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Co-creating Spaces for Resilience to Flourish: A Community Music Therapy project in Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract

MusicWorks is a non-profit organisation based in Cape Town, South Africa, and offers psycho-social support through music to young people growing up in marginalised communities. In South Africa three hundred years of colonialism paved the way for Apartheid which left a legacy of waste, nepotism, corruption and the oppression of the majority of our country's citizens. Its impact is still visible today and the consequences of past and current political, social and economic challenges has led to perpetuated patterns of poverty, gangsterism¹, unemployment, and family violence that are endemic to communities such as Lavender Hill where this MusicWorks project is situated. Encouraging and strengthening the resilience of young people within this community can empower them to not only break this cycle but also be part of the solution as they become contributing members of their community and society at large. Ebersöhn's (2012) generative theory of relationship resourced resilience proposes that when individuals use relationships as a way to access, link, and mobilise resources, an enabling ecology is shaped that can foster positive adjustment in a largely at-risk environment. Drawing on this social-ecological understanding of resilience, this paper outlines the MusicWorks project in Lavender Hill and discusses case vignettes of music work with young people and the broader school community. The aim of the project is to co-create musical spaces where young people and those around them can access resourced relationships.

Introduction

MusicWorks is a non-profit organisation based in Cape Town, South Africa and aims to contribute towards the development of resilience in children and their communities through active engagement in musical activities and experiences, ranging from individual and group music therapy sessions to community music performances. One of MusicWorks' guiding principles is to provide access to music therapy services to children who would not otherwise be able to participate². The organisation is contracted by the Department of Social Development to offer therapeutic support services to supplement the child protection services offered by government.

Our services are offered specifically in marginalised communities that are grappling with multiple and complex socio-economic challenges which impact on the quality of life and opportunities available to the children growing up here. The investigative jour-

nalist Don Pinnock (2016) gives a startling, but in our experience accurate description of what life is like in these suburbs of Cape Town:

Cape Town is two cities. One is beautiful beyond imagining, known since its beginning as the 'fairest cape' in the world. Here tourists come to lounge on beaches, scale misty peaks and dine in fine restaurants. The other is one of the most dangerous cities in the world, where police need bullet-proof vests and sometimes army backup. Here gangs of young men rule the night with heavy calibre handguns, dispensing heroin, cocaine, crystal meth and fear... (Pinnock, 2016).

The "other city" Pinnock refers to are the neighbourhoods known locally as the Cape Flats – the area to which people were forcibly moved to in the 1960s under the Apartheid Government's Group Areas Act which segregated South Africans according to race. This social dislocation and displacement, and subsequent lack of service delivery, inadequate policing, poverty, and unemployment laid the foundation for organized crime networks that have increased its reach and intensity in post-apartheid South Africa (Petrus & Kinnes, 2018). In his reflection on the reasons for the existence of gangs and its "sociological construction" Pinnock says:

We...cannot understand them without considering the conditions which give rise to them, particularly because, as a society, we have created some neighbourhoods that make gang formations almost inevitable (Pinnock, 2016).

For children growing up in these neighbourhoods exposure to violence is often unavoidable (Ward, Flisher, Zissis, Muller, & Lombard, 2001), education is mediocre, job opportunities are scarce³, and all these factors increase the risk of the pathway of their lives leading to high-risk and anti-social activities (Mathews, Jamieson, Lake, & Smith, 2014). The violence witnessed and/or experienced by the children in our programmes - and in fact by many South African children (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011; Seedat, Van der Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009) - is often endemic to the community, trans-generational in nature (Mathews et al., 2014) and has systemic causes (Pinnock, 2016) with no possibility for resolution or solutions in the immediate future. Nor does the South African child welfare system (under auspices of the Department of Social Development) have the means and resources to provide safe alternatives to all children affected by violence (Patel, 2015). As a result, many children and families have to find ways of surviving amidst adversity.

Through our work in these communities, over more than a decade, we have first-hand experience of the resilience and resourcefulness of individuals and communities who are not merely surviving, but thriving, as well as, supporting and contributing in meaningful ways to the lives of those around them. The lessons we have learned as music therapy practitioners from the people that we work with has had a profound impact on the way we think about the role music and music therapy can play in these communities (Fouché & Torrance 2005, 2011; Pavlicevic 2010; Pavlicevic & Fouché, 2014).

When considering theoretical frameworks that could inform and support how we make sense of our work, we are often confronted with theoretical constructs and discourse originating from the developed (mostly Western) world, where contexts and systems of health and social care provision are often more formalised and resourced than the contexts we find ourselves working in (Pavlicevic & Fouché, 2014). Although a trauma informed framework is useful in considering the impact of violence on for example the neurobiological and psychological development of the child, we find that it does not always help us to understand how children, families and communities survive - and even thrive - in contexts where trauma is complex and on-going.

Over the past two decades, several music therapy scholars and practitioners have been contributing towards a discourse that challenges traditionally dominant models and approaches to music therapy (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2004; Stige, 2002; Stige, Ansdell, Elephant, & Pavlicevic, 2010). Baines (2013) offers a critique to Eurocentrism in music therapy and proposes the umbrella term anti-oppressive practice "as a way of



Figure 1.
Prince George Primary school, Lavender Hill

addressing the ‘problems’ that our clients present within the context of their socio-political reality and resourcing both ourselves, and persons we serve to address social inequity toward the goal of creating a socially just future” (p. 4). Rolvsjord (2006) approaches her critique from a perspective of empowerment philosophy and advocates for a more resource-oriented practice and collaborative approaches that focuses on a more user-led perspective.

We have found the emergence of broader theoretical music therapy perspectives that emphasizes an ecological understanding of people, music, and music therapy (Ansdell, 2014; Wood, 2016) useful when considering our music therapy practice that often takes place in non-conventional places and spaces. An ecological perspective encourages us to consider the broader context that the child in our music therapy room is situated in and is engaging with. It enables us to consider how music (therapy) can be useful not only for the child, but also for the family structure, school system, and broader socio-political context and systems that the child interacts with, within an ecology that is connected and interdependent (Ansdell, 2014). By using a theoretical lens that centralizes the child *within* their micro-to-macro-context, MusicWorks’ practice has naturally aligned with a community music therapy approach⁴ (Pavlicevic, 2010; Stige & Aarø, 2012).

Within a community, societal and systemic context of complex trauma and ongoing adversity, we have found a resilience informed framework, specifically the discourse around the social ecology of resilience (Ungar, 2011), to be a helpful theoretical construct. This paper continues to unpack this notion of resilience and focuses specifically on resilience theory generated from within a South-African context and its implication for music therapy practice.

The Lavender Hill project

We are at Prince George Primary school (figure1) in Lavender Hill. Despite the fresh coat of paint, the bright turquoise does little to hide the dilapidated state of the buildings and school grounds. There is a police vehicle parked at the entrance to the school with two police officers standing watch. Since the last flare-up in gang shootings the parked police vehicle has become a permanent fixture at the school. The school is situated at the edge of Lavender Hill, right next to a busy main road. On the other side, the school is surrounded by barren sandy fields. It is here where opposing gangs often come head to head. A flare-up in gang shootings makes the walk between home and school a dangerous one for children. Life in Lavender Hill can be unpredictable and chaotic.

In 2016, MusicWorks, on invitation from Prince George Primary school, embarked on a project within this school located in the community of Lavender Hill, about 20km outside of Cape Town's city centre. It is one of the areas people were forcibly moved to during the Apartheid Government's Group Areas Act in the late 1960's. With Lavender Hill being one of the gang hotspots in Cape Town, violence and the impact of substance abuse is part of the lived experiences of families and children on a daily basis.

Thinking about communities such as Lavender Hill, it is easy for the adversity, because of its extreme nature, to become the dominant narrative. Yet, there are evident examples of resilience and resourcefulness through-out the community (e.g. community food gardens, an income generation project where community members grow and sell lavender plants, an inter-generational knitting project, a strong sense of social activism in community forums that mobilise against gangsterism⁵, and a unique and vibrant music culture). Ebersöhn (2012) wrote that "resilience implies the need to adapt because of unfavourable circumstances" (p. 31) and can therefore not exist without a certain level of adversity. Resilience has largely been considered to be an internal resource, a personal trait or skill (Ungar, 2008). Ungar (2011) stated that resilience is "more a quality of a child's social and physical ecology" (p. 1) than an individual trait:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways. (p. 225)

Ungar's (2008) definition of resilience highlights a process of "navigating towards" which implies a certain level of agency and motivation. It also implies the presence of resources that are made both available and accessible.

In communities such as Lavender Hill the adversities are multiple and ongoing and those in the community have to live with the risks. The educational psychologist and researcher Liesel Ebersöhn (2012) works in communities and schools in South-Africa, in what she calls 'adversity saturated communities' (high-risk and resources-poor environments). Her research indicates diverse responses to adversity, and she proposes "flocking" as an alternative response to the generally accepted "fight, flight or freeze".

In a research study looking at various schools in a particular community, Ebersöhn (2012) saw one school paralysed by the challenges they faced, and just down the road, a school thriving despite the challenges. Both schools had limited resources, dilapidated infrastructures and the effect of poverty obvious. Yet the one school left learners incapacitated and the other vibrant, energetic, and present. Upon further investigation she learnt how the one school made use of relationships in order to link resources and in so doing the contexts was in a sense "restructured and learners set up to prosper" (p. 30). This led her to the theory of *flocking*, which is placed within the framework of relationship resourced resilience (Ebersöhn, 2012). She described flocking as a process by which individuals "use solidarity to access, mobilise and sustain resource use to counteract ongoing risk" (p. 30). This theory proposes that relationships can be used to "shape an empowering ecology that can foster positive adjustment" (p. 29) in a largely at-risk environment. Flocking thus entails a process of "linking...that builds upon the inherent strengths within a system" (p. 33).

Within a school community – such as Prince George Primary - it is the *relationships* surrounding the teachers, learners, and their families that provide safety and strengthen their inherent ability to be resilient and overcome adversity. These relationships are creating and strengthening their pathways to resilience.

From within this theoretical frame, MusicWorks considers its role in the context of Prince George Primary, and the broader context of Lavender Hill, as firstly, developing and strengthening young people's agency and drive so that they are motivated to *navigate towards* resourceful relationships, and secondly, *strengthening* the already existing resources within the school so that there are resourced relationships for the children to navigate towards. These resources include relationships among children, teachers, and families as well as entities outside of the school context, such as other non-profit



Figure 2.

Activities that forms part of the MusicWorks project in Lavender Hill

and community based organisations. It is important to highlight the fact that we are not “bringing resources to,” or “providing” in some way. The project aims to *co-create enabling spaces* that highlights already existing strengths and possibilities and where children are encouraged and feels motivated to navigate towards existing resources.

Evidence within resilience related research suggests that the positive outcomes for children facing severe adversity are mostly the result of “facilitative environments that provide children with the potential to do well” (Ungar, 2011, p. 4). The project offers long-term support where children have the opportunity to access various musical spaces over a 4-year time span. A team of music therapists and community musicians facilitates the project. Working collaboratively with community musicians has been a consistent part of MusicWork’s approach since its inception (Oosthuizen, Fouche & Torrance, 2007; Pavlicevic and Fouché, 2014). The community musicians bring indigenous knowledge around the cultural and social value of music which supplements the music therapists understanding of music, health, and social well-being which is framed within a western paradigm. The working relationship between community musicians (who are black men) and music therapists (who are white women) models a collaborative working relationship for children growing up in communities where - due to historical segregation - there are often few opportunities for collaborative engagement across racial and cultural lines.

The musical spaces facilitated by the community musicians and music therapists serve as the main activities of this project and includes the following (Figure 2):

- The gumboot dance⁶ workshops are attended by approximately 110 Grade 4 learners (about 10-years-old) and form part of the arts and culture component of the school curriculum.
- In the Grade 5 group (about 11-years-old), 12 children attend group music therapy sessions. Teachers and families identify children that will most benefit from this process. In the following year, these children have the option to move on to:
- Marimba workshops that they participate in until they come to the end of primary school (+ - 13 years).

The group music therapy sessions focus specifically on providing opportunities for children to strengthen their self-esteem, enhance their ability to self-regulate, and encourage social connection and capacity to show empathy. The Gumboot dance and marimba workshops facilitated by community musicians are framed within the Circle of Courage model⁷ and create opportunities for children to experience a sense of mastery, belonging, independence, and generosity. Within these various music spaces, young people develop their ability to build and strengthen relationships and are also encouraged to, and celebrated for, contributing to their community.

Building and strengthening relationships with and between teachers is equally as important within our programme as the sessions with the young people. A South-

African research study done in schools in low-income areas (Pillay, 2012) indicated that children considered the school environment to be a place where they feel safe and protected. They also place a high value on the presence of the teachers as well as their relationships with their teachers. This study indicated the strong potential within schools to positively impact on the lives of children and highlighted the role of schools as a supportive system for the young people and their families.

The teachers at Prince George Primary carry a heavy burden of being not only educators to the children and providing safe and caring spaces but also having to contain and manage complex and often very challenging behaviour as a result of children's ongoing exposure to violence. Ebersöhn (2012) stated that when not able to positively adapt to adversity, it can lead to feelings of "hopelessness, passivity and further feelings of stress," (p. 33) which over time can be compounded to result in "burnout, depression, aggression and withdrawal" (p. 33). As part of this project, the MusicWorks team offers teacher workshops that provide a space for self-care, where teachers can de-stress and connect with each other in a creative and playful manner. Only when teachers feel resourced and connected, can they offer and encourage resourceful spaces for the young people to navigate towards.

Inside the Lavender Hill project

Vignette 1 - a group music therapy session with five young men who have been referred for showing aggressive and disruptive behaviour in the classroom and at home. Names have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

It is a Tuesday morning and there is music coming from the small room at the far end of the passage. The musicians, a group of five young men between 10 and 13-years old and two music therapists, are seated in a circle playing along on percussive instruments to a steady beat given by Zahid on the djembe. The basic beat soon disintegrates and the group's music becomes fragmented and disorganised. This group has been making music together in music therapy sessions for the past 3 months, and this moment is representative of their musical improvisations. While musical coherence does occur, it is fleeting and the group members often seem unable to listen to one another or wait their turn. There is a general sense of disconnectedness with each person doing his own thing. The music is often loud and noisy – perhaps a reflection of the noise, chaos, and unpredictability of their everyday lives.

The music suddenly shifts and the group re-organises itself. Achmat offers a vocal sound "pada-boem-boem," which is echoed by Michael, who up until now, has sat slouching in his chair. Michael gets up and takes a djembe, and the other group members follow suit. All the time, the music keeps going. There is a moment where it seems as if the music will disintegrate again, but Shane has now stepped up and is giving instructions to the group as to who should play when. Josua asks Zahid to sing a song and yet again the music shifts direction. With the encouragement of the rest of the group, Zahid begins to sing a Muslim song while the group accompanies him on djembes. Achmat knows the words and joins in, singing along in harmony. The musical moment ends as Zahid and Achmat comes to the end of the song and a discussion follows about the specifics of the song and its relevance to the month of Ramadan.

Within in this micro-moment, the group is able to re-organise itself. The music helps the group to connect and to move fluidly. There are moments within the group music making when the young men are able to play together, wait, direct, and be directed – with a great level of consideration and tolerance for each other.

Lavender Hill is a community with a strong religious culture, both Christian and Muslim. Many of the Muslim families are ancestors of enslaved people who were brought from other parts of Africa and Asia in the late 16th century. Although there is intolerance towards many aspects of social life in this community – e.g. allegiances to different gangs – there is a great amount of tolerance towards religion. This session happened right at the beginning of the month of Ramadan, a time where the whole community participates in the rituals of sharing meals, which fosters community spirit

and connection. Therefore it is not only the Muslim children who know the song Zahid sang, but the other children could also join in.

The objectives in music therapy sessions include offering an experience of social connection, as well as an opportunity to explore and practise social skills that can help the young people connect with others, in and outside of the music therapy sessions. This potentially enhances the children's ability to navigate towards protective resources and enable them to access resourced relationships with peers, family, and teachers. As music therapists, we are quite intentional about these objectives and a moment like the one described above will be followed with a discussion around how the young people experienced this shared musical moment, what they might have learnt about themselves and about others, and what they could take from this experience and apply to their life in the classroom, back home, and in their community. Performances provide another platform where children can experience a sense of mastery and social connection. Children participating in gumboot dance and marimba workshops have the opportunity to perform at various events.

Vignette 2, Video excerpt - Children participating in a gumboot dance performance as part of the annual school concert at Prince George Primary.

In this excerpt, the community musicians take the group of children through a series of call and response activities ranging from gumboot dancing to musical games. In the background, you hear the audience, consisting of family, friends, teachers, and community members, enthusiastically encouraging the children.

Video: https://youtu.be/_ZjirFglwsE

This musical moment creates the space for a community to celebrate the resources that remain intact and in fact flourishing, within an adversity-saturated environment. It demonstrates the social connection between children and their gumboot dance coaches - young men from Lavender Hill or similar communities - who serve as positive male role models in a place where the majority of children are growing up without present father figures⁸. Within the bigger context of the everyday lives of the people living in Lavender Hill this is a small moment and it is fleeting. However, we prefer to think of this musical moment as flocking in action, where the relationships created among community musicians, children, and the community, enables an empowering ecology that supports the resilience of children growing up in this high-risk environment (Ebersöhn, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper contextualised the MusicWorks project in Lavender Hill within the framework of a social ecological understanding of resilience. Ebersöhn's theory of flocking has informed our understanding of how relationships can be mobilised to foster an empowering ecology that supports resilience. The project offers a range of music/music therapy experiences tapping into the existing resources within the children and their school community and offering safe and enabling spaces that strengthens and supports children's pathways to resilience.

This project in Lavender Hill is ongoing and provides a range of avenues for practice-based research on this theme of resilience and how music can be helpful to people living in communities where adversity is complex, multi-leveled, and persistent.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this paper the use of the term “gangsterism” is located firmly within the South African context, where terminology around “gangs” and “gangsterism” refers to a specific grouping of people who are involved in highly structured gangs whose criminal activity revolve mainly around illicit drug trade, with links to local and international organized crime networks (Chetty, 2015; Goga, 2014; Shaw and Skywalker, 2016; Goga, 2014; Wegner et al., 2018). Several authors have linked the proliferation of gangs, specifically in Cape Town, to the forced removals of people during 1960 to 1980 as part of the Apartheid government’s Group Areas Act (Chetty, 2015; Goga, 2014; Kinnes, 2017; Steinberg, 2004).
2. Although music therapy is a recognised health care profession regulated by the Health Professions Council of South Africa, public health services do not yet include music therapy, and music therapy is therefore mostly only available to people who can afford to access private health care services - only 17.4% of the population (Statssa, 2016).
3. This project is located in the community of Lavender Hill. According to the City of Cape Town’s 2011 census, only 18% of people aged 20 years and older living in Lavender Hill completed secondary school, and the unemployment rate of the labour force is 42% (Statssa, 2011).
4. When founded in 2003, this non-profit organisation was named the Music Therapy Community Clinic. It changed its name to MusicWorks in 2014.
5. Several researchers on South African gangs describe how gangs appeared and developed within a context of resistance to colonial and apartheid oppression of indigenous people (Kinnes, 2017; Petrus & Kinnes, 2018; Pinnock, 2016; Steinberg, 2004). Current research shows that today, in post-apartheid South Africa, in communities who continue to be marginalised in their access to economic and social resources gang membership continues to offer an attractive option for young men (Chetty, 2015). In neighbourhoods like Lavender Hill, “gang involvement offers social support, material resources including drugs and money, independence, thrills and excitement, and serves the purpose of providing a sense of belonging and of proving manhood” (Wegner et al., 2018, p. 34). The community relates to the gangs in often contradictory ways. In Lavender Hill, where structured, organised and powerful gangs have a specific strong-hold, there exists both a fear of and allegiance to the gangs (Leggett 2016; Shaw and Skywalker 2016; Standing 2003). People express a strong fear of gang-related violence, yet, at the same time the gangs provide security against rival gangs and social services in the form of feeding schemes and the sponsoring of local soccer teams.
6. Gumboot dance is an indigenous South African dance performed by dancers wearing Wellington boots.
7. Circle of Courage is a youth development model based on the principles of mastery, belonging, independence, and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Bockern, 1990).
8. A household survey conducted by Statistics SA in 2017 found the biological father of 61.8% of children younger than 18 were absent from the household (Statssa, 2017). Within the context of Lavender Hill this rings true and the majority of the children accessing our project are being raised by their mothers or grandmothers.

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