joy and relief to a work environment full of stress. Once again, the expressive arts became a resource for possible transformation, but this time for the staff.

Joy is an Act of Resistance

The phrase “joy is an act of resistance” is not a new one; it is the title of a poem by Toi Dericotte (2008) about a Black woman finding the tiniest joy in her pet fish. The saying has been converted into internet memes, t-shirts, logos on banners, and tote bags. Not much thought had been given to this phrase before the community engagement project, but the meaning holds true. Joy and positive emotion can help to balance out the body’s physical response to stress and strengthens the immune system (Frederickson et al., 2003, p. 366). Frederickson theorized that positive emotions also have the capability of building durable personal resources, including physical resources, social resources, intellectual resources, and psychological resources; therefore, experiencing joy may be transformative in promoting creativity, accruing knowledge, social integration, and health (Frederickson et al., 2003, p. 366). Although emotional states of happiness may be transient and temporary, Frederickson believed that even an incidental experience of a positive emotion increases one’s personal resources (Frederickson et al., 2003).

Based on the documented reactions of the audience after each performance and my general observations of body language, energy level, and verbal expression immediately following the show, the community engagement project brought happiness to the youth, staff, and guests. The showcase only lasted about one hour, but the buzz from the performers, staff,
parents, and community partner remained the entire week. For one hour, the community members of the emergency homeless shelter were given permission to forget about their stressors by experiencing art created by the youngest members of their society. They were allowed an escape from the current realities of COVID-19, of homelessness, of poverty, of isolation, of stress, of their responsibilities to merely survive under capitalism, and were allowed the space and time to thrive in joy. Finding real joy is an act of resisting the terrors of the world by reclaiming humanity and reasserting vitality. Community members were given a chance to tap into their internal resource of happiness, a resource that belongs to them, a resource that cannot be taken, stolen, or plundered by oppression.

It is worth noting that the phrase states, “joy is an act of resistance,” not resiliency. The distinction is significant and will be examined in the Discussion.

Discussion

Resistance and Resiliency

As proven in the case of E, music may function as a healthy coping mechanism under times of distress which can build resiliency in adjusting to a new way of life under COVID-19. In resiliency, individuals are expected to harness all their strength and be tough against tough circumstances as passive recipients of their condition which they have no power to change. The notion of being strong and powerful in overcoming life’s obstacles is glamorized with neoliberal rhetoric, romanticized by the ideal that a quick recovery and a swift bounce back to “normal” is what measures a person’s strength against adversity without addressing the systemic conditions that demands grit in order to survive. What neoliberal rhetoric fails to address is that under critical race theory, “normal” is a life of systemic oppression under white supremacy that
remains embroidered in the governing systems, dominant narratives, and the history of the United States of America (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

We cannot compare being resilient to COVID-19 to being resilient against systemic oppression, white supremacy, poverty, homelessness, internalized prejudice, sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia, imposter’s syndrome, these everyday, so-called forces created by human beings that manufacture inequity. The neoliberal co-option of resilience accepts these so-called forces as a shared reality for all while omitting the fact that their creation was bred from a history of violence, trauma, and injustice against historically marginalized populations. Resiliency in the shade of oppression often becomes a non-consensual practice because the other option would be literal death.

Resistance, on the other hand, prompts the questions: resistant to what or to whom? Why must hierarchies of control determine one’s fate? Is there another option that envisions a life different than adapting to what seems like inevitable circumstances which are sometimes unfair? Resistance questions why these circumstances exist in the first place and shifts the power dynamic from being a passive victim with no control to an active participant who possesses the ownership of their being. Resilience can be co-opted by neoliberalists to prove that people can adapt to oppression if they are just strong enough; resistance fights back against oppression which in turn, fosters strength. Even though this community engagement project started as an investigation in how music can foster resilience in a marginalized population during global distress, the music also has potential to cultivate resistance. At the Spring Showcase, music became a vehicle of action and a resource of change to resist feelings of isolation, loneliness, and pandemic stress responses. Experiencing positive emotions of joy generated by music is a direct
resistance to the classist and oppressive narratives given to those experiencing homelessness by the dominant brutes of society.

Both resilience and resistance are valuable assets that fall upon a spectrum and I do not believe resilience should be dismissed completely. Neither does resistance mean a lack of flexibility or inability to adapt. To choose only one concept over the other perpetuates the scarcity mode which allows us to believe that there is not enough room for both. But if the personal really is political, whatever happens in a systemic level will always affect us internally. Resilience is simply not sustainable as an individualistic characteristic in an entire system of oppression. Resistance, while questioning the validity of the same systems, has the potential to be sustainable when shared in the context of community.

**Anti-Oppressive Practices Foster Community**

Ruud (2009) wrote that CoMT should promote acts of solidarity and social change, build identities to empower and install agency, humanize institutions, and foster mutuality. These tenets were achieved in the preparation, execution, and longevity of the community engagement project by intentionally employing an anti-oppressive music therapy practice as a framework for the Spring Showcase.

Giving agency to the children and the staff to pick their own songs was one step to empowering their self-identity and building trust. Their song choices and lyrics written by mostly singers of color validated their humanity and connected them to a musical legacy of resistance. An emphasis on self-expression and having fun instead of the added pressure of performing perfectly for their audience taught the children that their voice, no matter how it sounds, deserves to be heard. Mutuality and collaboration, two salient tenets of an anti-oppressive practice in music therapy, are also two tenets of CoMT, and rightfully so. If one were
to truly exercise anti-oppressive practices, a result would be the promotion of community care and mutual aid with the knowledge that community sustains the resistance to oppression by sharing the responsibility amongst its members. If anti-oppressive practices were implemented successfully, marginalized voices would cease to be marginalized within the community.

Furthermore, if anti-oppressive practices were built into the infrastructure of institutions and sustained by their community members, perhaps opportunities to foster joy would become normalized. Perhaps resistance against larger systems of oppression would feel achievable because empowerment would be a consequence of the infrastructure. Perhaps a result of community care in the infrastructure would bring about a positive social change led by community members and determined by their wants and needs instead of catering to perceived desires of funders and donors.

**Solidarity, Not Saviorism**

To be able to do anti-racist and anti-oppressive work ethically, honestly, and in a way that uplifts marginalized populations, those outside of the community must be self-aware of how their upbringing, their privilege, and their academic theories inform their intention to “do good” or “change the world.” Frankly, the notion of changing the entire world is a purposefully vague cop-out for neoliberals with a saviorism complex to believe they are fighting oppression without doing any work. These ideals, though they may be laced with good intentions, are self-satisfying and probably differ from those of the community. Without a framework or a plan based on collaboration, mutuality, trust, empowerment, and community resistance, the music therapist may fall into a dangerous trap of propagating the savior complex that further perpetuates oppression, no matter what their skin color.
I entered my second year internship as a brown-skinned immigrant living in the same neighborhood as the emergency homeless shelter, but somehow still fell into the trap of thinking I could fix or save those who are less-fortunate than me because I was taught that they are less-fortunate. I led with my personal agenda of completing a thesis method so I can graduate from college, not because it was what the community members actually wanted or needed, but because it was what my predominantly white college required of me. The demoralizing ideals of white supremacy can be enacted by someone who is not white, especially if they are desperate enough. How different was I from a colonizer, seizing the opportunity to co-opt someone else’s home for my own benefit?

Anti-oppressive practices in music therapy and CoMT do not leave room for saviorism if done correctly. Again, community resistance is sustainable through mutuality, collaboration, and trust which requires the music therapist to listen and prioritize the needs of community members. Empowering individuals in a community music therapy setting promotes a sense of solidarity in the personal and collective struggle. Solidarity by itself validates, supports, and empathizes; solidarity in the context of community holds the potential to transform. Similarly, supportive music therapy may create a container for achieving individual client goals, but music cannot be the primary vehicle for transformational change because of the length of treatment (Bruscia, 2013). However, supportive music carries the potential to be transformative when it is shared in a community that values its members. As made evident with the Spring Showcase, music was the means of accessing previously unbeknown community resources that can change the quality of life for both youth and staff at the emergency homeless shelter. When that resource is community, there is no need for a mythical neoliberal savior. The community can take care of itself.
Conclusion

As more people in the United States of America receive vaccinations against COVID-19 and community spaces slowly reopen for the general public, it is vital that we do not revert back to a place of normalcy, complacency, or resiliency without resistance. We were given the opportunity to rethink, re-evaluate, and re-establish how we can engage in communities and to explore what is possible in anti-oppressive music therapy. We cannot allow neoliberalism to co-opt our efforts made to uplift and empower our historically and currently marginalized communities by perpetuating a futility rooted by ideals of white supremacy. We must remain vigilant by holding fast and honing our community resources—music, joy, and each other.
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A CRITICAL APPROACH TO RESILIENCE AND THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

Appendix A

Spring Showcase Project Proposal

The community engagement project proposal was submitted to the Chief Operating Officer and Chief Executive Officer and was approved on March 1, 2021. All signifying information and details were removed.

Project Proposal:
Spring Showcase

1) Project Details
   Project Name: Spring Showcase
   Departments affected by the project: Youth, Community Outreach, Staff, parents of youth from the academic support program
   Date Approved: March 1, 2021

2) Project Planner(s)
   Name: Corrine Mina
   Email: cmmx673xxxxxx.xxx
   Supervisor: -----
   Department: Clinical Services

3) Project Description (what you want to do)
   On a Tuesday in April at 4:00 PM in the backyard area of the shelter, I would like to facilitate a socially-distanced community gathering that showcases the music, art, and talents of the youth of the youth program. As an expressive art therapy graduate student intern, I have been working with many of the children and using music as a coping skill and vehicle for self-expression. This will be an opportunity to showcase community resilience during a global pandemic. This event will also be open to shelter staff to showcase their artistic talents as well and continue to foster a sense of community. I will work with the Community Outreach department to find resources like food, prizes, or giveaways for the participants.

4) Project Motivation (why you want to do this)
   The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to not only cause physical, financial, and material harm to individuals, but an array of mental health struggles including feelings of isolation, disruptions of normal patterns of behavior, increased frustration and despair, and anxiety/fear about the future or getting sick. The American Psychoanalytic Association also defines Pandemic Trauma and Stress Experience (PTSE) happening in communities, resulting in increased collective fear, intensified stress responses, misinformation about the virus or vaccine, decreased community cohesion, an overburdened infrastructure, and loss of financial/human resources. The expressive arts not only offer a healthy coping mechanism for these community and individual mental health struggles but also provide a container for participants to release their feelings in a positive, supportive way. Further, I believe that part of community resilience is fostering joy within its members. I believe that this event has the potential to connect community members with a shared lived experience and help them feel appreciated and supported under COVID-19.

A. What measures will you put in place to determine the success/safety of this project?
   The event will be outdoors to decrease the chance of virus transmission. All participants will be screened and temperatures taken before entering the backyard space. All participants will be required to wear protective masks or face shields even if they have had the vaccine. Audience chairs/standing area will be marked 6 feet away from each other to follow social-distancing
regulations. Hand sanitizing stations will be created at three different locations. Participants will be required to sanitize their hands before touching microphones/musical instruments.

B. To the extent that you have information on specific benefits of performing this project, please summarize them below. This might include items such as costs savings or service improvements.

Potentially, the Spring Showcase can be filmed or documented to show donors or the Board of Directors the resilience and creativity of participants and staff under the roughest circumstances.

C. Does this project support a University, Campus, or Department strategic plan?

Corrine Mina, the clinical intern, is a third-year graduating student of Lesley University’s Graduate Program of Clinical Mental Health Counseling with a concentration on Music Therapy. This community engagement project is part of Corrine’s final graduate capstone thesis.

5) Alternatives Considered (include the impact of no action)

This can be a virtual Spring Showcase on Zoom if conditions, weather, or safety concerns do not permit a live, outdoor event.

6) Timeline

- **Tuesday, March 9** - Corrine will work with the staff and children at the Above & Beyond program to continue preparing for the event. That gives six weeks to learn songs, choreography, write poetry, or create art for the Spring Showcase.
- **Thursday, March 11** – Corrine will complete a flyer for the Spring Showcase to be distributed to staff, youth, and families
- **First week of April** – Corrine will check in with staff of Community Outreach to try and partner with any community organizations for donations (food, prizes) to the event. Corrine will also talk to individual staff about their contribution to the showcase.
- **Show day** – during the day, Corrine will set up the backyard space to prepare for the event. At 4:00 PM, the event will take place.

7) Needs/Costs/Expenses

- Microphone stand (I saw one at the teen program)
- PA system, otherwise Corrine will bring amplifiers from home
- Video recording consent forms for participants
- Video recorder/photographer for social media (if applicable)
- Paper copies of the flyer advertising the event

Right now, expenses are at zero because we are utilizing all of the resources we already have.

Thank you for reading my project proposal. I look forward to your responses.

Corrine Mina
Appendix B

Spring Showcase Flyer

A physical flyer was distributed to the youth and the youth’s parents on March 1, 2020. A digital version was e-mailed to the staff four weeks before the showcase. All signifying information has been blacked out.

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Student’s Name: Corrine Mina

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: A Critical Approach to Resilience and the Need for Community: Anti-Oppressive Music Therapy at a Homeless Shelter during COVID-19

Date of Graduation: May 22, 2021.

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

Thesis Advisor: Denise Malis