

Vol 5(3), November 1, 2005
mi40005000190

Lose Yourself in the Music, the Moment, Yo!

Music Therapy with an Adolescent Group Involved in Gangsterism

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Introduction

Since forming the *Music Therapy Community Clinic* and beginning our work in Cape Town's townships, we have been overwhelmed by the needs of the communities, the open arms with which they welcome and invite us in, and the many challenges we meet on a daily basis. At times, we become disheartened, struggling to make sense of our work, and at others, the music just works: it sings, dances, permeates, draws in, explores and explains.

As we are writing this article, in June 2005, we are in the process of reflecting back on a busy school term at our Heideveld Project. A new project focuses on a group of adolescents, facing the danger of becoming immersed in the gang culture of this community. This is the subject of this essay.

The Context

Since January 2004, we have been working in the suburb of Heideveld (about 15km from Cape Town's city centre), which is home to predominantly 'coloured' people (so-called). Most of Heideveld's older generation remember being moved here in the 1960's from inner city suburbs as part of the apartheid government's Group Areas Act. Where extended families used to live in the same house or in close proximity to relatives in Cape Town city, they became scattered over the different settlements in the Cape Flats, in the 'hinterland'. These forced removals to Heideveld and other areas of the Cape Flats meant moving into a world of strangers. The social and emotional support which family members and neighbours once provided each other was lost.

Like most of the settlements in the Cape Flats, Heideveld is ravaged by social problems that include unemployment, drug and alcohol dependency, family fragmentation, overcrowded living conditions, school truancy and high levels of violence. In the foreground of these depressing social features is the ongoing gang-violence. Gangsterism has been part of this community for many generations and impacts on every aspect of life in Heideveld and its neighbouring areas.

The Gangs

For young boys living in a socially fragmented community, gangs provide the emotional support that their dysfunctional families often cannot provide (Pinnock, 1998; Dissel, 1997). Being a member of a gang means having an identity and a sense of belonging to these 'surrogate' gang families, providing a feeling of acceptance, power and purpose, which boys on the verge of adolescence and adulthood desperately need.

There are between 60, 000 and 80, 000 gang members in the Western Cape alone, of which

approximately 5 000 are residents in the Heideveld/Manenberg area (Leggett, 2004; Pinnock, 1998). Gangs are territorial, and revolve around the drug and alcohol trade within their territories, their communities, in surrounding areas and internationally (Dissel, 1997). Small businesses, vendors and shebeens (an unlicensed establishment selling alcohol) operating in a gang's territory become 'assets', with gangs demanding 'protection money' from businesses to ensure safeguarding against rival gangs.

In Heideveld, children as young as 12 years become involved in street gangs, which are a feeding ground for more established, more structured gangs. While the adults usually control the drugs, younger children are used to carry out tasks. Gang members as young as 14 years old are armed with either firearms or knives and some are prepared to die in order to protect their gangs' territory and their fellow gang members.

Although the gangs terrorize the general community and often make their lives unbearable, there is a powerful allegiance between the community and the gangs - which seems bizarre to 'outsiders'. Community members often 'turn a blind eye' or give misinformation to police whenever a gang related incident has occurred. This is partly because residents fear the consequences of being seen to be reporting to the police; but also because of a mutual dependency and protection between gangs and their families and communities (Leggett, 2004). Indeed, gang bosses sponsor local soccer teams, the 'Kaapse Klopse' groups and feeding schemes (Standing, 2003). These acts of charity can be seen as a way of controlling the community, enabling gangsters to commit crimes without being reported.

Music Therapy in Heideveld

Until recently, we were mostly working with children referred by teachers from the 7 different primary schools in the area, for reasons including recent death of a family member (often caused by acts of violence); sexual, physical or emotional abuse; abandonment; parent in jail; aggressive or withdrawn behaviour indicative of underlying trauma.

In April 2005, however, we were approached by two Police Officers from the Manenberg/Heideveld Police station, who had heard of our work. They asked us to conduct sessions with the Police Officers, for stress-management, and to begin seeing "Youth at Risk" adolescents; most of who are involved in local gangs, suspected of drug abuse, rarely attending school and often involved in acts of crime. The Police were reluctant to place these youngsters into the criminal justice system as the rehabilitation statistics in Southern African prisons are exceedingly low, with notorious prison gangs constantly recruiting young adolescents to a life of organized crime. The police saw music therapy as an alternative form of intervention. Each week, the Police fetch the youngsters, disarm them and deliver them to our Music Therapy door. Police supervision ends and the musicking begins.

At the moment, we run one weekly group with 5 adolescents (4 boys and 1 girl). Our sessions consist of musicking and talking. Unstructured improvisations can last up to 20 minutes; and talking usually involves explanations and stories of their gangs and life in their community. The group doesn't talk about the music.

We've been asking ourselves questions about this work, which we discuss for the remainder of this paper:

What brings these gang members back to music therapy each week?

While the police fetch the youngsters each week, their attendance is not compulsory. Although the group appeared very sceptical and aloof at the first meeting, they have returned willingly and eagerly every week. Music seems to be the magnet. It is a 'cool' thing to do. Within the gangs' Rap/Hip-Hop culture, the musicians are the 'heroes', looked up to by the youth; the ones who give social commentary. The music energises them, gets them moving, and gives them purpose. What we're also realising is that the improvisations bring us together - bearing in mind that group members are from different gangs, and only have hostile contact as 'gang members' outside the sessions. Playing music together enables us to dissolve our social differences. Here we are not just 'whiteys' from Cape Town City meeting with members of different gangs .we are musicians improvising music together.. Perhaps it is this experience that brings them back to us week after week: not only do they experience themselves as 'cool' and align themselves with 'the heroes' when they play music; but they also, possibly, experience the relief of taking on different social identities: that of young people, being together and making music and talking.

What about the talking?

From the 2nd session, the group spontaneously began telling us their stories. At first we were

concerned that this was taking up too much of the 'music' session time, as it was completely unrelated to the music. We soon changed our minds. In the Heideveld community, it is often said that "everyone knows everyone's business", so that often, families prefer to get help from 'outside' professionals, for fear of their stories being spread through the Heideveld grapevine. The fact that we are from Cape Town City, which is far removed from the Heideveld area, means that in this scenario, we are the "outsiders". In response to our questions, explanations provide an opportunity for group members to process their experiences and to express aspects of their lives, which they would usually choose to keep to themselves.

What does the Music Therapy space offer?

The role of gangs in an area such as Heideveld, is immensely complex. On the surface, and especially to 'outsiders', gangs appear to be exclusively 'bad' and destructive. It is only after understanding the complicated social networks and historical legacies on which gangs are founded, that one begins to understand their appeal - and indeed, their necessity. Within the Music Therapy room, our experience is that gang members' roles and identities are shed, and replaced by vulnerable and open young people. Music therapy provides an opportunity to explore different ways of relating, creating and expressing. As therapists we too have learnt to leave our stereotypes of gangs and adolescent gang members well beyond the walls of the Music Therapy room. This helps us to relate to the gang members as young persons in music therapy, and also enables them to experiment and create other social identities.

Conclusion

We are only at the beginning of a long process, and have no doubt that there are many challenges ahead. For now, something feels right. . . and exciting.

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To cite this page:

Fouché, Sunelle & Torrance, Kerry (2005). Lose Yourself in the Music, the Moment, Yo! Music Therapy with an Adolescent Group Involved in Gangsterism. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*. Retrieved from <http://www.voices.no/mainissues/mi40005000190.html>

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Comments to this essay:

- **Sarah Finger**, May 30, 2006.

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