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Community Project: Dominican Palo Dance, a Non-Pathological Intervention to Enhance Youth
Therapeutic Engagement in Community Based Healing

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

Date

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Dance and Movement Therapy

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Abstract

Palo Dance is a Dominican folkloric, cultural, spiritual, and community dance, an essential piece of Dominican roots and their ancestral healing practices. Dominican Palo Dance healing qualities include a variety of Indigenous and diasporic approaches including chanting, rituals, and community healing. These methods not only have healing properties but also reflect deeply rooted cultural practices designed for holistic well-being. The research is grounded in my experiences growing up in Los Guaricanos de Villa Mella, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, a marginalized yet culturally rich community. Through participation in youth spiritual groups, community dances, and events, I developed a profound appreciation for the dance form and its ancestral healing practices. Understanding rituals as systems of meaning requires a deep dive into the symbols they comprise (Hernández Soto, 1996). The thesis draws on Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT) concepts inherent in Palo and builds off Mara's Four Levels of Empowerment model, which recognizes the body-mind unity and therapeutic potential of expressive movement, specifically as it relates to rituals and daily practice. Further, it helped show the opportunities to utilize elements of Palo Dancing for community healing. The intended outcome of this community project was to establish Palo Dance as a recognized therapeutic practice, particularly within expressive therapies. By incorporating Palo Dance into the respite program, I aimed to contribute to DMT clinical practice by offering an innovative and culturally relevant therapeutic technique. Participant feedback indicated a positive response to the tools introduced, highlighting the effectiveness of community-based healing techniques.

Introduction

I was born and raised in Los Guaricanos de Villa Mella, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Los Guaricanos is one of the most marginalized cities in the Dominican Republic, but it is rich in culture, community engagement, youth empowerment, and strong religious values. I grew up participating in youth spiritual groups, community dances, and events. The mass in Los Guaricanos was unique and joyful. During mass, the chorus played the drums, tambourine, and Latin percussion. The mass was not solely spiritual, it was a community celebration filled with energy, connections, movement, and laughter. I explored dancing and choreography from an early age. Before having the opportunity to attend dance classes, I started listening to music and making up steps. I gathered groups of young girls from the community and taught them the dances that were later presented at church and community events. While still a high school student, I taught dance to younger girls through community programs and created choreographies for school presentations and dance competitions in the Dominican Republic. While I taught a range of styles from Merengue to Hip Hop and Belly Dance, traditional Dominican dances such as Merengue, Yuca, Mangulina, and Palo Dance were core elements of my culture and learning. Once I arrived in the United States as a young adult, I stopped dancing and followed the cultural idea of being an adult, which meant leaving my passion behind and pursuing a practical job. I later got married and had children. After becoming a mother, I let go of the things that represented who I am. It was not until I entered the Expressive Arts Therapy program at Lesley University that I took a course in Dance and Movement Therapy and rediscovered my connection to my roots. I met my then instructor Nancy Jo, who guided me through an intense self-discovery process. This process was both therapeutic and educational and helped me reconnect with my roots. Dance and Movement Therapy is the ability to explore and

express the natural self and profound feelings. When thinking about the art of body movement, the body and mind are set in motion as a unity and the connection that stems from the feeling of trust becomes a reality. Dance and movement bring awareness to the body. Through movement observation, the mover can potentially understand trauma and use dance and movement to heal.

During my years of folkloric dancing as a young adult, I was introduced to Dominican Palo Dance, a traditional dance form deeply rooted in my cultural upbringing. Being part of a community dance group that showcased our performances in various cities in the Dominican Republic, this dance has a deep meaning in the formation of my cultural identity. Palo Dance is a Dominican Folkloric, cultural, spiritual, and community dance, an essential piece of Dominican roots and their ancestral healing practices. Today, Palo Dance is not as popular in the Dominican Republic. Dance forms like merengue and Bachata have taken over and are recognized globally as the predominant Dominican Cultural dances. However, Palo Dance is one of the most rich and prevalent musical traditions. Rooted in the times of slavery, it emerged as an early expression of brotherhood, support, and empowerment.

For the execution of my project, I introduced Palo Dance as a therapeutic intervention in a respite program during my internship. The method consisted of organizing dance movement activities, where children formed a circle to explore breathing control, singing, and learning the fundamentals of Palo Dancing. The execution of this method could potentially address the lack of therapeutic engagement, reluctance to speak, feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety that young people experience. Considering my passion and respect for this dance form, my goal is to share my learned experiences by acting as a liaison to advocate for the integration and honor of Afro-Caribbean cultural practices, particularly Dominican Palo Dance. I aspire to provide a

bridge for future students seeking information about Dominican healing practices. I hope to contribute to the preservation and expansion of Dominican cultural heritage.

Literature Review

This review of literature addresses the rich history of Dominican Palo Dancing, incorporating its musical traditions, rituals, and therapeutic potential in mental health settings. The review explores the need for alternative therapeutic interventions in community work and highlights the fundamental healing properties in Dominican dance, such as chanting, the use of ritual practices, and community healing. Additionally, the review discusses the role of dance and movement therapy in empowering individuals and communities, including the concept of the four levels of empowerment and the importance of Kalalu (Palo) Dance in this context.

Palo Dancing

History

Palo Dance is a Dominican folkloric, cultural, spiritual, and community dance, an essential piece of Dominican roots and their ancestral healing practices. "An early Dominican dance, the baile de palo ("long-drum dance") is an African-derived couple dance that is based on death rituals in which the spirit of the deceased entered an heir and danced" (Cashion, n.d., pg. 16). This dance often happens in a community setting. The most popular form of Palo Dance happens during "Fiesta de Palos". This is a dance party where people gather in a circle, engage in rhythmic chanting, and provide enthusiastic support to the central dancer. The chanting takes the form of call and response where one person chants and the group responds to their command. Dominican Palo Dance can be performed as a couple, which is mostly popular in folkloric

dances, or alone, which is more common in community settings and "Fiestas de Palo" Palo parties. In this last, the person dancing in the center is taken over by a spirit that enters their body and guides their movement. Dominican folklore encompasses various genres, including beliefs and practices related to popular medicine. These beliefs form part of the people's understanding of the world, often based on perceived correlations between natural phenomena, past events, and future outcomes. Whether scientifically proven or rooted in faith, these beliefs shape cultural practices and rituals (Garrido de Boggs, 2013).

Musical Traditions

One prevalent musical tradition is the Palos or Atabals dance, deeply connected with religious rituals and beliefs. For instance, in certain areas, it is believed that performing a Palos festival for Santa Rita during droughts will bring rain. The dancers and musicians involved in Palos often belong to a brotherhood dedicated to the Holy Spirit, where it is believed that a dying brother may not pass away until the drums are played (Garrido de Boggs, 2013). The Palos ensemble typically includes three cylindrical drums of varying sizes, along with the addition of a güiro in some regions. The musical structure involves repetitive phrases and choruses, with improvisations and variations introduced by the singer, making each performance unique (Garrido de Boggs, 2013). These dance traditions, while specific to the Dominican Republic, share similarities with similar dances found in other Latin American countries, showcasing the diversity and richness of cultural expressions across the region. For example, in Cuba, there is a dance called yuca or yuka, distinct from the Dominican Palos Dance despite sharing a similar name (Garrido de Boggs, 2013).

Rituals

The meaning of rituals lies in the symbols they encompass, serving as the fundamental components of these ceremonial acts. Understanding rituals as systems of meaning requires a deep dive into the symbols they contain. To interpret the meanings behind specific symbols, one must consider the broader context that leads to the ritual's celebration. This includes examining the circumstances surrounding the ritual and the behaviors associated with each symbol within that specific context (Hernández Soto, 1996). Specialists were knowledgeable about the rituals and ordinary faithful individuals were consulted to gain insights into these symbols. Signs or symbols only hold significance when distinguished from others that lack meaning individually but contribute to a collective set of symbols within the ritual framework (Hernández Soto, 1996).

Villa Mella's history is linked with the cultivation of sugar cane along the Isabela and Osama rivers, where African slaves were brought to work in the sugar mills. The migrations of enslaved individuals and their descendants from neighboring areas, particularly San Lorenzo de Los Mina, influenced Villa Mella's cultural landscape (Hernández Soto, 1996). The Cofradías (Brotherhood) of the Holy Spirit, also known as the Cofradías of the Congos, is a vital institution in Villa Mella, honoring the patron saint associated with the area. These cofradías, rooted in Spanish traditions of mutual aid and religious devotion, play a significant role in preserving cultural rituals and practices. The musicians and dancers within the brotherhood contribute to the ceremonial aspects, maintaining a sacred bond with the Holy Spirit (Hernández Soto, 1996).

The origin of the Congos, symbolic figures within the brotherhood, is attributed to divine encounters linked to the Holy Spirit. These encounters and rituals involving the Congos emphasize a sense of divine origin and spiritual significance within the brotherhood's traditions

(Hernández Soto, 1996). The drums used in these rituals, characterized by their unique construction and materials, play a central role in the musical and ceremonial aspects of the brotherhood's practices. The larger and smaller drums, crafted from javilla or avocado wood with cowhide membranes, produce distinct sounds integral to the ritual performances. Overall, the rituals and symbols within the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of Villa Mella reflect a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and spiritual elements, showcasing the enduring traditions and beliefs that shape the community's identity (Hernández Soto, 1996).

Dance and Movement Therapy

Dance and Movement Therapy is the ability to explore and express the natural self and profound feelings. When thinking about the art of body movement, the body and mind are set in motion as a unity and the connection that stems from the feeling of trust becomes a reality. Dance and movement bring awareness to the body. Through movement observation, the mover can potentially understand trauma and use dance and movement to heal. Dance and movement offer the opportunity to connect to all of our parts. In the movement, one can explore identity. One can feel the airflow, the soft touch of the air when we move, and the connection to the earth and nature. People can connect with others through movement. Dancing offers the power of storytelling with the body. Dancing is a nonverbal universal language. I have discovered the power of this tool, one that I wish to continue to explore, and eventually share with others.

According to Williams, in her article, *(Re-) Defining Dance/Movement Therapy Fifty Years Hence*, Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT) involves the psychotherapeutic application of movement to facilitate the integration of the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social aspects of a human being. The establishment and development of the definition of DMT, founded by the

American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) in 1965, have not been significantly reexamined since their initiation (Williams, 2019). The ADTA definition of DMT, is “Dance/movement therapy is the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration of the individual” (Williams, 2019), which emphasizes the interconnection of body, mind, and body spirit. This process is measured with some variations in the way other organizations define DMT, such as the removal of the preface "psycho" or the use of terms such as Dance/Movement Psychotherapy, highlighting the occupation's ambiguity regarding its psychotherapy relationship and its approval (Williams, 2019). DMT is a profession that addresses underlying issues of self-esteem and identity within the field. This aims to deconstruct and challenge established norms, meanings, and power dynamics within language, discourse, and society through a critical lens. DMT encourages reflexivity, complexity, and openness to multiple interpretations and perspectives (Williams, 2019).

Need for Alternative Therapeutic Interventions in Community Work

In the research aiming to address breaches in understanding while examining possible prognosticators of youth engagement difficulties, Gellatly described challenges faced during the implementation of Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) in community mental health practices. These difficulties are explored through the therapist, client, and session levels within the context of the implementation of mental health support for youth from ethnic minorities and low-income families. The study focused on client engagement concerns reported by therapists. As EBPs become more prevalent in these settings, concerns about the sustainability and efficiency of these efforts are on the rise (Gellatly, 2019). The results of the study indicate that therapists observed various participation challenges during several sessions. Among the common challenges reported were concerns indicated by clients and lack of participation. According to Gellatly, these

difficulties were influenced by many factors, including client demographics (such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity), therapist characteristics (such as caseload and training), session dynamics (such as presentation of the problem and the presence of youth), and specific EBP practices (Gellatly, 2019). The study acknowledged limitations, such as potential bias in therapist selection of clients and reliance on therapist reports for data. However, it underscored the importance of understanding and addressing youth engagement challenges when delivering real-time EBP. Recommendations included providing therapists with strategies to promote and support youth engagement, encouraging the expression of clients' concerns as opportunities for engagement and teaching, and distributing evidence-based strategies to enhance the implementation of EBP in community environments (Gellatly, 2019).

Some of the most frequently reported challenges in youth sessions were indifference or disinterested conduct. Gellatly emphasized the need for therapists to actively raise clients' concerns and address possible participation difficulties, specifically in sessions with youth who are showing signs of nonengagement (Gellatly, 2019).

These outcomes emphasize the significance of understanding and addressing youth-specific participation challenges. Approaches to promote youth engagement, such as youth-friendly interventions are vital to improving treatment outcomes and improving the effectiveness of mental health services for young people in community settings (Gellatly, 2019).

While working with youth and families as a community health worker for Children's Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI) services, I realized there is a lack of programs for teenagers. I would like to see more program opportunities for youth, especially for those with behavioral challenges. The challenges encountered in the research “Engaging Youth in Evidence-Based

Practices (EBP)” within community mental health settings are similar to those found in CBHI services, particularly those involving direct youth therapy. In both settings obstacles related to effectively engaging clients are present, especially with the youth population. Some possible factors to influence lack of engagement among youth could be cultural differences, socioeconomic differences, and mental health stigma. As the author noted, the skills and qualities of therapists are crucial for fostering meaningful engagement, emphasizing effective communication, cultural competence, empathy, and rapport building. The dynamics within sessions and the intervention practices used also impact client participation and engagement levels. Addressing these engagement challenges is vital for the promotion of youth and family’s mental health. To actively engage youth in therapeutic practice, it is required to introduce strategies that promote culturally sensitive approaches and offer youth-friendly interventions.

Dominican Dance Healing Properties

Healing Qualities

Dominican Palo Dance healing qualities include a variety of Indigenous and diasporic approaches including chanting, rituals, and community healing. These methods not only have healing properties but also reflect deeply rooted cultural practices designed for holistic well-being. Chanting, often an integral part of these healing approaches, serves as a powerful tool to connect with spiritual dimensions and promote inner balance. Rituals, whether derived from traditional practices or adapted within diasporic contexts, contribute to a sense of continuity and community support. Community-based healing underlines the collective well-being of people within a shared social background, understanding the interconnection of individual and community health. Collectively, these qualities form a thorough healing foundation addressing

physical, emotional, and spiritual factors of well-being, reflecting the value and diversity of using Indigenous and diasporic healing traditions.

Chanting. Chanting is a prevalent practice in several traditions to deepen spiritual awareness, but there is limited understanding of its psychological, emotional, and social consequences. Chanting practice can be broadly classified into two styles: vocalized and silent. Vocal chanting involves the repetition of spoken or sung words or syllables, while silent chanting involves the mental repetition of imagined words or syllables without vocalization. Both vocal and silent chanting are forms of focused attention (FA), a technique that involves single-point concentration. This type of meditation is associated with mantra meditation, where individuals focus on mentally repeating a specific sound or phrase, known as a mantra. In this context, both vocal and silent chanting represent forms of mantra meditation, using the sound or word of concentration as a mantra. The benefits of vocal chanting may be mediated by three factors: group synchronization, which increases feelings of social interconnection; physiological changes (breathing control and singing), which can contribute to increased positive mood; and focused attention, which can prevent reflective thinking and lead to increased positive mood. Chanting has emotional and social benefits for both experienced and inexperienced people, and these benefits can be observed after vocal or silent chanting (Perry, 2016). Chanting is a huge part of the Dominican Palo Dance. It is an important aspect of not only the Dominican tradition but also the healing practice used in the community, religious groups, and cultural and folkloric sectors.

Rituals. In an article that explores the rituals and healing ceremonies and how these help to promote psychosocial well-being by increasing a sense of identity and community, Rebolledo discussed the utilization of rituals for healing within the Healing Ceremonies Program organized

by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, aimed at aiding Rohingya refugees. The author emphasized several crucial aspects related to rituals for healing inclusion, the creation of a collective healing space where refugees could address mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) issues, the incorporation of cultural practices such as music, art, storytelling, and symbolic representations of strength as tools for expression and intergenerational dialogue, the focus on reconnecting participants with their cultural identity and heritage through these rituals, the active engagement of community members of all demographics in structured sessions, and the positive impact observed in participants' wellbeing, solidarity, and empowerment post-program evaluation, underlining the significance of integrating rituals and cultural practices in healing interventions within humanitarian contexts for enhancing psychosocial wellbeing and community resilience (Rebolledo, 2019). Rituals play a crucial role in the Dominican Palo Dance, due to cultural and spiritual meaning. Within the context of Palo, rituals serve several important functions including cultural preservation, spiritual connection, community bonding, expression, celebration, and healing. The rituals in Palo dance are important because they create space for spiritual connections, promote healing and protection, strengthen community bonds, and provide avenues for creative expression and celebration within Afro-Dominican culture. These aspects of community healing can be used in various spaces regardless of cultural identity or modality of preference.

Community Healing. In an article aiming to explore the integration of cultural continuity in health programs for Indigenous youth, Ansloos discussed youth wellness facilitators' emphasis on programming, and its roots in traditional Indigenous health philosophies, with the "Medicine Wheel" guiding aspects related to mental, and emotional, physical, and spiritual wellness. They also highlighted the core value of "culture as medicine" in

their programming, emphasizing that cultural dimensions were not treated as an add-on but as integral to addressing multiple aspects of health (Ansloos, 2023). " Indigenous youth reported feeling they were crafting a community together through the shared experiences of engaging in activities centered on cultural practices and traditions"(Ansloos, 2023, p. 140). The research provides valuable insights regarding the practical integration of cultural continuity into mental health programs for Indigenous youth, highlighting its critical role in fostering positive mental health outcomes. The four identified practices include integrating Indigenous health philosophies, incorporating cultural practices and ceremonies, promoting harm reduction and accessibility, and supporting wellness facilitators (Ansloos, 2023). Community healing is important because it allows youth to build a sense of community together through shared experiences of engaging in activities centered on cultural practices and traditions. Community healing aligns closely with the cultural and communal aspects of the traditional Palo dance form. Palo dance is often performed in community settings, involving group participation and shared experiences. It embodies cultural expression, storytelling, and spiritual connections, all of which contribute to a sense of community healing among participants. Through Palo dance, individuals can experience the benefits of cultural continuity, social support, healing, and collective wellness, similar to the principles highlighted in the article regarding community healing for Indigenous youth.

Exiting Networks of Healing and Empowering Dance

Four Levels of Empowerment

The Africa Dance Healing System, later renamed the Four Levels of Empowerment, is a comprehensive framework developed by Mara, based on her journey of ethno-racial, cultural, and spiritual identity development. It draws from research on cultural dance traditions in the Caribbean and the African diaspora, incorporating principles from Black African-centered psychology, intersectionality theory, family systems theories, community psychology, and African Indigenous healing practices. This client-centered model aims to help individuals access their embodied intelligence and achieve empowerment through four interconnected levels: Self Body Power, Collective Relational Power, Socio-Political Cultural Power, and Spiritual Ancestral Power. Self-body power focuses on establishing a connection with one's physical body and emotions. Collective Relational Power examines social experiences and values within familiar environments. Socio-Political Cultural Power addresses power dynamics and the impact of oppression on clients' bodies, aiding in the development of protective factors. Spiritual Ancestral Power delves into culturally specific healing practices and energy medicine to heal energetic imbalances. Overall, the framework provides a holistic approach to empowerment, considering various aspects of clients' identities and experiences to support their healing journey (Dieterich-Hartwell, 2022).

Although Mara's framework is not explicitly labeled as Palo Dance, and her practice places more connotation on multiple Afro-Caribbean dances, there are critical similarities between her approach and the healing qualities of Dominican Palo Dance. Palo Dance encompasses a variety of Indigenous and diasporic healing methods, such as chanting, ritual, and

community healing. Chanting serves as a powerful tool to connect with spiritual dimensions and promote inner balance, reflecting Mara's emphasis on connecting with emotions and spiritual energy. Palo Dancing also has many spiritual aspects. Rituals in Palo Dance, whether rooted in traditional practices or adapted within diasporic or spiritual contexts, contribute to a sense of continuity and community support, similar to the emphasis on collective relational power in Mara's framework. Additionally, community healing in Palo Dance underlines the importance of collective well-being, aligning with Mara's holistic approach to empowerment that considers both individual and community health. Mara's African Dance Healing System and Palo Dance share core principles of holistic wellness, cultural connection, and community support. However, these are expressed through different frameworks and methodologies. Both approaches highlight the value of Indigenous and diaspora healing traditions in addressing the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of well-being.

Kalalú Danza

This contemporary approach is rooted in African Antillean cultural traditions, utilizing the present moment to construct artistic, social, and political proposals. The body becomes a tool for resistance against colonization, employing sound, rhythmic gestures, and narrative vocabulary. Movement serves as a catalyst, activating healing energy and ritual dances to foster a sense of belonging and resistance. Marily Gallardo is a cornerstone of the modern dance movement (Kalalu Danza), advocating for the reaffirmation and articulation of Afro-descendant and Black racial identity in the Dominican Republic. She believes that through self-observation, individuals can rediscover personal and collective values, reclaiming them from within rather than external sources. Marily aims to help dancers reconnect with their essence, exploring questions of cultural heritage and personal values. Emphasizing dynamic cooperation and

personal exploration, Marily interprets archetypes and cultural myths, particularly those rooted in popular religious origins. This approach, evident in her creative process with Kalalu, serves as a healing method for her students. By actively listening to the history embedded within our bodies, Marily believes we can dismantle colonizing narratives and reconstruct our own stories. In her view, the sounds, gestures, and embodied prayers of oral traditions represent the body's resistance against oppressive ideologies. Through African Caribbean dances, Marily honors the spiritual legacy passed down by grandmothers, highlighting the power of Black women and Afrocentric values. She asserts that the voice and body are instruments of empowerment, declaring power from a place of intention. Marily articulates processes of transformation, empowerment, and social reality through body movement and dance, offering a platform for personal and collective growth (Rivera, 2014).

While Marily is not a therapist or counselor, as a teacher her school has been widely acknowledged as a center for cultural practices that promote healing and empowerment in the Dominican Republic, particularly among young women (Gallardo, 2016). Mara herself acknowledged Marily as her mentor and credited her with playing a significant role in her research journey. Marily's approach shares core principles with Mara's methods, emphasizing the use of cultural practices, body movement, and dance for healing, empowerment, and personal growth. Although Marily does not explicitly reference it as Palo Dance, upon studying the "*Kalalú Danza*" video, I noticed that the dance incorporates all the fundamental components of Dominican Palo Dance. These include elements like Rhythmic Patterns, Community Participation, Circle formation, Call and Response, Use of Percussion Instruments (maracas, shakers, drums), Symbolism, and Ritual.

Modality and Theoretical Reasoning

During my first few semesters of graduate school, I felt lost and could not connect with the therapeutic dance forms I was studying at the time. I even thought about changing careers. It seemed impossible for me to visualize working as a dance and movement therapist in training and I could not comprehend the readings, it just did not make sense to me at the time. I then came across the Afro-Caribbean Dance Healing System, while watching a Ted Talk (Mara, YouTube video), for one of my assignments. I became completely fascinated with this theoretical model. I learned that I could have the opportunity to interview the person who created this therapeutic system: María "Mara" Rivera, M.A., M.S, BCDMT, LCAT, the founder of the 4 Levels of Empowerment, Self-Body Power. Political Socio, Collective Power, and Spiritual Power A comprehensive model that is mainly based on three main frameworks, which are: African Centered Psychology, Indigenous Community Psychology, and Psychospiritual Energy Psychology. During my interview with Mara, I learned that she researched Palo (Afro-Dominican dance). I also learned that her teacher and mentor was a fellow Dominican, Marily Gallardo, Declared "National Glory of Dance" in the Dominican Republic, dancer, choreographer, researcher and educator, and creator of a unique pedagogical proposal in the Caribbean (Kreol, 2021). This experience helped me regain hope in the program. I started reading with more patience and finding connections between the readings and my cultural identity. This experience brought me back to my roots. At that moment, I remembered that both of my maternal grandparents were natural healers. That is when everything became clear.

Mirroring Mara's Methods

Mara inspired a recognition of the separate pieces of palo dance, specifically as it related to rituals and daily practice. Further, it helped show the opportunities to utilize elements of palo dancing for community healing. During our consultations, Mara helped me to organize the language and access relevant resources to expand my understanding of Afro-Caribbean healing practice. After consulting with Mara, I started to develop the idea of what I want to see in my future work. The rituals of Dominican Palo Dance are community-based, “when we dance, we come together and share energy, and joy, and release tension via humming” (M. Mara, personal communication, February 5, 2024). Through chanting, humming, dancing, and playing instruments, people can connect with nature, and with their bodies. Dominican Palo Dance can create space for making a “mind, body, and spiritual connection with the self” (M. Mara, personal communication, March 5, 2024), this type of practice could be beneficial to diverse communities, especially communities of color. However, not enough research is available regarding the potential healing benefits of Dominican Palo Dance and the understanding and use of this dance form as a possible developing framework.

While my approach does not directly utilize the four levels outlined in Mara's framework, I do incorporate several key theoretical foundations that guide our methodology. These include cultural dance traditions, community healing principles, and Indigenous healing practices. Specifically, I integrate the therapeutic elements of Palo Dance, a culturally specific practice deeply rooted in the Dominican tradition. My method embraces a holistic perspective towards healing and empowerment, acknowledging the interconnections between physical, emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions in individuals' well-being and paths to empowerment.

Objective

The intended outcome of this community project is to establish Palo Dance as a recognized therapeutic practice, particularly within expressive therapies. By incorporating Palo Dance into the respite program, my objective is to contribute to DMT clinical practice by offering an innovative and culturally relevant therapeutic technique. The benefits of this practice may include building trusting relationships, fostering self-awareness, reducing therapeutic stigma, and providing indirect therapeutic intervention for youth facing challenges such as withdrawal, communication difficulties, isolation, depression, and anxiety. Ultimately, the project would seek to enhance therapeutic engagement in a way that aligns with the specific needs of youth 13 to 18 years of age.

Method

The team consisted of a Sustainability Coach, a Young Adult Peer Mentor, a Health and Well-being Coach, a Family Partner, a Program Director, and a clinical intern. All working together during my internship placement. The initiative was part of the launch of a respite program designed for youth and families, which occurred during a school vacation week. The program aimed to provide sustainable and community-based respite care options for caregivers and youth facing mental health challenges; the goal was to create a transformative and sustainable model of respite care that not only meets the immediate needs of caregivers and youth but also contributes to long-term individual, family, and community well-being.

Project Implementation

The program utilized a community-based approach, drawing on theories of resilience, social support, and empowerment. By providing a safe and nurturing environment, the program

aimed to promote healing and well-being for both caregivers and youth. I used the fundamental healing qualities of Palo Dance and broke them down in separate sessions to explore with the group. I created a different theme for each day. Themes reflected feelings of anxiety, breathing, trust, trusted adults, recognition of emotions in the body, and community. The daily routine began with the youth introducing themselves and responding to a prompt, followed by a 30-minute movement activity, lunch, a main session, and a closing activity.

Logistics

The respite program consisted of sessions held daily during the school vacation week. The sessions were designed to be flexible in length and frequency, accommodating the needs of the participants and their families. This intern, alongside the respite team, meticulously developed a detailed plan outlining the schedule, activities, required materials, and intervention objectives. Modifications were made to some activities to align with the participants' varying ages. The respite program was hosted in the basement of the building and transformed into a therapeutic space. We created distinct zones organizing the space in separate settings: an art space equipped with art materials and tables, a cozy corner: featuring teddy bears, reading material a sitting couch, and a tent, and a gaming area: with table games and Fidget Toys, a hydration station: offering refreshments, and a designated space for movement activities, highlighted by a centrally placed rug indicating the meeting and activity area.

Participants

The program welcomed nine participants aged between 5 and 17, with some attending daily while others joined intermittently throughout the week. Initially targeted for youth aged 8-18, the program flexibly accommodated participants based on families' specific needs.

Detailed Session Design:

- Pre-Session Protocol: Before each session, the team prepared the therapeutic space in the basement of the building, creating distinct zones for various activities.
- Welcome Circle: Each session began with a welcome circle, where participants and facilitators gathered to introduce themselves and set intentions for the day.
- Movement: Activities included movement sessions, where participants engaged in movement-based exercises to promote self-expression and emotional release.
- Closing Circle: The session concluded with a closing circle, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences and share any insights or challenges they encountered.
- Post-Session: After each session, the team debriefed and evaluated the day's activities, making adjustments as needed for future sessions.

On the first day, we gathered in a circle and established ground rules collaboratively. I introduced the use of shakers for transitions and the rug as our designated movement and meeting space. The movement activity incorporated recyclable materials as instruments, with youth selecting their preferred instruments. Sitting in a circle on the floor, they created a space for communal expression and bonding. Through guided instruction, they learned the basic sounds and rhythms of Palo Dance, integrating their chosen instruments into the music to develop a collective rhythm. This process encouraged creativity and inclusivity, emphasizing that there was no right or wrong rhythm as they collectively shaped the music. The activity also

promoted connection and a sense of community among the youth. Incorporating movement further enriched the experience, resulting in high engagement and enthusiasm among the participants.

The following day began with an exploration of breathing control during the warm-up. Initially hesitant about using an expandable breathing ball due to concerns about fragility and limited availability, I was pleasantly surprised by the group's interest and willingness to explore breathing techniques. They took turns using the expandable ball, experimenting with different breathing tempos, and symbolizing the ball's expansion with their hands. This activity served as a valuable tool for self-regulation, empowering the youth to manage their breathing in various situations. Witnessing their positive response and recognizing the practical utility of the tool left me feeling accomplished and proud to have introduced a resource that was enthusiastically embraced and viewed as beneficial by the participants.

On the third day of our session, we explored emotions. Initially, the group displayed a high level of energy and excitement. To channel this energy effectively, I began by playing music that suggested specific emotions, prompting us to engage in collaborative movement through mirroring exercises and the incorporation of singing. While my original plan included incorporating handkerchiefs into this activity, I noticed that the youth were becoming easily distracted. To introduce them to the Dominican Palo Dance and its basic steps, I started playing the music associated with this traditional dance. However, it became apparent that the youth were getting tired, and some began to disengage from the group. To re-engage them and foster connection among participants, I quickly improvised and introduced a parachute activity. This unexpected shift allowed us to continue exploring rhythms and movement dynamics at different

levels, ultimately bringing the group back together and regaining their engagement in the session.

On the fourth and final day of the session, the group reviewed the tools they had learned throughout the week and discussed how and when to apply these tools effectively. We invited participants to share their feedback by asking what they enjoyed about the activities, which activity was their favorite, and what improvements could be made. Participants shared their favorite activity from the week and highlighted the tools they found most beneficial. Most participants identified using their hands to moderate breathing as the most useful tool they had learned. Following this discussion, the group gathered for a movie screening and enjoyed pizza together to conclude the session.

Progress Recording

To monitor progress, I documented information before and after each intervention through a journal. The journal included observations about the participants' responses, notable changes in behavior, and general experiences during the movement sessions. Keeping a journal helped me retain a complete record of all my experiences throughout the project. To prepare for each session, I set aside some time in a separate space to gather the necessary materials and perform breathing exercises, ensuring my preparation for the sessions. Once in the space, I focused on the rituals and used eye contact and constant scanning of the room to stay in sync with the team, which was effective as we all quickly understood our roles without extensive discussions. Using the rug in the center of the room as a transition helped us create opportunities to breathe, especially important during fast-paced transitions when children were quickly changing activities. However, on a day when I skipped my pre-session routine, I felt unprepared

and noticed increased stress during a participant's dysregulation. This experience taught me the importance of energy channeling and self-care before and after sessions to manage my energy effectively. I also realized that neglecting self-care, such as skipping meals, affected my energy levels and my interaction with the group. Additionally, I hesitated to present the basic steps and music of the Palos Dance due to concerns about how to manage the already high energy levels of the group, highlighting the need to carefully evaluate interventions based on group dynamics. Positive feedback and successful interventions, such as using countdown techniques and providing space to regroup, reassured me about the effectiveness of certain strategies and the importance of adaptive planning based on real-time feedback.

Results

The results of the sessions revealed a progression of community building and challenges throughout the four days. Initially, participants showed high levels of enthusiasm and engagement, particularly during movement-based activities, cooking, and breathing control exercises. However, on the third day, cases of dysregulation among some children required individual support, which caused some distress for both the group and the facilitators. Despite these challenges, the use of innovative tools like utilizing the hands for breathing control improvised activities like wall painting, and the use of a parachute re-engaged the group and fostered a sense of connection. Participant feedback indicated a positive response to the tools introduced, highlighting the effectiveness of hand-based breathing moderation techniques. Concluding the session with a film screening and shared meal provided a clear end to the program, emphasizing the importance of reflection and feedback in shaping future interventions. Overall, the sessions showcased the dynamic nature of community healing, requiring adaptability and creativity to overcome challenges and maintain participant engagement.

Discussion

The primary goal of using elements of Palo Dance during this community project was to explore the use and benefits of Dominican Palo Dance as a therapeutic practice, particularly within expressive therapies like Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT). The project aimed to contribute to DMT clinical practice by offering an innovative and culturally relevant therapeutic technique, specifically within a respite program setting. The motivation for this research came from my extensive involvement in community organizations, where I observed a demanding need for alternative therapeutic interventions for youth. Additionally, my desire to give back to a community that significantly contributed to my personal growth fueled this initiative. As an Afro-Dominican with a background in folk dancing, I envisioned a framework based on natural healing, community engagement, self-expression, and self-empowerment. The project intended to use Palo Dance to facilitate self-regulation and community bonding among participants.

In the above-mentioned research, Palo Dance can be an effective way to develop connections among participants. Its healing properties reflect deeply rooted cultural practices designed for holistic well-being. Chanting serves as a powerful tool to connect with spiritual dimensions and promote inner balance. Rituals contribute to a sense of continuity and community support.

Community-based healing underlines collective well-being. Together, these qualities form a thorough healing foundation addressing physical, emotional, and spiritual factors of well-being.

The anticipated benefits of integrating elements of Palo Dance into the therapeutic interventions included building trusting relationships, fostering self-awareness, reducing therapeutic stigma, and providing indirect therapeutic support for youth. Based on the literature reviewed, I expected to create rituals with the group that could become accessible to participants outside of the program. I expected these rituals to serve as tools for the participants' self-regulation. I

anticipated the use of the circle and collaborative movement, cheering, and rhythm creation to be an effective way of developing brotherhood/friendship. I also expected the integration of participants in a circle to become a symbol of community. While I was able to introduce the group to the basic rhythm of Palo music, I was unable to introduce the basic steps of the dance itself as I had anticipated. I was also hoping to introduce the use of bandanas as part of the dance rituals, but the participants did not show interest in this idea. Lastly, I expected the participants to gain self-awareness about their bodies and their emotions and use the presented tools for grounding. However, during the implementation of the project, several unexpected challenges were encountered. These challenges included undisclosed behavioral triggers, for example, during one of the days of programming, there was a participant who went through several changes before coming to the program. The child dislikes changes and any abrupt transition could become a trigger. The participant got dysregulated, and we were having a hard time supporting the youth. We learned about the specific triggers for dysregulation after the program was over. The history of possible triggers and changes in the youth's routine would have been important information to have before programming to adjust the interventions. This had to be learned through observation and notes. When working with children in groups, it was challenging to keep their focus. To get their attention, it was often required to use redirection, and sometimes youth needed to receive one-on-one support. I was surprised by the way participants activated each other in a circle format. I did not anticipate so many instances of one participant initiating the dysregulation of other participants. The group was a hyperactive group with a lot of energy. The containment of the group in a circle for more than 15 minutes was extremely challenging for these reasons. I learned that simpler activities like breathing, the use of the breathing ball, and hands as breathing tools were more successful than other activities.

Similarly, I found that it was critical to assess the emotional state of the group throughout the process because the circle formation and using movement to activate the body led participants to activate each other. Also, the use of terms like “movement” was more successful at engaging the participants than the term “dance” which caused them to be less enthusiastic. While some participants did develop friendships and were eager to return to the program to see other participants, some struggled to connect with others and were isolated for the entire week. Additional challenges I encountered during the research was finding updated information regarding Palo Dance and its use. The information available is mostly from the 1990s. These limitations highlighted the need for further exploration and adaptation of strategies to suit participants' needs and contexts effectively. The findings emphasized the potential effectiveness of movement-based activities, such as breathing exercises using a breathing ball, in engaging participants compared to dance activities. The insights gained from this project showed success in participation since the participants returned to programming. Feedback from caregivers indicates positive changes in youth behaviors after the vacation week. In addition, the use of instruments seemed to be effective in encouraging movement. Lastly, I was pleasantly surprised by the participant's huge acceptance of tools like breathing tools. Moving forward one thing I would do differently would be to shorten the expected circle time and have more opportunities for energy release rather than trying to contain the youth in a circle. Lastly, I would have a more thorough pre-session preparation, addressing safety concerns, and establishing clear communication channels regarding behavioral triggers to enhance the effectiveness of similar interventions in the future.

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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.

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