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"Not a Note in My Head":

Reflecting on Musical Identity through Kodály-inspired Community Music Therapy

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Received 24 January 2024; Accepted 26 August 2024; Published 1 November 2024
Editor: Maevon Gumble
Reviewers: Luca Tiszai, Megan Ellen Steele

Abstract

Research on the health and well-being benefits of participating in music therapy initiatives such as group singing and drumming is steadily increasing. Community music therapy aims to render such initiatives more accessible to people who are marginalised due to race, gender, age and socio-economic status for example. This study focuses on people who are reluctant to participate in such musical initiatives because of negative self-beliefs about their musical identity. Previous studies have investigated the reasons behind these negative self-beliefs among certain populations, but there is a lack of research surrounding music therapy interventions that address this issue. This study aimed to explore reasons behind people's negative self-beliefs about their musical identity among an Irish population. This study further aimed to investigate whether an intervention involving a Kodály-inspired community music therapy approach could produce a shift in those negative self-beliefs. Data gathered from seven participants during semi-structured preliminary and exit interviews and a 3-week focus group intervention was analysed using thematic analysis. It was found that negative self-beliefs about one's musical identity were constructed from negative early experiences of music education and through adopting Irish society's tendency to polarise people into musical and non-musical categories. These factors have contributed to many Irish people's reluctance to participate in active music-making opportunities. Findings also revealed that participating in a Kodály-inspired community music therapy intervention produced a positive shift in people's musical identity and a potential to consider participating in future active music-making opportunities. A Kodály-inspired community music therapy model of practice is proposed.

Keywords: music therapy; community music therapy; music education; the Kodály philosophy; musical identity; negative self-beliefs

VOICES: A WORLD FORUM FOR MUSIC THERAPY | VOL 24 | NO 3 | 2024
Publisher: GAMUT - Grieg Academy Music Therapy Research Centre (NORCE & University of Bergen)
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.15845/voices.v24i3.4067

Purpose of This Study

This exploratory study aimed to examine people's negative self-beliefs about their own musicality. This study also aimed to investigate if participating in a Kodály-inspired community music therapy (CoMT) intervention can produce a shift in those beliefs. People who considered themselves to be non-musical were invited to take part in this study comprising of one-to-one preliminary phone interviews; three weekly workshops consisting of a focus group discussion, musicianship training, and group improvisation; and one-to-one exit phone interviews.

Personal Stance of the Researcher

I qualified with an honours degree in psychology from the University of Galway in 2005 but decided to postpone my postgraduate studies to focus on starting a family. I continued to work part-time as a professional musician and piano teacher until 2009 when I was first introduced to the Kodály concept of music education. Having taught according to more traditional methods, I was impressed and excited by Kodály's pedagogical concept of musicianship through active music-making. Additionally, I was intrigued with the overarching philosophy of the importance of making music accessible to everyone. I trained in a Kodály-based early years musicianship program called Colourstrings and qualified as an associate teacher in 2011. In addition to setting up kindergarten classes, I continued to train in the Kodály methodology, applying the approach to instrumental and choral teaching. For the past fourteen years, I have been running programs according to the Kodály concept, and my passion for this holistic and inclusive approach continues to grow as I observe not only the steady musical development but also the non-musical effects of this approach on children of all ages and ability.

Children who attend the Colourstrings kindergarten classes are accompanied by parents, grandparents, minders, aunties, uncles, and friends who find themselves taking an active part in these busy music and movement classes. I have had the pleasure of getting to know many families and indeed make some life-long friends along the way. Like a large jar finally filling up with small pebbles, it eventually occurred to me that it was time to turn my attention towards the people who raise these young musicians and finally acknowledge what they had been trying to tell me all along—their own musical story.

Many families reported that the reason they enrolled their young children in Colourstrings was because they felt it was a more holistic, fun, and encouraging introduction to music than the one they themselves had. Over the years I listened to many stories of negative early experiences of instrumental lessons, music in school, and singing situations, as well as people's regret at the lack of exposure to music when they were young. Although the impact of these early negative associations with active music-making was powerful enough to result in people seeking alternative avenues into music education for their own children, these parents seemed to accept and even joke about the fact that they had closed this whole realm of musical experience off for themselves.

The decision to pursue a master's degree in music therapy was a direct result of my years working as a Kodály educator, which had taken me on a journey from a narrow focus on instrumental skill acquisition to wholeheartedly embracing the potential of music to nurture the whole person. A requirement of the music therapy master's degree was to conduct a research project in the final year. This allowed me the opportunity to combine my learning as a music therapy student with my capacity as a Kodály educator to design an intervention to address the issue of people's negative beliefs about their musical identity.

Introduction

Music therapy (MT) is a creative arts intervention which has seen an expansion in recent years in terms of diversity of approaches and its use in a wide range of settings. According to Bruscia (2014), “Music therapy is a systematic process of intervention wherein the therapist helps the client to promote health using music experiences and the relationships that develop through them as dynamic forces of change” (p. 23). In terms of this study, the music therapist has an active role in facilitating a group of people to explore how actively engaging in music can lead to positive change.

Community Music Therapy

Community music therapy (CoMT) is an approach to the use of music in therapy that is sensitive to cultures and contexts (Ansdell & Pavlicevic, 2004) and which aims to reach those populations that have conventionally been excluded from musical engagement and experience due to factors such as low socio-economic background, gender and racial inequality, or illness. In the traditional biomedical model of MT the client-therapist session usually takes place in the MT room of the hospital, nursing home or school for instance where the clients are present by referral. People who are reluctant to participate in musical initiatives because of their negative self-beliefs about their musical identity may be unlikely to engage in music therapy. The practice of CoMT on the other hand aims to meet people in their own social and cultural environments, where they have an active role in the degree to which they participate. This can pose challenges in terms of reaching those in the community that could potentially benefit most from CoMT interventions.

The relatively new field of CoMT has many definitions and approaches. In their book *Invitation to community music therapy*, Stige and Aarø (2011) introduce the metaphor “attending to unheard voices” which suggests a collaborative approach to the therapeutic process. They offer the following description of CoMT, which fits well with the population in this study: “Community music therapy encourages musical participation and social inclusion, equitable access to resources and collaborative efforts for health and wellbeing in contemporary societies” (p. 11).

Group Singing for Well-Being

Research on the benefits of group singing is steadily growing (Moss et al., 2018; Moss & O’Donoghue, 2020) and is not just confined to CoMT studies (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). In recent research conducted by the MT department in University of Limerick, a mixed methods survey was employed to catalogue and map all singing for health and wellbeing groups in the republic of Ireland (Heilitzer & Moss, 2022). The aims of this survey were to determine how group members prioritise health outcomes, understand what they consider success and to identify gaps in provision. Also explored were group members’ reports on issues including negative childhood musical experiences, benefits of the voice as an accessible musical instrument, and opportunity for skill development for marginalised groups.

The Problem of Participation

Despite such available research on the benefits of CoMT initiatives, people who have internalised negative beliefs about their musicality may be too reluctant to put themselves forward for participating in musical situations which may require them to sing or play in front of other people (Ruddock & Leong, 2005). As will be demonstrated in the results of this research, the tendency of Irish traditional music culture to hail instrumental virtuosity may also present a barrier for people wishing to participate in social music-making.

Furthermore, it is possible that these therapeutic initiatives designed to promote well-being, because of their contextual similarity to previous negative music education or community experiences, actually evoke negative feelings for this population. Reaching out to this group from a CoMT perspective requires a sensitive approach and one which both acknowledges and aims to understand these experiences while at the same time aiming to address them.

The Kodály Philosophy

Zoltan Kodály (1882-1967) was a Hungarian composer, music pedagogue and ethnomusicologist known for his unique approach to musicianship through group singing. While his main aim was music education for everyone (Kodály, 1974), with the help of his students who continue to develop his concept, Kodály's approach spread internationally to a wide variety of cultures and contexts.

According to this concept, solid musical skill is developed by embodying the basic elements of music through singing and movement in a gradual process which builds musical skill and thereby confidence.

Rhythm syllables (e.g., TA for crotchet and TI for quaver) are recited and clapped during activities such as partner clapping and circle games. The Kodály approach to pitch development and understanding is achieved by the use of *relative solfa* characterised by a moveable DO which makes use of hand signs which together with the voice help to embody the relationship between tones. The visual syllables are introduced only when these concepts are secure internally.

Figure 1. Solfa Syllables and Hand Signs Used in Kodály Musicianship Training.

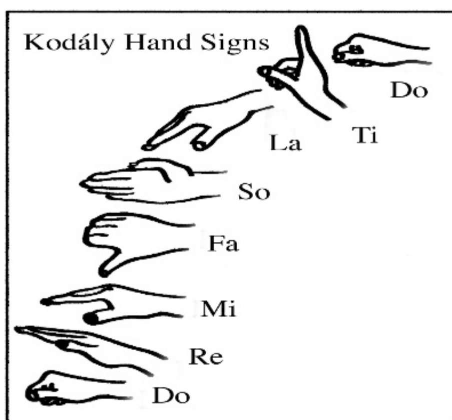

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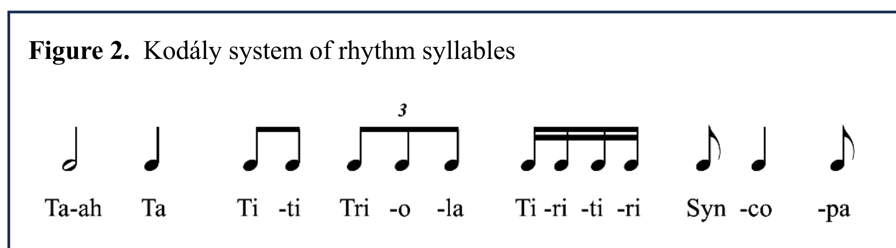
Figure 2. Rhythm Syllables Used in Kodály Musicianship Training.



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Kodály's philosophy is aimed at making music accessible with the belief that everyone has the capacity to acquire and develop some degree of musical skill. More specifically, this is possible with both the right musical environment supported by a creative and encouraging facilitator as well as a willingness of an individual to engage in active music-making.

Literature Review

The first part of this review focused on searching the available literature around the phenomenon of people's negative beliefs about their musicality. While the majority of the studies reviewed identify early negative musical experiences as the reason for people's negative beliefs about their musicality, the review revealed a lack of literature on music therapy interventions to address this problem. Several studies examined musical training interventions with people who were told as children that they could not sing. Other studies involved people who identified as non-musical but did not specify singing. For simplification purposes, the participants of these studies will be described collectively as people with negative beliefs about their musicality (PNBM). This review also aimed to gather all possible literature on the connection between the Kodály concept and Community Music Therapy (CoMT) to explore how these two philosophies could be combined to create an intervention to address this phenomenon. The databases PsycInfo, Cochrane, Web of Science, Scopus, and the University of Limerick library catalogue were searched using Boolean operators on the keywords: group singing interventions, self-perceptions, non-singers, the Kodály concept, and community music therapy. The reference sections of retrieved literature were also used. These searches were conducted between September 2022 and November 2022.

Musical Identity: The Non-Singer

It is believed that all humans are born with a natural ability to sing (Cooke, 2004, as cited in Whidden, 2010), but some people for various reasons hold the belief that they cannot sing. One study conducted by Steve Demorest at al. (2017) revealed that people who identified themselves as tone deaf were told as children that they were not able to sing, and they tended to opt out of musical experiences and opportunities later in life. This was a decision many regretted. Irish people who identify themselves as being unable to sing also tend to use the term tone deaf. It is also not uncommon to hear someone describing themselves as "not having a note in their head." There is a medical condition called *congenital amusia* which is described as the inability to distinguish between two tones, but this condition is quite rare. In a quantitative study by Wise and Sloboda (2008) participants were assessed on a range of measures for musical perception, cognition, memory, production and self-ratings of performance. The group who self-identified as tone deaf performed significantly less well than the non-tone deaf group in all measures, but did not qualify as having congenital amusia. In his narrative investigation of singing and social anxiety arising within the context of a music methods course for elementary school teachers, Abril (2007) found that all participants traced the roots of their anxiety to negative experiences in a school music program. In a study by Ruddock (2012), data from pilot interviewees was used to structure conversations with the research cohort, most of whom perceived themselves to be non-musical. Ruddock found that beliefs about their musicality were due to negative previous musical experiences and the western cultural system that reinforced these beliefs.

As the initial literature search revealed a significant body of research on the roots of these negative beliefs, the next stage of the review included the terms group singing intervention and community music therapy. These searches revealed several cross-disciplinary studies investigating the effects of various music interventions on people's

self-identified negative musical beliefs. In a narrative enquiry by Whidden (2010), a music education intervention was employed to investigate whether or not it is possible for PNBM to reverse their identity through a positive singing experience. Nine out of the twelve participants experienced a positive change in their identity. This study also revealed that the label of non-singer arises out of a particular circumstance in a western culture. In a randomized trial involving a music education intervention using either group singing or acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) to improve singing confidence, group singing was found to have a positive effect on self-perceived tone-deafness (Swain & Bodkin-Allen, 2017). Participants also reported perceived benefits through the group experience itself. In a group singing intervention study conducted by Canadian music therapist Nicola Oddy (2011), a group of six people who were told as children that they could not sing were invited to rediscover their voices through introspective singing during five workshops designed to enable them to sing together in a non-judgemental environment focusing on discovery rather than product. Oddy used a non-threatening group therapy approach where she first invited the group to focus on their breath only. The second session involved vocalising sounds. In subsequent sessions she used various music therapy techniques and the tools of solfège syllables taken from the Kodály philosophy to facilitate pitching. This study was developed into a clinical model of practice which the author continues to use.

Most of the above studies employed group singing interventions which share a common link with the growing field of CoMT.

Community Music Therapy and Music Education

Literature in the field of CoMT often overlaps with other disciplines such as community music (O'Grady & McFerran, 2007) and research on the effects of group singing on well-being is often conducted by music educators (Ruddock, 2012; Swain & Bodkin-Allen, 2017). Music education researchers John Sloboda and Jane Davidson conducted several years of research on group singing investigating the role culture and context plays in people's relationship to music (Howe et al., 1998; Wise & Sloboda, 2008). One such study interviewed members of two different marginalised group choirs, and one theme that arose from the data included the challenge of musical identity (Davidson, 2011). This research revealed a fear of music participation in Western cultures due to a lack of exposure and confidence.

The Kodály Philosophy and Music Therapy

Literature on the application of Kodály concepts in MT can be found as far back as the 1970s (Lathom, 1974). Research on the non-musical effects of the Kodály approach focuses on the areas of cognitive, emotional, and social skills development in children. Examples of studies on cognitive development include examining the effects of a Kodály intervention on joint attention in children with autism (Chiengchana & Trakarnrung, 2014); spatial reasoning of kindergarten children (Hansen, 2003); temporal and spatial abilities of primary grade children (Hurwitz et al., 1975); and sensorimotor entrainment on cognitive, linguistic, musical and social skills (Maróti et al., 2019).

Aspects of Kodály's philosophy have also been used to facilitate emotional expression and social interaction with a variety of populations. Klára Kokas (1929-2010)—a Hungarian music pedagogue, researcher and psychology professor who was a student and co-worker of Kodály—developed a unique creative dance approach to music learning deeply rooted in Kodály's philosophy and which is now recognised and used by music specialists internationally. Her sessions and notes were compiled in short films of more than 6 hours known collectively as "The Worlds Discovered in Music." The third DVD of this collection is dedicated to her application of the approach to people with additional

needs. While Klára Kokas felt that applying a traditional frame of therapy to her approach would limit the improvisational nature of her sessions, her work is regarded as holding considerable potential for music therapy particularly for adults with severe learning disabilities (Tiszai, 2018).

The Kodály Philosophy and CoMT

Kodály's belief that music belongs to everyone and his ideas about the power of music extended beyond the classroom to its role in the building of a nation (Chosky, 1974). Recent research has discovered a link between the philosophy of Kodály and CoMT. According to Tiszai Luca (2015), while the Kodály philosophy is an educational approach that promotes social changes on a national level, CoMT considers the social context from the perspective of the individuals or groups themselves. Both approaches agree that music has the power "to heal and strengthen communities as well as individuals" (Ruud, 2010, p. 27).

Improvisation is a main feature of both philosophies. In her book on CoMT and intellectual disability, Tiszai (2019) describes how Kodály referred to the encouraged use of improvisation in human musical history. Taking folk song and baroque music as an example, Kodály maintained that most humans have the capacity to improvise if they are allowed to. For Kodály, the main role of improvisation was to practice skills and to develop a deeper understanding of music, and his teaching reflects this with improvisational elements included in the teaching of rhythm, melody, harmony and styles. By comparison, improvisation in MT does not require any previous musical skill or training and was one of the first techniques used by music therapists such as Nordoff and Robbins in the 1950s (Tiszai, 2019). The practice of improvisation in MT is informed by research such as Stern's affect attunement and vitality affects (Stern et al. 1985, as cited in Tiszai, 2019) and communicative musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009), both based on the innate non-verbal dialogue between mother and infant. While this form of spontaneous improvisation has been largely associated with the biomedical model of MT, a growing body of literature is demonstrating the transforming power of improvisation in group therapy contexts (McFerran & Wigram, 2007).

Kodály-Inspired CoMT Intervention

There is a lack of research specific to the target population considered in this study within an Irish context. In her doctoral thesis examining primary school music teaching in Ireland, Kerin (2019) found that one of the main contributary factors to teachers' self-reported lack of confidence was a belief that they themselves were unmusical—a finding which appears to be consistent with research presented in this literature review. Considering the above findings in an Irish context, I propose designing a focus group MT intervention that combines elements of the Kodály approach and CoMT and includes both musical improvisation and basic musical skill acquisition to address this phenomenon.

Research Questions

Previous research on peoples' negative self-beliefs about their musical identity has been conducted mainly within the domain of music education. This study aims to explore this phenomenon through a music therapy lens by embedding elements of the Kodály concept within a CoMT framework.

Research Question 1: What are the causes of people's negative beliefs about their musical identity?

Research Question 2: Can a Kodály-inspired group music therapy intervention based on CoMT principles produce a shift in peoples' negative beliefs about their musical identity?

Methodology

This exploratory study aims to examine people's negative self-beliefs about their own musicality. This study also aims to investigate if participating in a Kodály-inspired community music therapy (CoMT) intervention can produce a shift in those beliefs. This section will explain how this research was carried out. Firstly, the research paradigm underpinning the choice of methodology is discussed. This is followed by a description of the research method including the granting of ethical approval, participants and sampling, and a brief outline of the data collection procedure including details of the semi-structured interviews and the focus group intervention. This section will conclude with a description of how the data was analysed and possible limitations of the study.

Research Paradigm

Preliminary interviews uncovered a number of common themes. These were presented to the focus group. Personal stories and assumptions about musical identity were discussed. Larger social and cultural issues also arose moving the focus from the personal inner experience to the impact of Irish culture in general. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979, as cited in Holden & Lynch, 2004), a regulatory view of society assumes that society evolves rationally and is viewed as unified and cohesive, whereas the radical change view sees society in constant conflict as humans rebel against the controlling power of societal structures. As the importance of cultural and societal influences on the participants' beliefs became clear, a social constructionist ontology was deemed the most appropriate philosophical stance from which to address the phenomenon. Social constructionism differs from constructivism in that it is believed that reality is interpreted in an intersubjective way between people who share a specific culture and language rather than coming from their own minds (Crotty, 1998, as cited in Hiller, 2016; Pascale, 2011 as cited in Hiller, 2016; Schwandt, 1994 as cited in Hiller, 2016).

Research Design

Research methods in the social sciences including music therapy are evolving and expanding and the resulting terminology can be confusing (Edwards, 2012). Informed by methods applied in similar studies in recent social science literature, a qualitative design was chosen for this study. Recent years has seen a growth in the use of qualitative methods in government-funded social science research where data and interpretation from multiple qualitative studies are combined and used to inform practice and theory (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2017). As the primary aim of this research was to gain an understanding of why people have formed certain negative beliefs about their musical identity, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain preliminary information. To explore this phenomenon in more depth, the second part of this study involved an active music making intervention conducted over three consecutive weeks consisting of three parts: focus group discussion, Kodály musicianship training, and group improvisation.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a research methodology that has become a widely used tool for the analysis of qualitative data (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2017). It can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches, is compatible with a social

constructionist paradigm, and is suitable for an under-explored area such as the present study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Method

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study has been granted by the university research committee (2022-11-5). Participants were informed of this study by email and invited to attend if they wished. Those who volunteered to participate in the study received an information letter, a research privacy notice and a consent form sent out by a separate gatekeeper explaining the aims of the research and description of the 3-week workshop focus group. Participants were given 2 weeks after the invitation without any contact from the researcher to ensure they had sufficient time to consider.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was employed in this study as the area of interest focused on a specific population (Keith, 2016). Participants were parents and or grandparents of children attending the Athenry Music School who volunteered to take part in this research project and who fit the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria involved participants who reported negative beliefs about their musical identity and regret that this belief has prevented them from engaging in active music making. People who reported a negative self-perception about their musical identity but who nonetheless regularly participated in active music-making were excluded from this study. For the purposes of anonymity the participants' names have been changed in the results section.

Data collection procedure

Data was obtained from transcripts of preliminary and exit interviews and three focus group discussions.

Preliminary semi-structured interviews

Participants who volunteered by replying to the initial email and who supplied their phone number were contacted by phone message to arrange a date and time for interview. Interviews were conducted over the phone, with a maximum duration of 20 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed using the application Otter. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions informed by similar studies and with consultation of the researcher's supervisor. All recordings were deleted after the transcriptions were edited. Nine participants in total were interviewed. Six participants agreed to take part in the focus group workshops.

Focus group workshops—Setting

The focus group workshops took place in a quiet, spacious teaching room in the Athenry Music School. Materials for the study were supplied by the researcher and included a variety of drums (including djembes, congas, bodhrans and bongos), claves and rhythm flashcards.

Focus group workshops—Technique

The workshop intervention consisted of three sections: Focus group discussion, Kodály musicianship training, and group improvisation (based on CoMT principles). While the

researcher had written up a plan for the first workshop in order to frame the session, a certain amount of room was given to allowing the session to emerge. The researcher was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic and so made the steps very clear to the participants. The participants were informed when parts of the workshop were being recorded. Participants were reminded at the end of the third session that the second interview would be conducted within a week and that they would receive an email to arrange a suitable time. Field notes of the workshops can be found in the Appendix.

Exit semi-structured interviews

In total five participants who had completed two or more focus group workshops were interviewed again one week after the last workshop. The researcher used eight open-ended questions relevant to the second research question which aimed to investigate if a shift in self-perceptions of musical identity had occurred. Participants were given an opportunity to review their transcripts and all recordings were deleted after the transcriptions were edited.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step model of TA was used to analyse the data corpus. As the researcher had previous theoretical interests about the research topic and focused mainly on in-depth analysis of certain aspects of the data, a latent, theoretical approach to the analysis was taken (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Extracts were taken from each transcript and coded according to what appeared relevant to or specifically addressed the research questions. An example of a coded extract from a preliminary interview is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of a Coded Extract from a Preliminary Interview.

Data Extract	Coded for
"Exactly yeah, that's my question too—like, you know, we drive around our kids and we bring them to every lesson going. Like, where's the opportunity for the adults to do something to do something similar and not be embarrassed that you can't at your age you know, know notes, or beats or anything. You know? "(Amy)	1. Why can't adults have the same opportunities as young people? 2. Something for adults to participate in without being embarrassed about your age or lack of musical knowledge.

Following the initial coding process a search for themes was facilitated by organising them into colour-coded tables such as those identified in the preliminary interview data set in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Preliminary Theme Search.

Theme 1: Musicality is genetic	**Theme 6: I would not do anything individually where people could hear me. I lack confidence.**
Theme 2: Regret	**Theme 7: Music for well-being**
Theme 3: Failure of education system	**Theme 8: Past experiences**
Theme 4: Lack of music in home life	**Theme 9: It would be nice to sing/play with others**
Theme 5: Education will improve your confidence	**Theme 10: The role of culture**

The research questions informed the revising of all themes identified in the entire data set into five main themes which are presented in the following results chapter.

Limitations

This study was prone to an element of experimenter bias due to the researcher's previous theoretical and personal interest in the topic. Responder bias is also a potential limitation as this study was conducted locally and all of the participants except one were previously known to the researcher. Taking into account the small sample size and the fact that the invitation to take part in this study was advertised through one music school only, the sample investigated may not be representative of the population in question. Possible limitations of the choice of questions will be discussed later in this article.

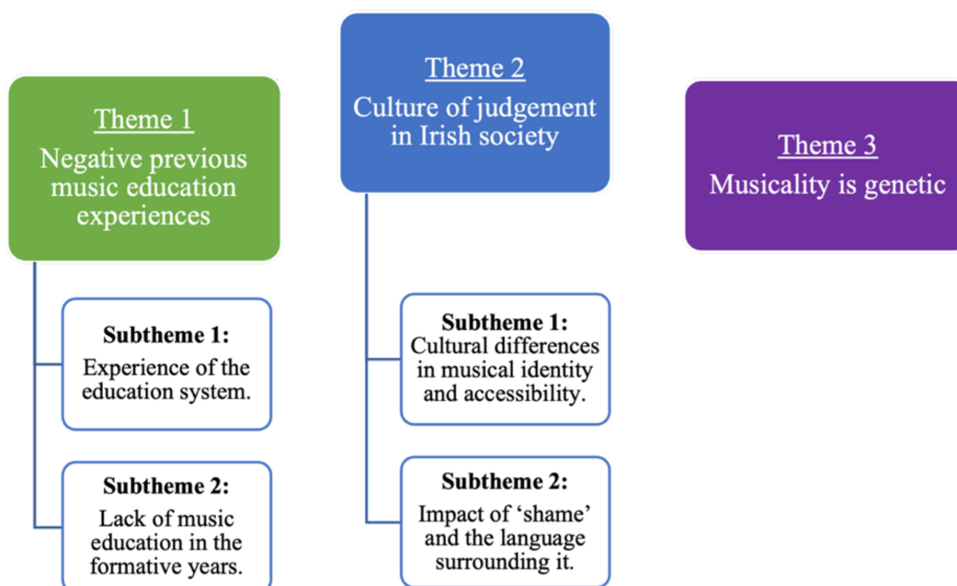
Findings

Five themes were identified in relation to the research questions. Seven participants completed the preliminary interview. Six of the participants took part in workshop 1. Five of the participants took part in workshop 2 and three participants took part in all three workshops. The five participants who took part in two or more workshops completed the exit interview. Pseudonyms were used for anonymity.

Research Question 1

Thematic analysis was applied to the data which identified three main themes for research question 1: What are the causes of people's negative self-beliefs about their musical identity?

Figure 3. Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1.



Theme 1: Negative previous music education experiences

Six out of the seven participants who completed the preliminary interview reported a negative music educational experience in childhood. Two key subthemes were identified: (1) Experience of the education system, and (2) Lack of music education in the formative years.

Experience of the education system

When asked about their previous music education experiences most participants described a negative association with music teachers both in school and privately. Exposure to music in primary school mainly revolved around singing in choirs and playing in school bands. Some participants reported that they were asked to sit out of choir because they were told they couldn't sing.

> *"I think I think it's because of that experience in school, I think, I think like…. it just kind of probably came back to that where two or three of us was told to sit down because we couldn't sing. But that was kind of funny, but not funny."* (Pat)

One participant shared that she believed she was given the triangle in the school band because that was all she could play.

> *"Even back in my school band, I was playing the triangle. I don't even think I was trusted with the tambourine. It would be the triangle (laughs). So yeah, probably I consider that it was a pretty minimal effort or musical ability instrument."* (Helen)

One participant described her piano lessons experience.

> *"I was never good at piano… I was told to kind of give up piano (laughs)."* (Jane)

A tone of regret in some of the responses was also noted by the researcher.

> *"But I enjoy singing and it's always something I'd always say, well, sooner win a million euros or be able to sing and I'd pick being able to sing so it's kind of just, it was never encouraged. I was I was very quickly and easily discouraged and then that stopped it dead in its tracks."* (Pat)

Lack of music education in the formative years

Apart from the school system and private music lessons some participants identified a lack of exposure to music both in the home and in the wider community.

> *"yeah, I regret my complete lack of exposure to any sort of opportunity to learn music at a young age, you know, kind of toddler child. There was no music in our house… We never got the opportunity—there probably wasn't even an opportunity for people to access music lessons. That was something that belonged to the rich."* (Rebecca*)*

Theme 2: Culture of judgement in Irish society

As one participant had spent several years living among other cultures in Asia and South America, his stories generated discussions among the group from which two key subthemes were identified: (1) Cultural differences in musical identity and accessibility, and (2) Impact of shame and the language surrounding it.

Cultural differences in musical identity and accessibility

The participant who had lived abroad compared his experience of the inclusivity and joy in shared music-making and being encouraged to sing in Asian and South American cultures with being met with old prejudices and exclusivity in music participation when he returned to Ireland.

> *"Very multicultural (Brazil) and everyone is moving and dancing so it's a completely different atmosphere… You're just happier… Galway is known for great musicians but in Brazil even out in the small country towns music is everywhere."* (Matt)

In discussing the freedom of other cultures to sing and dance together because "*they're not afraid to be judged*" *(Amy),* comparisons were made with Irish society around musical identity and accessibility where participants agreed on the difficulty in joining in social music making circles such as traditional Irish music sessions for example.

> *"If you aren't very good. Yeah. Like, you wouldn't feel free to do it either, you know, even if you want to."* (Carol)

> *"I think our mindset is that they're musical and you're not so you just leave them to it. Is it—a bit?"* (Jane)

Impact of shame and the language surrounding it

Participants agreed that part of the problem around trying to participate is the fear of being shamed. Being criticised for one's singing voice is particularly hurtful because it is "*part of you" (Helen)* and commonly used language and clichés such as "*don't quit the day job" (Carol),* serve to further solidify the impact.

> "*Shaming has become part of our psyche—it has become second nature to feel they have the right to judge."* (Rebecca)

Theme 3: Musicality is genetic

In the preliminary interview all participants reported that they believed musical ability to be genetic.

> *"I don't know where my son gets the music from. It's not in either of our families."* (Amy)

Some participants tended to describe someone musical as having a gift or lucky enough to have a talent, but most participants agreed that while it helps to be predisposed to it, with hard work most people have the capacity to learn music.

> *"I think music can be learned with time and effort and how long it takes depends on how gifted you are."* (Matt)

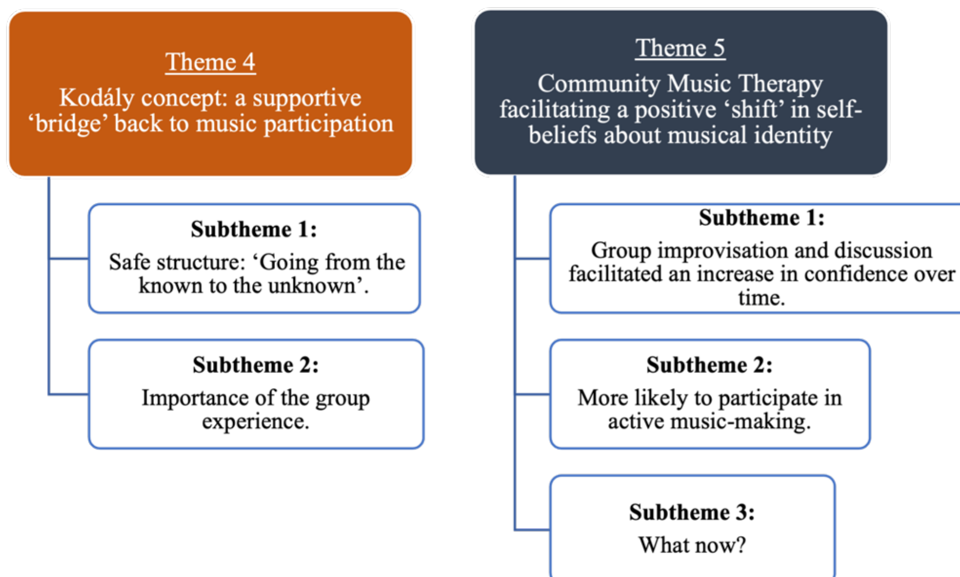
Later in the same interview this participant also mentioned the importance of the early musical environment.

> *"I used to think it was a gift but now I think it is more to do with growing up in the right environment where you are free to enjoy music."* (Matt)

Research Question 2

Thematic analysis was applied to the data which identified two main themes for research question 2: Can a Kodály-inspired group music therapy intervention based on CoMT principles produce a shift in peoples' negative beliefs about their musical identity?

Figure 4. Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2.



Theme 4: The Kodály concept—a supportive bridge back to music participation

Analysis of the data from the focus group discussions and exit interviews identified two key subthemes in relation to the Kodály music training experience: (1) The feeling of safety in the approach of going from the known to the unknown and (2) The experience of learning in a group.

Safe structure: Going from the known to the unknown

Participants reported a feeling of safety which they felt was achieved due to the enjoyable nature of the active approach and the stepwise progression of moving on to a new concept only when the previous learned concept was secure.

> *"Going from the known to the unknown… made it easy."* (Helen)

> *"It has made music as a subject maybe not as frightening as it was... I really like the work you do on the beats and explaining, you know, the TI and tacka and TI TI or something you know, and it starts to make a bit of sense you know... or the way you explain it just is really helpful..."* (Amy)

The group experience

The Kodály approach of group active music making involving marching, saying and playing rhythms, partner clapping, and call/response activities was described by most of the participants as challenging at first, but that it became progressively easier and more enjoyable as the weeks went on.

> *"I felt a bit foolish (laughs) when we were kind of dancing. But by the end, I actually felt a bit free and I was more I was more willing to participate and if you had offered another session or two I would have gone as well. Because it took that for me to actually break down the barrier or open up, you know."* (Matt)

Some of the participants reported that one of their biggest challenges was talking in front of the group about their insecurities around music and associated feelings of embarrassment and shame.

> *"I suppose voicing saying how frightened I was and how I feared music, that kind of like.. I felt shameful in saying that like or felt a bit stupid saying it, you know, I think that was the most difficult. Just acknowledging it."* (Jane)

However, as the focus group discussions progressed and participants realised the similarities in their stories, an ease developed within the group which facilitated the learning process.

> *"It's an eye opener to think, you know, I'm not the only one out there. You know, it's not it's not abnormal. Like, it wasn't my fault."* (Jane)

Theme 5: Community Music Therapy facilitating a positive shift in self-beliefs about musical identity

The musical concepts (basic pulse and rhythm skills) acquired in the Kodály training part of the workshop each week were then applied to a group improvisation activity directly after (see Appendix). Week 1 and 2 involved mainly instruments only apart from the end of the improvisation in week 2 where the researcher offered a humming drone but was not joined by the group. However as musical confidence grew through experiential group learning and an ease developed between the group members, in the final session in week 3 the researcher decided to introduce a vocal improvisation which she first demonstrated and then opened the invitation up to the group. All three group members present in this final session took part in this improvisation which included a wide variety of vocalisations from vowel sounds and tongue rolling to animal and bird screeching. A very excited and good-humoured focus group discussion followed. Analysis from the three focus group discussions and the five exit interviews identified three key subthemes: (1) Group improvisation and discussion facilitated an increase in musical confidence over time, (2) Increase in the likelihood to participate in future active music-making, and (3) What happens next?

Group improvisation and discussion facilitated an increase in (musical) confidence over time

The participants all agreed that it took time to develop the courage and confidence to improvise but that the feelings of well-being afterwards were worth it.

> *"There was a bit of performance pressure and we were a bit shy about doing it but ... I think once we did it it turned out to be a good laugh in the end. Singing makes you happy."* (Matt)

> *"It takes a while to build up to, to that level of trust in the room that you feel, feel free to be able to vocalise any sound and not be judged. And so, by the time we were, you know, that was workshop three, you know, that.. I felt comfortable in the group to be able to, to do something like that. I can't say oh, like, I don't think I would have been happy week one. If that was introduced. That'd be too. Too far too soon."* (Amy)

Increase in the likelihood to participate in future active music-making

While there was an obvious caution around claiming that the intervention had changed how they felt about their own musicality, most participants reported a shift in their relationship to music participation.

> *"I still wouldn't .. I wouldn't say I'm musical. I definitely wouldn't say I'm musical but I'd say I'd have ability. You know, to start you know, to learn or you know."* (Jane)

Informed by the years of hearing about her students' parents and grandparents' inhibitions

around their voice, a conscious effort was made to focus the interview questions on music in general and only three structured questions pertained to singing specifically. Introducing the Kodály concept in the first workshop included explaining his belief that the voice is our most important instrument. As it turned out that participants did choose to improvise vocally in the last session, the following question was added to the exit interview: How do you feel about your singing voice now? Four out of the five participants reported that, while they still would not feel comfortable being singled out or singing solo, they would consider singing in a group situation in the future.

What next?

All five group members who completed the exit interview expressed interest in participating in active music making either through joining a choir or drumming circle, or instrumental lessons in the future. If continuing, they also expressed their eagerness to participate in weekly Kodály-inspired community music therapy.

> *"If you said to me, there's going to be an adult Colourstrings I will be there 100%."* (Rebecca)

> *"I miss it already. There's already a void. You know, you'd make the effort on a Sunday afternoon, you feel so good after it."* (Amy)

Participants also expressed interest in hearing about the results of the study and reported that participating in the study was a positive experience for them.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the Causes of People's Negative Self-beliefs About Their Musical Identity?

Participants' negative beliefs about their musical identity were attributed to the themes of negative previous musical experiences within the education system and lack of access to music education in the formative years. Their reported memories of teachers' negative comments both in the public school system and in private instrumental lessons are consistent with previous research (Abril, 2007; Whidden, 2010). Some participants had already made a clear connection between the experience of being told by a figure in authority that they could not sing and the impact this had on their belief about their musical identity, while for other participants this association only became clear towards the end of the intervention possibly facilitated by the focus group discussion.

Additionally, there were factors that contributed to participants' confidence in their musical identity. Most participants were aware of a lack of exposure to musical experiences growing up both within the family home and the wider social community due to family interest, finances, or availability of local musical opportunities. Research by Demorest et al. (2017) suggests that a child's family's participation in music can predict that child's likelihood to choose music as a subject in school. Access to community music opportunities could have provided a more positive experience outside of school for those who were unsupported by the education system.

Within the second theme centred on the culture of judgement in Irish society, focus group discussions on cultural differences in musical identity and accessibility led to acknowledging the fear of being shamed in Ireland in general for trying to better oneself. This contributed to feeling ashamed to sing or play in front of others for fear of being judged. The language used further contributed to internalising that judgement into a negative self-belief that one is non-musical. The participant who returned to Ireland after several years of living in South America and Asia experienced a form of culture shock in

its most impactful sense where he moved from cultures where his singing was encouraged and everyone was invited to participate in music whether through dance or song back to a western culture which valued the expert model of musicianship. Davidson (2011) describes how African cultures use music as an opportunity for people to experience the gradual achievement of competence. According to Davidson, "[m]usic is valued and believed to be for all, each person assuming that she or he has the capacity to achieve competence" (p. 69).

Where the other semi-structured and closed-ended questions in the preliminary interview appeared to succeed in their task of generating dialogue around the various topics of interest, participants' responses to their ideas around musicality and genetics were quite clear cut; people are either born with a gift or they are not and most participants reported they were non-musical. Encouragingly, it was generally felt that people do have the capacity to learn if they are willing to put in hard work. One participant reported that it did not bother her that she was not musical, as she had other creative outlets in her life, except that she regretted not being able to participate in conversations around music with her husband and their friends. In her song writing intervention with self-perceived non-musical non-musicians, Ruddock (2012) described how the participants "feel that they have no 'license' to do music and that they are not part of the human musical community" (p. 207). According to Professor John Sloboda the social implications of this belief that being born with a talent is a precursor for high musical achievement is that children who are not identified as having innate talents are unlikely to receive the encouragement needed to attain competence. Sloboda and his colleagues (Howe et al., 1998) analysed positive and negative evidence of this "talent account" and suggest that a child's early experiences, opportunities, training and practice are the real determinants of high musical competence.

Research Question 2: Can a Kodály-inspired Group Music Therapy Intervention Based on CoMT Principles Produce a Shift in Peoples' Negative Beliefs About Their Musical Identity?

The participants' language around how they felt about the Kodály learning experience portrayed a sense of safety or absence of fear. The gradual progression of moving from one securely known concept to the new unknown concept was described by one participant as an easy to follow layering of new concepts. The success of this approach is due in part to acknowledging the smallest gains in musical skill acquisition such as marching to a steady beat. This characteristic of Kodály teaching reflects the theory of musical competence put forward by John Sloboda and his colleagues in their comparison of Western and African cultures. Davidson (2011) names that:

> ".. if the learning environment can encourage a belief in incremental skills acquisition with minimal indicators of accomplishment being regarded as sufficient conditions for competency rather than expert fluency—motivation for engagement and a belief in the attainment of competence could potentially be increased" (p. 69).

One participant who described herself as neurodivergent reported that the clear stepwise process of the Kodály approach provided a non-threatening space where she felt in control of her learning indicating the possible value of this approach for people with a variety of learning styles.

The reported feeling of security experienced in the Kodály methodology was further enhanced by learning together as a group as participants agreed that although it took time to feel safe within the group, once they did it became increasingly enjoyable and they could appreciate how the group element facilitated learning. The confidence and competence gained through this group experiential learning prepared the participants for

the transition to group improvisation.

The concept of improvisation was already introduced casually during the Kodály rhythm training part of the workshop by leading from the call/answer exercise on claves to inviting participants to make up their own rhythms. As this was conducted as a continuous flow, it was presented in terms of a learning exercise as opposed to a performance of an individual composition, but it was intended as a preparatory exercise for a similar rhythmic improvisation in the drumming circle. Although intended initially to be used only as part of the improvisation, the researcher felt that sitting behind the large djembes and congas helped to ground the participants in some way. They even used them to lean on or hold during the focus group and so they remained the participants' workshop partners throughout. Drum circles have been part of healing rituals in many cultures since antiquity and so the concept of CoMT using group improvisational drumming is nothing new. Research has demonstrated the potential of group drumming music therapy for alteration of stress-related hormones and enhancement of immune function (Bittman et al., 2001). Even though the group had engaged in group drumming as part of the teaching of pulse and rhythm, the researcher sensed a definite shift in energy in the room once the focus became more creative. The researcher's role transitioned from that of teacher to facilitator whose task was to hold the space for the participants to express themselves on a deeper level individually and as a group. It was quite a powerful feeling to share this courageous inner exploration through the medium of free improvisation—both the rhythmical expression on the drums and the highly creative and daring explorations of the voice.

Participants' accounts of this experience ranged from fun and enjoyable to freeing and therapeutic. Most participants reported that the group improvisation improved their confidence and if the sessions were to continue, they felt this confidence would grow. Data from the exit interviews revealed a positive though cautious shift in people's negative beliefs about their musical identity and a clear willingness to consider participation in future active music making opportunities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this research was firstly to explore the reasons behind peoples' negative self-beliefs about their musical identity and secondly to investigate if an intervention involving Kodály-inspired group music therapy based on CoMT principles could produce a shift in those beliefs. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research which has identified early negative music experiences as the primary cause of these beliefs. The contribution of cultural judgement is also consistent with a large body of research which explores the impact of Western culture's tendency to categorise people into musical and non-musical identities due a value placed on those who are innately musical predisposing them to the achievement of high levels of musical skill. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first music therapy study to investigate this phenomenon in an Irish context, and findings may also be relevant to other cultures.

A summary of the findings from this exploratory study about people's beliefs about their musical identity and the factors that have contributed to those beliefs are possibly most effectively represented by the story of one particular participant whose narrative inspired the title of this project.

> *Jane loved music... particularly the sound of the piano. Her mother loved music too and Jane remembers her mother dancing in her seat at the back of their local church during the singing of hymns at Sunday mass. Already as a young child, Jane recalls being uncomfortably aware that her mother's joyful reaction to the music was somehow out of place and that people were looking at her. Jane was encouraged by her mother to go to piano lessons. Jane was told that learning to play the*

> *piano involved learning to read music. Like many people of Jane's age, her dyslexia was not diagnosed until much later, when she was in college and so Jane and her teacher attributed her struggles to being no good at music and she was advised by her teacher to give it up. When a local children's choir was set up Jane and her classmates were invited to attend but Jane recalls being told by the choir leader that she couldn't sing…*

Hence putting an abrupt end to this social musical opportunity. During the focus group discussion on the aural nature of Ireland's unique traditional music culture and the agreement about the barriers to participation, Jane suggested that it is just taken for granted that "*They (the players) are musical, but you are not.*" Jane admitted how despite her own daughter's pleas to take up piano lessons Jane put off enrolling her because of her own experience which she described as traumatic. During the exit interview, Jane revealed that participating in the study helped her to realise that the irritability she regularly experienced when her husband and her daughter danced to songs on Spotify was probably due to defences constructed as a result of these early negative associations with music.

The example of Jane's story painfully depicts how many people of her generation were unsupported by an education system within a culture which values the expert model of musical performance possibly heightened in an Irish context with its unique traditional music culture which hails virtuosity. The language surrounding such socially constructed beliefs further solidifies their impact allowing no room for an alternative musical identity such as the dancer, the community drummer, the learner, or all the other multiple possible ways to relate to music.

Many of the studies carried out by music education researchers mentioned in the literature review point to the work of the prominent American psychologist and educator Carl Seashore (1938) in the early 20th century who devised procedural tests to identify those who were musically talented as having a major contribution to our present Western concept of musicality. Notably the work of anthropologist and ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1973) in his writings about his experiences of the African Venda tribe's musical culture is heralded by the same authors as providing a crucial counterargument to Seashore's claims illustrated by his frequently cited quote, "must the majority be made 'unmusical' so that a few may become more 'musical'" (Blacking, 1973, p. 4).

As this research has illustrated, previous negative musical experiences compounded by fear of judgement by a culture still well and truly embedded in the Western expert model of musical identity can impact not only the person themselves but also the people around them as in the example of Jane delaying her own daughter's music education. Further larger scale studies of this nature could be conducted to promote awareness among people that this issue is far from resolved.

Future studies should consider carefully the language used when inviting people to explore and define their relationship to music. Inquiries could be presented in a less directive manner for example: How do you feel about the role of your genetics in your relationship to music? This kind of question has the potential to evoke far more meaningful information than the closed-ended question used in this study.

The studies presented in this project include research conducted by music educators, music therapists, anthropologists and ethnomusicologists. Additionally, it considered work with a variety of populations, in several different countries, in multiple contexts, using a range of methodologies all pursuing the same goal—to investigate how to make music more accessible to people within their own community. Addressing this goal for people who have excluded themselves from the realm of musical experience due to negative beliefs imposed by the social constructs of a Westernised culture appears too big a task for one discipline alone. Future research should consider a multidisciplinary approach in order to best serve this target group. Brynulf Stige (2002) in his historical account of CoMT

identifies two main notions of this area of practice: a) music therapy *in* community context and b) music therapy *for change* in a community, emphasising the power of uniting the various disciplines involved to effect that change.

As a music therapist and music educator trained in the Kodály approach the researcher proposes a model of practice which combines the skills, experience, and passion gained throughout her years of teaching, with the clinical knowledge acquired during her music therapy training to develop an interdisciplinary intervention which holds as its core theme a belief that encapsulates the philosophies both of Zoltan Kodály and CoMT that music is for everyone.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ronan De Burca who undertook to act as my supervisor and my academic writing tutor Miriam Phillips for her advice and enthusiasm for my research topic.

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Appendix

Description of Focus Group Workshops.

Workshop 1.

a. *Focus Group Discussion*: In the first workshop after the induction, the researcher invited the group to comment on some common themes that emerged from the preliminary interviews. This was audio recorded on Otter. The recording was stopped when the discussion ended.
b. *Kodály Musicianship*: After 30 minutes of discussion the researcher explained some basic concepts of musicianship beginning with pulse through keeping the beat on the heart (hand on chest), then on the feet, then marching on the spot, and when this was secure, marching in a circle. The researcher sang ‘Come Sing a Song of Joy’ as the group marched the beat but made no requests for participants to sing. As the song continued some participants joined in singing quietly. When invited to sit again there was some laughing among the group and general excitement. The researcher then explained how the words of the song were what is called ‘rhythm’ and were invited to clap the words of the song on their hands as the researcher sang. Again, some of the group sang along. The researcher wrote both beats and the rhythm on the board according to Kodály methodology of introducing pulse and rhythm. To introduce the concept of rhythm, participants were invited to take claves. The researcher modelled a basic 4/4 rhythm structure which developed into a call/answer game. When this was secure the researcher introduced basic 4/4 flashcards which included TA (crotchet), TI (quavers) and TA (crotchet) rests. Some participants reported that they found this fun and this evoked some discussion among the group. The researcher collected the claves and invited the group to choose a drum each. Drums consisted of congas, djembes, bongos, and bodhrans of various sizes.
c. *Group Improvisation:* The researcher decided to move on to this section as the previous musicianship training had gone well and the participants appeared comfortable and secure. The group were invited to repeat the call/answer rhythm exercise they had previously played on the claves on the drums this time. The improvisation began according to drumming circle methods (Stevens, 2003) where the leader (researcher) introduces a steady beat while giving the instructions for a basic improvisation using a simple 4/4 pattern. Upon hearing these instructions there was some nervous laughter and doubtful facial expressions among the group. The researcher modelled first by improvising a simple ostinato against the steady beat of the group which lasted for 8 bars before re-joining the steady group beat. The researcher invited the group to try if they wished and three members of the group took turns improvising. After it was clear no one else wanted to take a turn the researcher through gradually decreasing dynamics and tempo gently brought the pulse to a close. After a moment’s pause the researcher invited the participants to comment about the experience if they wished and a short discussion ensued. The researcher thanked the participants and ended the session.

Workshop 2.

a. *Focus Group Discussion:* The researcher invited the group to comment on last week’s session, and if they had any thoughts or feelings regarding the topic during the week that they would like to share. The group discussion lasted 25 minutes.

b. *Kodály Musicianship*: Concepts introduced in workshop 1 were reinforced. During the marching section the researcher developed the activity by continuing to sing a medley of gospel songs (‘Oh When the Saints’, ‘Swing Low’, and ‘I Wanna Sing, Sing, Sing’). Again, the researcher made no indication to the group to sing along but most of the group sang along perceivably louder than previous session. The activity continued where the researcher began a clapping game where she invited the first participant to clap a ‘high ten’ during certain words. The participants were then directed to find a partner and do same. The activity involved changing partners after each verse until everyone had danced with everyone else. At the end of the session as the group was out of breath and laughing, everyone sat down. Discussion started between the participants and one member of the group said she found it ‘tricky’. The researcher explained that the exercise was to keep a steady beat while engaging in another activity and that all members had managed to keep a steady beat on their feet. Discussion ensued and for time keeping reasons after ten minutes the researcher invited the group to choose a drum and move on to the next part of the session.

c. *Group Improvisation*: The warm-up activity of call/answer rhythms was continued until all group members were secure in listening and reproducing. The researcher then started a steady beat and invited rhythmic improvisations as in workshop 1. There was some tentative playing at the beginning and then one participant started to play a steady ostinato which she continued for about two minutes. When the activity was brought to a close, she spoke at length about the experience. The concept of pitch was mentioned during the group discussion and one member said she did not understand what a ‘scale’ was or how a note was ‘high’ or ‘low’ and appeared a little upset. The researcher used this opportunity to explain the concept though the voice. Participants were invited to hold their fingertips to their voice box and then hum the lowest note possible in their own voice. As they gradually brought their voices up higher they were asked if they could feel how this changed the sensation in their voice box until the vibrations disappeared. This exercise opened up a period of vocal discovery within the group which the researcher guided according to music therapy research in the area (Oddy, 2006). To avoid overwhelming the group with a sudden embodied vocal experience, the researcher incorporated some basic low frequency humming into the already secure steady beat on the drum inviting them to change this frequency every eight beats. The researcher explained that she would improvise vocally over this while the group kept the steady beat and low humming. After several moments of a minor pentatonic vocal improvisation the researcher opened it up to the group. It could be that members did try to improvise but it was not audible to the researcher.

Workshop 3.

a. *Focus Group Discussion:* There was a noticeable change in group dynamics at the start of the session as the two absent members had tended to be the more vocal of the group. The researcher summarised some of what happened in the previous workshop and eventually one participant started talking about the Kodály Musicianship part of the workshop and how it made the concepts so clear for her. She also expressed regret that music had not been introduced to her in that way. Another participant described her early music learning experiences as ‘traumatic’ and prompted by another group member she continued to tell her story. A twenty-minute group discussion followed and because of the change in focus of the group

discussion the researcher decided to skip the musicianship part of the workshop and start with the improvisation.

b. *Group Improvisation:* Participants were invited to choose a drum as in the previous two sessions and the researcher began by keeping a steady beat on the drum and inviting participants to take turns. Each participant took a turn to improvise and after a period of keeping the pulse as a group the researcher brought the activity to a close. A ten-minute discussion followed. Then the researcher suggested a vocal improvisation and the participants replied that they would try it. The researcher started a known song '59th street song' and invited the group to keep a steady beat on the drums. The researcher began a call and answer 'scat'-style improvisation using words such as 'scooby doo be doo' and eventually leading on to sounds involving tongue rolls and high-pitched bird calls. The researcher invited the group to take turns around the circle and each member participated. Discussion for twenty minutes followed this activity. Participants were informed of the details of the exit interviews and thanked for their participation.