

Keeping the (heart)Beat: Music Therapy in the General Music Classroom

Elizabeth Lovell

An Action Research Project
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts in Teaching

Western Oregon University

2025

Reading Committee:

Amy Bowden, Chair

Melanie Landon-Hays

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

College of Education

MASTER'S DEGREE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Completion Term: Spring 2025

Type of exit requirement: Action Research Project

The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Degree should be awarded

Recommendations:

- ✓ Exit Requirement has been approved
-



**WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE GRADUATE FACULTY OF
WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY HAVE EXAMINED THE ENCLOSED**

Action Research Project Title:

Graduate Student:_____

Candidate for the degree of : Master of Arts in Teaching: Initial Licensure

*and hereby certify that in our opinion it is worthy of acceptance as partial fulfillment
of the requirements of this master's degree.*

Committee Chair:

Name:_____ Signature:_____
Date:_____

Committee Member:

Name:_____ Signature:_____
Date:_____

Director of Graduate Studies:

Name: Amber N. Deets Signature:_____
Date:_____

Abstract

This action research project investigates the effectiveness of integrating music therapy techniques into the elementary general music classroom as a response to the prevalence of trauma among students. The study explores how music therapy aligned activities impact student emotions, classroom environments, and student regulation. The study is grounded in the pedagogical theories of E. Thayer Gaston and trauma-informed education. Teaching journals, student self-assessments, behavioral observations, and informal feedback were assessed using qualitative research methods. Three main themes emerged: improvising together to improve relationships, creating and sharing to improve confidence and personal agency, deep listening for environmental and self-regulation. The research suggests that embedding music therapy principles into general music curriculum can create a more inclusive, expressive, and healing educational environment. This study advocates for the intentional integration of music therapy with music education.

Keywords: music therapy, elementary music education, trauma-informed teaching, student relationships, student agency, environmental regulation

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my reading committee, Amy Bowden and Melanie Landon-Hays. Their helpful feedback shaped my project and its results into something meaningful and, more importantly, comprehensible.

My cooperating teachers Kristina Etzel and Katie Robinson were essential in my growth as a teacher this year. Y'all rock.

My class of fifth graders challenged me in ways both unexpected and hilarious. I'm thankful to have learned so much from them and pray they learned as much from me.

Thank you to Sam and Table- my husband and dog- who dealt with my moods, lack of time, exhaustion and, finally, my return to self. Love you both so deeply.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Guiding Pedagogical Theory.....	4
Connections to InTASC Standards.....	8
Summary.....	9
Chapter 2. Review of Relevant Research and Scholarship.....	10
Chapter 3. Methods.....	22
Participants and Setting.....	23
Data Collection and Analysis.....	26
Researcher Positionality.....	27
Chapter 4. Findings.....	29
Improvising Together to Improve Relationships.....	31
Creating and Sharing to Improve Confidence and Personal Agency.....	38
Deep Listening for Environmental and Self-regulation.....	43
Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion.....	49
Limitations.....	51
Conclusion.....	53
References.....	54

Chapter 1. Philosophy of Education

To fulfill Western Oregon University's degree requirements all Master of Arts in Teaching all candidates must complete an action research project. Through an action research project the graduate candidate looks at a specific problem within their classroom or school environment and attempts to solve it by implementing changes in their own teaching. This process seeks to familiarize the pre-service teacher with reflective assessment of their teaching practices, data collection, and action based solutions. In this chapter I will recount my interface with music and its healing abilities as well as my desire to implement therapeutic practices into my current and future elementary music classrooms.

I've been using music as therapy for most of my life. I compose music, I practice sonic mediations and deep listening, I sing to evoke concealed emotions, and I've often shared these experiences with others, further deepening their beneficial effects on my psyche. As a kid who felt alienated from her peers, I truly wish I would have had music therapy as an option when I was in school; both to open lines of communication to others and simply to feel more comfortable in my own skin. I believe that integrating music therapy into traditional elementary music education would empower students and also help to heal the widespread trauma that I am beginning to recognize in my pre-service placement. As a teacher, I hope to give students the option for more personally relevant experience with music, as well as a pedagogical approach that harnesses the healing benefits of learning to make music.

I grew up in a very rural, southern identifying part of Illinois six hours south of Chicago. The area was fairly impoverished and my family (married parents with 4 kids) was no exception. I am a first generation college student. My father supported all of us on an inadequate fireman's

salary and my mother supplemented that with income from her visual art as well as doing the unending work of raising four children.

I did not enjoy my time in public school. From very early in my education I oscillated between feeling intentionally ignored and overtly noticed/subsequently ostracized. In-grouping and out-grouping were standard practices at my school, and anyone who did not fit the town's status quo was likely to have a difficult time. Aside from feeling separate from my peers due to some basic differences (my family wasn't Christian or right-leaning; I was queer) I also found that there were no trusted adults I could rely on for the vast majority of my schooling. This lack of a support system resulted in my pulling back ever further as I progressed through my K-12 education.

I grew into a fairly independent and somewhat churlish teenager as a means of defending myself against those who were perturbed by my perceived divergence from the norm. I disengaged inwardly from my education as school was where I found myself to be wholly unhappy. Once a drivers license was acquired this disengagement became quite literal as I was constantly truant. This time spent avoiding school was filled with drives deep into the Shawnee National Forest and solo hikes through the woods. Always in the background of these long days of solitude was a constantly evolving playlist of music; my first cognizant experience with using music for emotional regulation. At a time when I felt unable to express myself, music took on the task of conveying big emotions like fear, anger and sadness and conversely lifting me from those emotions with something upbeat and lighthearted.

Up until that time, my relationship with music had been somewhat fraught. My elementary music experience was less than inspired. We played no instruments and instead sat in rows of chairs learning song after song in preparation for the next performance solely arranged to

please the audience of parents. I played piano at a young age and participated in choir and band, but as I got older something about this thing so central to my life just stopped feeling appealing. The methods by which I was educated felt tedious and tired. The repertoire I learned and played felt uninspired, unrelated to my life and experiences. Like my general education, my specialized interest was beginning to feel less and less rewarding the further I progressed. By the time high school rolled around I had removed myself from the institution of educational music and slowly inserted myself into the musical world of DIY, experimental, punk, and avant-garde. In this new social realm I felt energized, inspired, and understood. Music gradually turned from an extracurricular activity into a life necessity, one that was deeply fulfilling and healing to the child that so often felt ostracized by their conditions.

I'm aware that I am not the only one who feels that music literally saved their life. Disenfranchised teenagers have found means for self expression, community, and connection through their preferred choice of music for decades. This tropic experience in no way diminishes its potency. The fact that my experience with music's healing power is *not* unique, is what initially piqued my interest in my action research project. As my realization of music's effects on my mental well-being developed, so too did my awareness of the vast history of music as a means for healing. From Indian classical music to new age to deep listening practitioners, music has been used as therapy since well before "music therapy" was a term.

My experience in public schools impressed upon me how important inclusion and community really are. I dealt with my feelings of isolation in unhealthy and unsafe ways, and I know I am not the first student to do so. In Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018) he says that, "Education as the practice of freedom- as opposed to education as the practice of domination- denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it

also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people.” (p.81) Now, while on my journey to head back into a space I felt somewhat abandoned by, I’m trying to heal my relationship with the educational system while also hoping to make it better for future students. My time in the classroom as a preservice teacher has been in a Title 1 elementary school. As I’ve learned of the prevalence of trauma throughout the student body, I’ve started to envision integrating music therapy techniques into my curriculum as music therapy is an embodiment of togetherness, communal dependence and connectivity.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory

Music therapy is a practice rooted in the universal experience of music as a means of healing. Music therapy’s origins are unspecified as music and healing have been intrinsically tied in many cultures spanning many centuries. The American Music Therapy Association (American Music Therapy Association, 2019) traces this connection back to ancient Greece and the writings of Plato, but in all likelihood it is older even than that. In the United States, E. Thayer Gaston is often referred to as the “Father of music therapy.” Although music therapy has been present in many cultures over centuries, in the mid 20th century Gaston brought music therapy into academic and scientific communities. In his book *Music in Therapy* (1968) he outlines the three core tenets of music therapy:

1. The establishment or re-establishment of interpersonal relationships.
2. The bringing about of self-esteem through self-actualization.
3. The utilization of the unique potential of rhythm to energize and bring order.

These principles strike me as a meaningful starting point when thinking about addressing trauma within the elementary music classroom. The aims to establish interpersonal relationships as well

as bring self-esteem through self-actualization are ideas that should be cultivated in our elementary schools. Why not embed these objectives into music making?

The necessity of trauma-informed teaching is deepened by the prevalence of early childhood trauma. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reports that more than two thirds of children experience a traumatic event before the age of 16 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services, 2025). While music educators should not be conscripted to address trauma on an individual basis, music therapy's universal techniques could benefit children with generalized responses to trauma such as feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and fear.

The World Federation of Music Therapy defines music therapy as “the professional use of music and its elements as an intervention in medical, educational, and everyday environments with individuals, groups, families, or communities who seek to optimize their quality of life and improve their physical, social, communicative, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health and wellbeing” (*World Federation of Music Therapy*, n.d.). This adaptability makes music therapy an especially relevant tool in educational settings. Its holistic methods can meet students' diverse needs within the shared classroom.

Central to Gaston's philosophy is the idea of music as a powerful, nonverbal form of communication that fosters connections and reduces isolation. In 1958, Gaston summarized his thinking on the nature and function of music in therapy as such:

1. Music is a means of nonverbal communication deriving potency from its wordless meaning.
2. Music is the most adaptable of the arts being utilized with individuals, groups, and in various locations.
3. Through participation or listening, music may lessen feelings of lonesomeness.

4. Music, in our culture at least, elicits moods derived from the tender emotions and has the capability of communicating one's good feeling for another.
5. Music can dissolve fears of closeness because its nonverbal nature allows an intimacy that is non-threatening.
6. Music, in most cases, is sound without associated threat.
7. The shared musical experience can be a form of structured reality upon which the therapist and the patient can form a relationship with some confidence.
8. Musical experiences possess an intimacy because listeners and performers derive their own responses from each musical experience.
9. Preparation and performance of music, in a noncompetitive fashion, can bring about a feeling of accomplishment and gratification. (Johnson, 1981, p. 281)

These functional guidelines can easily be applied to elementary music curriculum; creating a non-threatening, welcoming space where students can express themselves, connect with their peers, and derive satisfaction from the experience of making music.

As is becoming apparent, music therapy can look like a lot of disparate methods. In the book *Music Therapy*, Patey and Darnley-Smith (2003) note that we typically separate music therapy into two categories. The first is the use of music for its inherently healing vibroacoustic properties. This can look like making music or using recorded music as a direct physical means of curing mental or physical illness. The emphasis here is on the physical effects that sound waves have on the body. The second category is the use of music as a means of communication and self-expression within a therapeutic context. This can look like community musicking, guided imagery paired with music, and improvisational music making. The emphasis here is on the connective benefits of making music within a group. I believe focusing my efforts on

integrating elements from the second of the two schools of music therapy would have the best results in the elementary music classroom while still reaping the rewards of the vibroacoustic effects.

Music is a unique blend of the expressions of individuality and culture. The synthesis between the individual and the unit is one of the most magical parts of making music as a group. In many cultures music is an early and frequent expression of joy. Bringing these elements into the classroom with the intentional aim of addressing trauma leaves the door open to healing from that trauma by fostering community, mutual respect, leadership, independence, and hopefully that aforementioned joy. Gaston critiques traditional music education for its focus on performance, competitions, and accolades. He argues that students should make music for the recreational and therapeutic benefits that are carried well beyond their K-12 education. (Johnson, 1981, p. 280)

When I reflect on my unhappiness in childhood, it is my experience as a student in a K-12 public school that stands out as the defining reason for my depression. Even my interest in music was briefly curtailed due to the nature of its curriculum- from my first experiences in general music to my more focused experiences in competitive marching band and choir. I believe that if my early music teachers had incorporated music therapy into their curriculum, my interest in the subject would not have waned. I also believe that music therapy integration into the curriculum could have shaped the overall culture and community of my schools. Music therapy integration into curriculum turns the music room into a classroom centered on emotional well-being, collaborative learning, and personal growth.

Connection to InTASC Standards

As a teacher, I hope to foster a sense of community and well being in my students by addressing their trauma through the integration of music therapy practices into my elementary music classroom. This goal aligns with the following InTASC (2013) standards:

- **Standard Two: Learning Differences**

“2(a) The teacher designs, adapts, and delivers instruction to address each student’s diverse learning strengths and needs and creates opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in different ways.”

“2(d) The teacher brings multiple perspectives to the discussion of content, including attention to learners’ personal, family, and community experiences and cultural norms.”

- **Standard Three: Learning Environments**

“3(a) The teacher collaborates with learners, families, and colleagues to build a safe, positive learning climate of openness, mutual respect, support, and inquiry”

Music therapy fulfills standard two learning differences because the methods by which it is practiced are inherently individualized. For example, improvisation, reactions to listening exercises, and communal collaboration are all music therapy devices by which each student will react and participate in a different way. Student choice will also be employed in my therapy-centric curriculum. Because creating and responding to music is so subjective, multiple perspectives will always be present in the classroom. Standard two is fulfilled by creating a welcoming and safe environment through which students are welcome to explore their interests in and emotions relating to music. Once a positive classroom environment is established, I am

hopeful that students will, in turn, cultivate the ability to experience some catharsis through making music as a community.

Summary

Through my work integrating music therapy practices in the elementary music classroom, I hope to help the population of students struggling with trauma. Integration of music therapy will help students to express and work through their trauma, engage in activities that bring joy and satisfaction, and relate to other students in ways that might not occur in other subjects or in standard music curriculum. Opening students up to the potential creativity born from music therapy practices will also encourage their further engagement with music as a means for self expression and healing well past their time in public schools.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

I am exploring the potentiality of integrating music therapy techniques into the elementary music classroom. I was motivated to learn more about the divide between music as therapy and elementary music education when I became aware of the prevalence of trauma within the student body at my student teaching placement. In this literature review I sought to learn more about music therapy as a stand-alone practice, trauma informed pedagogy, and music therapy's role within schools. I utilized the search terms "music therapy in elementary schools" "music therapy for children" "trauma and music therapy" and many similar terms. I found several pages of article and journals and narrowed my selection down to the ten that felt most pertinent. I searched through peer reviewed journals via Western Oregon University's Hamersly Library.

Annotations

Metić, M., & Svalina, V. (2020). Potential use of music therapy elements in Music teaching.

Metodički Ogledi, 27(1), 149–173. <https://doi.org/10.21464/mo.27.1.12>

This article examines the implementation of active music therapy methods into an elementary music classroom. The research was conducted with 20 students over one school year in an attempt to show teachers how to implement music therapy in their classes, establish communication via improvisation among students, and empower children to achieve self-liberation through music therapy. The findings were analyzed through a synthesis of Free Improvisational Music Therapy, Orff Music Therapy, Paraverbal Music Therapy, and Creative Music Therapy pedagogical lenses. Their research showed that music therapy incorporation into the music classroom benefited the students. Students felt happy, engaged and satisfied after their classes that utilized music

therapy approaches and it was particularly beneficial to students with developmental disabilities.

This study was useful for my work because, as suspected, it shows that it is beneficial to incorporate music therapy approaches into the classroom. Students were able to improve their ability to self-express as well as work with others. This study seems to show an improved classroom atmosphere through music therapy incorporation. This study was lacking in specificity as it utilized many approaches without necessarily having a specific aim. This article could be improved by narrowing its scope of activities. As I am specifically interested in the benefits of music therapy in response to trauma and behaviorally troubled students this study was not the most useful for my aims. The way it was structured may be useful for my future research as I will not be privy to every student's experience with trauma.

Smith, J. C. (2017). Hidden in Plain Sight: A Music Therapist and Music Educator in a Public School District. *International Journal of Music Education*, 36(2), 182–196.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761417712319>

This article explored the relationship between a school's music therapist and the school's music teacher. The author was examining where both adults were aligned, differed, and if they worked collaboratively. The author also learned how each educator perceived the others' work. Smith conducted a bound case study in a suburban Northeastern school district where both music teachers and a music therapist were employed. Research was conducted through observation and interviews. Smith's findings were analyzed through both the lens of music educator and music therapist as the author was a professional in both realms. The study found that there was a complete lack of communication between

the therapist and the music teacher, although both talked to the classroom teacher. It also found that although a lot of each educator's methods were the same, they were viewed through different pedagogical lenses. Both teacher and therapist both felt that their roles were undervalued in the classroom.

This article was very valuable for my future research. Smith created a Venn diagram that showed that, although much of the activity was the same in the action of both therapy and education the processes differed, with the therapist using an improvisational approach and the teacher using a methods-based approach. The article did a good job of demonstrating the divergence in goals and values of the therapist vs. the teacher. The therapist and the teacher are using the same means to achieve different goals. The therapist values the growth of social, cognitive, and communication skills while the music educator values technical musical growth. Seeing these disparate uses of music makes me wonder why these disciplines are so separate.

McEvoy, C. A., & Salvador, K. (2020). Aligning Culturally Responsive and Trauma-Informed Pedagogies in Elementary General Music. *General Music Today*, 34(1), 104837132090980. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1048371320909806>

The authors of this article posit that culturally responsive pedagogy and trauma-informed pedagogy share some essential elements in both theory and practice. They argue that both pedagogies can be aligned and incorporated into the music classroom. McEvoy and Salvador worked together to design a study that focused on both culturally responsive pedagogy and trauma-informed pedagogy and gave practical advice on how to integrate said pedagogies into the classroom. Their research was based on trauma-informed and culturally responsive teaching pedagogies. Although the authors designed a study, it

seems that they did not actively implement it into any classroom. Instead, they give some ideas (called “sidebars” in the article) on how to implement these practices. The authors suggest individualized relationships with students, opportunities for students to share, and validation of student identities through representation as well as a safe classroom environment.

This article was helpful in that they affirmed the overlap between many pedagogies that I value in a music classroom. The article was lacking in that it made suggestions based on readings but did not actually implement the ideas. Many researchers agree that trauma-informed teaching and culturally responsive teaching are a necessity but I suppose I’m looking for evidence that said methods produce meaningful change within individual students as well as in the school-as-community. McAvoy, the author who is a public school music teacher, had a classroom that has similar demographics to mine and it was helpful to know that other teachers are moved to action by seeing the constant crisis in their student bodies.

Dweck, J. (2023). Children as songwriters: The social-emotional benefits of songwriting in the elementary grades. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 46(2).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103x231189387>

This article explores the implementation of a songwriting unit into a school and the effect it had on the students. Dweck, the author, relays the therapeutic benefits of songwriting via self expression, collaboration and more. Dweck also investigates why songwriting is so infrequent in general music curriculum and how this can be changed. The author conducted an anecdotal study of students in their school who volunteered to speak to their experience with the school’s songwriting program. The students interviewed ranged from

3rd to 7th grade, with those who aged out of the songwriting program reflecting on the experiences that affected them when involved in the program and how it affects them now. Their findings were analyzed through a music therapy and music educational lens, while noting that the two practice's goals are often separated. The author suggests songwriting as pedagogy for a more holistic music education. Through their research Dweck was able to see some commonalities amongst students interviewed:

1. Songwriting built self-confidence and emotional wellbeing.
2. Songwriting built social bonds and stronger classroom communities.
3. Songwriting furthered the students' musicality.

This article examines the practice of pairing music education with music therapy that I have been searching for. The author saw the positive effects of creative, communal music making in their classroom and wondered why this type of curriculum wasn't a part of their music education training. I relate to the author because it wasn't a part of mine either. The author leaves the reader with many questions including; why is songwriting so infrequently incorporated into elementary music curriculum? I find myself wondering the same thing.

Salvador, K., & Culp, M. E. (2022). Intersections in Music Education: Implications of Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Education, and Trauma-Informed Education for P-12 Praxis. *Music Educators Journal*, 108(3), 19-29.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321221087737>

This article explores how music educators can promote equity by understanding the whole student. Salvador and Culp summarize three asset-based music education approaches; Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Education, and

Trauma-Informed Education and synthesize the similarities between pedagogies. The authors then give actionable ideas for creating inclusive music education experiences with the intention of fostering belonging and collaboration. The theoretical frameworks explored are Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Education, and Trauma-Informed Education. The authors' findings are the shared aspects of Asset Based Pedagogies (ABP). Using the commonalities of the ABPs the authors put forward six guiding principles along with ample examples to implement into the classroom.

The six guiding principles that the authors provide are as follows: practice cultural humility, build relationships with families and communities, know and value individual student identities, circumstances, experiences and goals, honor student voice and choice, establish firm, healthy boundaries that maintain high expectations, and reshape curriculum. The suggestions the authors provide are helpful and can be immediately implemented into my classroom. I'm interested to find more data on the impact these practices have in diverse classroom settings. This article defined intersectionality and implored teachers to look at the whole child, which I found impactful. It also pointed out the demographic disparities of music teachers vs. their student population, which I was thankful for.

Munro-Kramer, M. L., Beck, D. C., Ball, M., & Pardee, M. (2024). Finding the beat: A partnership to address the relationship between a music program and health among youth who have experienced trauma. *Psychological Trauma Theory Research Practice and Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001776>

This study's purpose was to use a community-based participatory approach (CBPR) to analyze outcomes of a program called Lost Voices, in which professional musicians assist

youth who have experienced trauma in a songwriting intensive over three to four weeklong workshops. The Lost Voices musicians were trained in the CBPR approach and trauma-informed practices. They set mutual goals with the authors and implemented them into their program. The authors and Lost Voices musicians pursued an ongoing relationship as well as expansion of their program. A nurse with extensive experience with trauma, and a nursing PhD student conducted interviews with participants of the Lost Voices program. The authors write that “thematic analysis was used to inductively identify key themes related to elements of the intervention that impact change and how the intervention impacts behavior, risk behaviors, and health outcomes” (p. 4). Four primary themes were deduced from the interviews: processing emotion, building trust, self-expression, and future orientation. Lost Voices participants found that writing out their story helped them to reflect on and feel both supported and independent in processing their experiences. They also created trusting relationships with the professional musicians as well as with the other youth participants of the program. The theme of self expression was evident through the participants' expressions of enjoying their time in the program and feeling more confident in telling their stories. This article was helpful in my burgeoning understanding of music therapy and music education’s overlap in process. I’m beginning to believe that the resulting effects of community, confidence, and reflection occur through music making whether or not it is defined as “therapy.”

Hess, J., & Bradley, D. (2020). Dewey's Theory of Experience, Traumatic Memory, and Music Education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09706-z>

This journal assesses the probability of trauma affecting the ability to learn, a theory originally posited by John Dewey. The article explores the potential of music's ability to invoke a trauma response and function as a way to work through trauma. The theoretical review explains how trauma is seated so uncomfortably within education. The article acknowledges Dewey's important contributions to the acknowledgement of trauma and its effects on learning while also conveying that his scope may have been limited. Dewey argues that traumatic events may be transmuted through action within the arts. His logic is flawed in that memories of, and triggers from, trauma can be faulty which means that working through trauma isn't necessarily linear and may not always be educative. The authors argue that, though Dewey made reasonable assumptions about trauma and methods for working through it, some of his opinions were limited and discordant. Dewey's critics argue that educators must learn to exist within the ephemeral state that trauma can occasionally induce, promoting empathy and creating connections despite the difficulties that trauma's irregularities can create in a classroom. The authors believe that music therapy holds a unique place within education as students can use certain somatic exercises to regulate the body and facilitate processing trauma. Dewey posited that the arts can serve as a way to process trauma, and the authors agree. This article was helpful for me to see the complexities within trauma-informed pedagogy as well as music therapy as a pedagogy in elementary music. I haven't read much acknowledging the ambiguity of the trauma response. Trauma informed teaching holds space for the

irregularities presented by such a wide umbrella as the word “trauma” represents. I’ll be returning to this article to more wholly imbibe its teachings.

Annesley, L., Curtis-Tyler, K., & McKeown, E. (2020). Parents’ Perspectives on Their Child’s Music Therapy: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 57(1), 91–119.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/thz018>

This study explored parents’ perspectives of their child’s participation in music therapy. The parents were interviewed in a variety of ways and described the effects of the therapy on their children as well as their evolving understanding of the practice of music therapy. Study participants were parents of children aged 6-11 with children partaking in or recently exiting music therapy. The parents were interviewed on a variety of topics at the health center where therapy occurred. The data was analyzed through the procedure of inductive thematic analysis. The research found five overall themes: parents sometimes felt disengaged from music therapy, parents perceived understanding music therapy as an evolving process, parents perceived positive outcomes for the child, parents perceived music therapy as a nurturing environment for the child, parents had substantial concerns about their child’s well-being. The article summarized some things about private music therapy that I had previously been wondering about. These things can include, for example, if the parent is often involved in the session or if it is regarded as a private endeavor between therapist and patient. The study also spoke to parents’ hesitancy towards the legitimacy of music therapy as a useful therapy for their children. Although I found the article insightful, it isn’t necessarily the most useful for my means. There are so many versions of music therapy and one-on-one practice is not viable for integration into elementary music curriculum. The article did denote that music therapy for children

under the age of 6 often takes place in group settings with parents present. For my purposes, whatever type of music therapy I hope to see integrated into the classroom must, by necessity, be group-oriented. This article was useful for me to read about the lack of credulity and understanding that music therapy holds in some parents' minds.

Giles, M. M., Cogan, D., & Cox, C. (1991). A Music and Art Program to Promote Emotional Health in Elementary School Children. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 28(3), 135–148.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/28.3.135>

This study developed a music and art program in 11 elementary homerooms. It studied the effectiveness of music and art for altering mood in elementary students. The project lasted 11 days with 9 days for implementation and 2 control days. The study was analyzed through a creative therapies lens. The study concluded that students' moods were affected by the music played in the classrooms with Disney, new-age electronic, and classical music all being employed. Students were more responsive to Disney and new-age electronic music than they were to classical music. This study was impactful for my understanding of music and art therapies in schools because it denoted that students who self-reported as sad were much less affected by the music playing in the classroom. The study also showed that although many students self-reported as not being sad, their drawings were often violent or sad in nature. This shows me that students who are sad may need more exposure to music to benefit from its mood altering effects. It also shows me that some students may repress their feelings of unhappiness or find themselves unable to express those feelings with words, while being able to express them through art. It was thought provoking that students reacted more to Disney and electronic music than to classical music. The reasons for this could be ample. Chordal progressions have

become far more simplified in today's popular music than they were in the past. Disney music uses these simple (and, in my opinion, emotionally manipulative) chord progressions effectively and new-age electronic music is often minimalist in nature, and therefore also less challenging to comprehend for younger students. This strikes me as a crossroads in building critical, technical musicianship in young students as opposed to using music in its simplest form for therapeutic purposes.

Salvador, K., & Pasiali, V. (2016). Intersections between music education and music therapy:

Education reform, arts education, exceptionality, and policy at the local level. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 118(2), 93–103.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2015.1060553>

In this article the authors examine the gap between federal and local policies on arts instruction for learners with disabilities. They propose policy ideas, including helping administrators to understand music therapy and adaptive music education as well as improving music teacher preparation. The article acknowledges the lack of training music teachers receive for teaching music in self-contained classrooms of children with physical and mental disabilities. The authors assert that music teachers should be trained in music therapy techniques as their training more often focuses on technical musical skills as opposed to the methods of music therapy. This article was interesting to me for a variety of reasons. It seems that the authors are advocating for what I am hoping to integrate into the general population, but they are only advocating for those skills to be used with children with special needs. I agree that music educators aren't given enough training or familiarity with reading IEPs or working within self-contained classrooms. But I think the authors are remiss in their lack of advocating for music therapy within the general

population. First, in my last several months of student teaching and then, through this literature review, I have become increasingly aware of the prevalence of trauma in elementary aged students. Not every student who has experienced trauma has an IEP, 504 or is in a self-contained classroom. I would therefore recommend that music therapy is a worthy offering to the mainstream population of the student body and the entire school population would benefit from the emotional regulation and other therapeutic benefits it offers.

Summary

Throughout the process of the literature review I was surprised by much of what I found. I was completely unaware of the prevalence of trauma within elementary-aged students with some reports relaying that over half of elementary-aged children have experienced trauma of some sort (Gonzalez et al.). I was also surprised to learn of the clear disconnect between music therapists hired by the district and music teachers in schools. Finally, I was delighted to learn that much of music therapy practices and elementary music pedagogy are closely aligned. The differences appear less through the actual practice and more through the lens in which the results are viewed. The journals I reviewed are beginning to help to form my opinion that teachers could greatly benefit from small changes made to their curriculum and intention in order to foster more self expression, bodily regulation, and community building in the music classroom.

Chapter 3. Methods Guideline

Action research is a self-reflective process in which practitioners identify an area for improvement or inquiry within their practice, implement changes, and then assess the results (Sagor, 2020). This research method often proves to be an empowering undertaking due to the highly personalized nature of the research, as well as providing ample opportunity for the practitioner to reflect on their methods. Teachers in particular can benefit from this research, not only because it can improve their teaching methods, but it can also make a big difference in the lives of their students.

There are several steps to completing an action research project. They are outlined in *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research* (Sagor, 2000) as follows:

1. Selecting a focus: In which the teacher makes a decision to investigate a specific area of teaching that they may want to learn more about, or improve upon.
2. Clarifying theories: This is when the researcher learns more about and then narrows down pedagogical theories that may change or improve the area of focus they have recognized.
3. Identifying research questions: This is when the researcher selects pointed questions to guide their research and inquiry.
4. Collecting data: This can be done through a variety of methods- although the teacher should use triangulation to “enhance the validity and reliability of their findings” (5).
5. Analyzing data: This includes filtering through the collected data to discover a narrative.

6. Reporting results: This is when the teacher contributes to a collective knowledge base, benefiting their own teaching and others’.
7. Taking informed action: During this process the researcher develops the ability to learn from and analyze mistakes and refine methods of teaching.

Action research is a great method of research for a new teacher. While I hope that my future career in teaching will remain very self-reflective, having received guidance through a focused, in-depth, data-based project will help to ensure that I am able to do the same type of thinking on my own in the future.

As I had not been in the classroom prior to my student teaching year, my focus presented itself quickly. The pervasiveness of students with signs of trauma was quite noticeable to me. When talking to my cooperating teachers about this, they were well aware of its prevalence within the student body. Through research clarifying the facets of music therapy, the prevalence of trauma in elementary aged students and the literature review, I began to believe that implementing music therapy into elementary music curriculum would be possible. My questions are as follows:

1. How do students’ emotions during music class change after music therapy-centric activities?
2. How do classroom environments, relationships between students, and teacher-student interactions improve during music classes that involve a therapeutic activity?

Participants and Setting

I’m teaching at a small school in the outskirts of Portland, Oregon. The feel of the area is a mix of urban and suburban. The school itself is quite diverse with demographics as follows:

2% Native American/Alaska Native, 11% Asian, 10% Black/African American, 29% Hispanic/Latino, 14% Multiracial, 3% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 32% White. The school holds a Title I designation, indicating that a large percentage of the study body lives in poverty. There are only 12 teachers at the school and they are by a vast majority White females. The climate of the school is one of closeness. The school truly seems to be a focal point for the community. A large percentage of students stay after school every day for after-school care. Due to the Title I status, all students are given free breakfast as well as free lunch; most take advantage of both. I often note that students I know who have difficult home lives come in seemingly sad on Mondays and their mood improves as the week progresses, until Friday when their mood is unhappy again. It is a cycle that I dislike being privy to, but shows me that school is a place of stability and growth for them, a stark contrast with my feelings towards school as a youth and something I kept in mind during my data collection.

The class I am working with is my 5th grade class. There are sixteen students. They are a mix of Black, White, Mixed, Hispanic, and Vietnamese. There are 2 trans students, 6 females, and 8 males. Two students speak Vietnamese and two students speak Spanish. All students are fluent in English. Seven of the students are on IEPs (individualized education plans). Only two or three students have the appearance of affluence, but appearance is not too valuable a measure.

The classroom environment is not ideal. The class is quite boisterous and oftentimes has trouble getting along. They are known to be difficult throughout the school, despite individually all being caring and kind. They seem to have the most serious difficulties with disruption and interruption, especially when instruction is being given. At times many different members of the class have expressed sadness about the way their class operates. There is a lot of resetting, reviewing expectations, stern talks, restorative talks, and general climate monitoring and

mending in all of their classes, including homeroom, P.E., art, and music. The students have said things like, “See, this is why I don’t like being in this class,” and “We never get to finish anything because we are bad.” On my first day of class, one student asked me, “Are you going to be mean like our last teacher?”

On the other hand they seem to thrive when being given autonomy and a task to solve. They are interested in music. There are many talented musicians in the group and many who are excellent listeners and observers. They love to play games and they are *hilarious*. They can be deeply kind and emotionally sensitive. Several students from the class visit me regularly outside of class time just to chat or jam, even if our class went poorly that day.

I’ve only worked with these students since the beginning of January. I understand that students who may have trauma need a lot of time to get to know and trust someone. To complicate the situation, they didn’t have music until this year. The school hired a music teacher at the beginning of the year and she quickly quit, leaving the school in a lurch. Then, for months until I arrived, they had substitutes. When I got in the classroom it was set up kind of like a college lecture hall and students said they watched videos every class. Prior to my arrival, the rotating cast of teachers and substitutes had turned the music room into a haven for chaotic classroom behaviors. I am still working towards licensure and am a new teacher. This means I have a lot of work to do especially in regards to classroom management. This class in particular has been my most difficult, but I still look forward to seeing them every week. I know these students have a lot to offer musically, if I am just able to coax it out of them. This is why I have chosen to implement music therapy techniques into their classroom. It is an attempt to change the classroom environment, improve relationships and help students work through any troubles they may be carrying on the day-to-day.

Data Collection & Analysis

My raw data collection occurred over the course of 5 class periods. Throughout my data collection I organized my information by day, to be sorted through later during analysis. I utilized both inductive and deductive coding as the choices I made regarding data collection were loosely aimed towards my research questions which were as follows:

1. How do students' emotions during music class change after music therapy-centric activities?
2. How do classroom environments, relationships between students, and teacher-student interactions improve during music classes that involve a therapeutic activity?

I then used deductive open coding to sort through my collected data and began to recognize repeated usage of similar words from personal journals and conversations with students as well as repeated behaviors.

The collected data I used was from teaching reflection journals, lesson plans, objective data on student behavior, student conversations about the class, student self-assessed moods, and informal observations of student engagement and behavior. These sources were both objective and subjective. They also utilized more than only my point of view as students were asked to share moods, feelings about class, and general observations on each lesson. I collected data from these disparate sources as Sagor (2020) suggests the importance of the triangulation of data. I wanted to be sure that I wasn't only relying on my personal recollection of the classes. By utilizing data regarding objective student behavior (i.e. did I call the office, did a student elope), talking with my students about their own feelings and perceptions of class and reviewing my own teaching reflections prior to each day, I can ensure that the data I am collecting is as objective as possible when using qualitative analysis.

My university supervisor as well as a second faculty member at Western Oregon University helped me to review my data analysis and ensure that the themes I began recognizing were conceptually congruent and of acceptable quality.

Researcher Positionality

I'm a 36 year old White female who grew up in a small town in rural Southern Illinois. My experience of the place was that it felt like a cultural vacuum, with an overall cultural apathy toward art and music. When I left the confines of my hometown and immersed myself into the music scene of an adjacent college town as a high schooler, I found what had been missing in my education and peer relationships. I found that through making and listening to music I could express myself, I found community, and I found a commonality that united the disparate members of our small "scene." What I now understand to be music-as-therapy happened naturally then, as has been the case for thousands of years.

As I integrate myself into the community of my small urban school in outer Portland I recognize that some elements of my identity differ from those of my students. Around 30% of the school's population is White like myself, making White the majority demographic, but not by a lot. I was raised during the "colorblind" 1990s when addressing matters of race was somewhat frowned up. In contrast, students today do not shy away from acknowledging their differences and take pleasure in celebrating them. I am thankful for this shift but can find myself to be a bit more reserved at times when it comes to addressing race frankly. I need to work on that. Thankfully, as an "all-genre" music enjoyer and educator, I won't have to worry about overcoming some long held beliefs among more conservative music educators about what types of music "deserves" to be studied in the classroom.

I also need to remain cognizant of the fact that I am a new teacher. Some changes in classroom environment and teacher-student relationships may be partially influenced by my emerging skills as an educator. I will try my best to keep this in mind as I analyze the data I collect and parse through what may have improved solely because of my emerging teacher skills, and what was a direct result of implementing music therapy.

Chapter 4: Findings

Throughout the course of my data collection with my fifth grade students, three main themes emerged. These themes emerged through analyzing my raw data using coding and thematic analysis, with guidance from Sagor's (2000) text, *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used for identifying, analyzing and then reporting themes from raw data. Thematic analysis allows researchers to code and organize data in a way that makes patterns, repetition, and contrasts apparent. Coding involves analyzing data by simplifying and organizing disparate sources into manageable segments.

In my case I was sifting through written teaching reflection journals, lesson plans, objective data on student behavior, student conversations about the class, photographed student self-assessed moods, and informal observations of student engagement. I gave codes to repeated actions and words, (i.e. elopement, disruption, smiling, having fun, etc.) then grouped these into broader categories, (i.e. played together, improvised as a class, everyone listened, etc. grouped together as "collaboration"). I then grouped these codes by their overarching meanings and uncovered my themes. Sagor (2000) suggests that triangulation reduces the researcher's tendencies of bias so once my themes were tentatively revealed I went back through my data to ensure that each theme was supported by multiple sources of data.

Three main themes emerged from analyzing the data I collected over the course of five classes with my fifth graders. They are as follows:

1. **Improvising together to improve relationships-** in which instruments were used to create music while simultaneously improving relationships among students, between students and teacher, and regulating the classroom environment.

This theme was identified through coding of data from two class sessions centered on improvisation. Observed behaviors such as reduced disciplinary actions, increased participation (in particular, from typically hesitant students), and improved peer to peer interaction was coded and categorized under interpersonal improvements and classroom regulation. These were then further classified into a theme of relationship-building through sharing musical experiences of vulnerability and joy.

2. Creating and sharing to improve confidence and personal agency- in which students engaging in musical creation and performance (like improvisation and composition) improved student confidence and increased personal agency. This change was cultivated by providing a space for expression and ownership over students' musical creations. The more students were able to explore musically, the more open they became to sharing ideas, engaging in work with each other, and taking creative control.

This theme emerged by coding evidence of increased participation, reduced performance anxiety through repetition, willingness to share personal work as well as give peer feedback. These broader characteristics were grouped in categories like "confidence-building," "self expression," and "personal agency."

3. Deep listening for environmental and self-regulation- in which incorporating deep listening exercises into the classroom created a calm and focused environment for learning. This activity promotes self-regulation through mindfulness and shared reflection as well as being culturally relevant.

This theme was identified with codes like "silent listening," "calm bodies," "focus," and "student preference" all gathered from classroom observations, journaling and student feedback.

These codes were set into broader categories related to emotional regulation, classroom management, and active participation.

Each theme was deduced using multiple forms of data and naturally aligned with the three core tenets that Gaston outlined in *Music in Therapy* (1968) which are as follows:

1. The establishment or re-establishment of interpersonal relationships.
2. The bringing about of self-esteem through self-actualization.
3. The utilization of the unique potential of rhythm to energize and bring order.

Improvising Together to Improve Relationships

My first theme showed that improvising as a class resulted in improved relationships between students as well as between student and teacher. Within 2 class periods I utilized improvisation as a music therapy technique. Musical improvisation occurs when the musician (in this case, a class of fifth grade students) creates melodies or rhythms instantly, on the spot. This class improvised during a drum circle and while using pitched mallet instruments.

During the second class in which I was collecting data, we were rounding out a 4 week drumming unit. Until this class we had worked on call and response, rhythms, learning technical aspects like the names of parts of the drums and sticking technique, as well as hand placement, ways to make sounds, etc. In this class students learned the “*Peanut Butter Sandwich*” rhythm from a World Drum Club video (2021). First we chanted the rhythm as a class (which actually starts with the word “sandwich”) “sand-wich pea-nut-butt-er” (two eighth notes and four 16th notes.) As the class continued chanting as a unit, I modeled an 8 beat improvisation over the chant. We then moved our chairs into a circle (instead of our usual assigned seats in 2 rows) and then grabbed tubanos (a tall drum with a 10-14 inch head that we play with our hands.) After learning the rhythm and practicing playing it together as a group we then used that established

rhythmic base to allow for individual solos and improvisation. As the class held down the drum beat, one student would improvise for 8-16 beats or until they were done. I led the class through this exercise until every student that desired to improvise was able to, one or multiple times.

To analyze the effects of this activity I recorded observations using journals written after class that included objective remarks about student participation and classroom behavior that included elements such as: did students elope, was there any overt disruption like a fight, did I call the office for assistance, did all students participate, did students verbally express enjoyment or dislike of the activity, did students non-verbally express enjoyment or dislike of the activity? I also recorded my own feelings about the way the class progressed. I had students self assess their own mood on a scale of 1-5 at the start of class and at the end of class (which I did for every day of observation for this project) with one representing a low, sad or mad mood and five representing “great!”

In my recorded observations on behavior and participation I noted that no students eloped from the classroom during the class period, and I did not send a student to the office or have need for calling the office (both elopement and administrative assistance are regular necessities in all classes at this school.) These facts alone indicate a better student-teacher relationship. I utilize a three-warning system with all classes. Students get warnings for continually talking out of turn, saying inappropriate things, and being physically unsafe with their bodies. After the third warning the student is then asked to go to the office. Often in class students argue with one another (which regularly results in physical altercations) or attempt to argue with me. I call the office regularly for help and have been told by office staff that this is expected.

I also noted that 3 students initially abstained from improvising as we moved around the group, with one student not participating at all. Then, as we made our second lap around the

circle, all three students volunteered to improvise. Still, the one student who initially didn't participate continued to abstain from playing the collective drum beat. Both improvising and performing are vulnerable acts. I interpret the high class buy-in and participation as a step towards better relationships with one another as being vulnerable with each other is a bonding experience.

My observation notes about my own feelings after this class were extremely positive, especially in comparison to the previous class with these students, in which there were multiple physical altercations, resulting in administrative assistance as well as the necessity of writing three referrals. This class started on a serious note in direct relation to the incidents that had occurred in the previous class. The school social worker came in and led a restorative justice circle in which we talked about the way the previous class had progressed and ways in which we could avoid similar situations occurring again in class. The mood after this talk wasn't particularly somber, but it also was not cheery. After this I moved directly into teaching the "peanut butter sandwich" rhythm.

In my notes I relayed that during the drum circle, student buy-in was very high. I noted a fair amount of embarrassment from students initially, especially when I first started asking for volunteers to improvise. This behavior looked like flushed cheeks or getting red in the face directly after their solo, students shaking their heads "no" when asked to solo and a lot of nervous laughter. After some successful solos from excited students as well as an intentionally comical solo from one student it seemed that the mood shifted and students were getting "into it." There was a lot of laughter and smiling as well as voicing of praise, approval, and excitement. Students in this class are often reluctant to volunteer and participate. Having all students participate in at least one element of the activity is quite rare. In the text *Trauma*

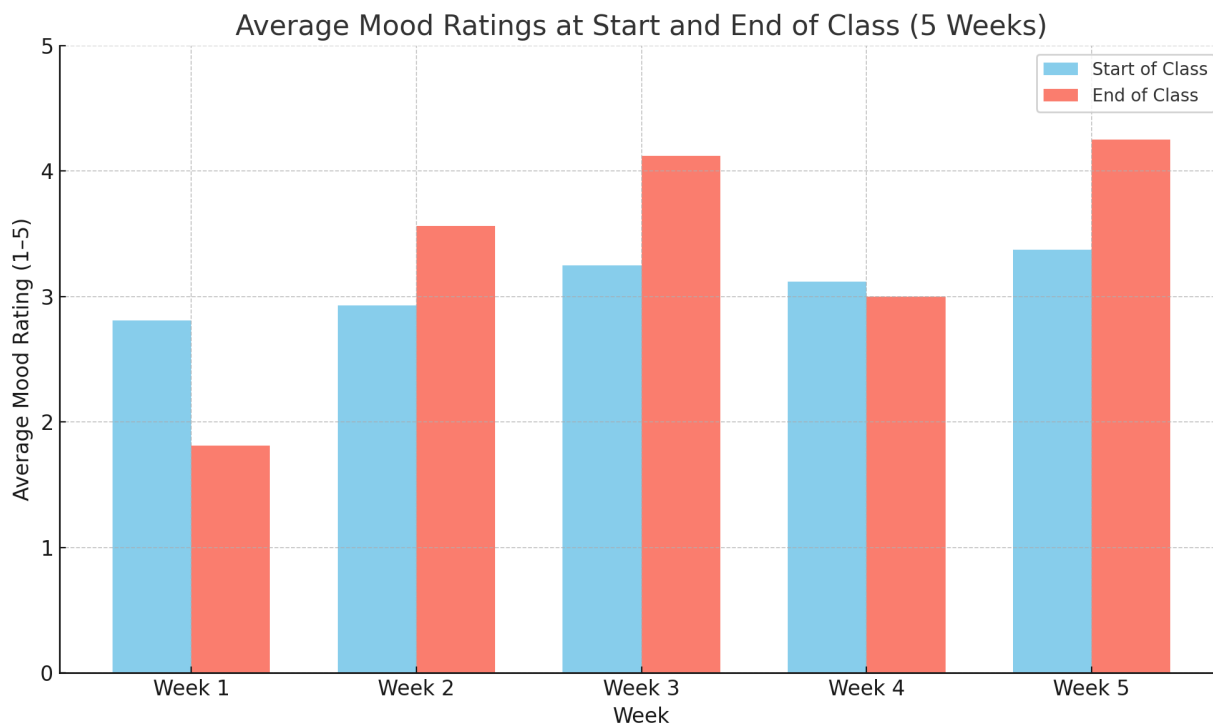
Informed Care we learn that, “social supports and relationships can be protective factors against traumatic stress. However, trauma typically affects relationships significantly, regardless of whether the trauma is interpersonal or is of some other type” (Center For Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). The walls these students have up with each other and with me can potentially be broken down by improving relationships within the classroom.

I also wrote about my excitement at having to continue with the circle for longer than anticipated due to repeated solos. I wrote, “Everybody wanted to keep going. Noah and Jeffrey were bummed when I couldn’t call on them again, because they’d already gone three times. Usually I feel like I’m pulling teeth to get students to participate but today was a hit! Drums are magic.”

Over the course of my data collection I asked students to self-report their mood both at the beginning and the end of each class. Student self-reported mood (1-5, shown by holding up their fingers, which I then photographed) started class at an average of 2.93/5 and ended class with an average of 3.56/5 showing an average increase of .63 which can be seen in Figure 1. Again, this doesn’t necessarily register as a great increase, in comparison with the last class which started at an average mood of 2.81/5 and ended at 1.81/5, which strikes me as a great success!

Figure 1

Self-reported student mood ratings.



Students self-reported their moods using their fingers (1 indicating a poor mood, 5 indicating a positive mood) before and after each class.

Our second activity that involved improvisation was one where we utilized pitched barred instruments (xylophone, metallophone, and glockenspiel.) We removed several bars from the instruments to make up a set of notes called a pentatonic scale, see Figure 2 to easily visualize the results of this process. Pentatonic scales are useful for beginning improvisation because the notes removed from the instrument make it so there are no dissonant intervals. What is left are only consonant intervals, which are pleasing to the ear. In layman's terms, we fix the instrument so that any notes a student will play will sound good together.

Figure 2*Xylophone with bars removed*

Students were directed to remove specific bars from the instrument to ensure that any combination of notes played will sound pleasing.

After removing the bars on the instrument students were given time to explore and encouraged to make up a little 4-8 beat melody. Then we gathered in a circle, and similar to the drum circle activity, we started with a basic beat, this time a bordun. A bordun is two notes making a major fifth either sustained or repeated as a means for providing a grounded harmonic base. As the group as a whole created this harmonic base, we went around in a circle and students were invited to improvise a melody on their instrument. This is such a great

confidence-building activity because the notes chosen can't really sound bad, no matter the order in which they are played!

Again, during this class period I noted better communication between students and better communication with me which I attributed to student's excitement to improvise and share their discoveries. Students weren't continually talking over me and were eager to share their melodies during their individual exploration time. Students asked me to come listen to what they were playing and were eager to share with each other. Two students in particular who have historically had a difficult time getting along were able to sit next to one another without any disturbances or unkind remarks. There were no elopements, and I did not need assistance from administration throughout the duration of the class period.

In my journal following class I noted praise, approval, laughter, and smiles. We also had a high level of participation with much less hesitance. This class occurred only one session after the drum circle and students seemed to gain confidence from already having been vulnerable and trying something new during our last class. One student did abstain from soloing, but they participated in creating the bordun with the rest of the class. In my journal I wrote, "Everyone was happy and joking around when they left class!" Transitions are really hard for this class and physical and verbal altercations often occur during these times. Having students leave excited and positive feels really encouraging.

These students have a full class CICO (check in, check out) sheet that I and their other "specials" (P.E., art, gardening, reading intervention) fill out each period. I noted that I was able to give the class "good" markings for each category, something that rarely happens with this group. Finally, students' self-reported average mood (1-5) at the beginning of class was 3.25/5 and was 4.12/5 at the end of class, a marked improvement (refer back to Figure 1).

Creating and Sharing to Improve Confidence and Personal Agency

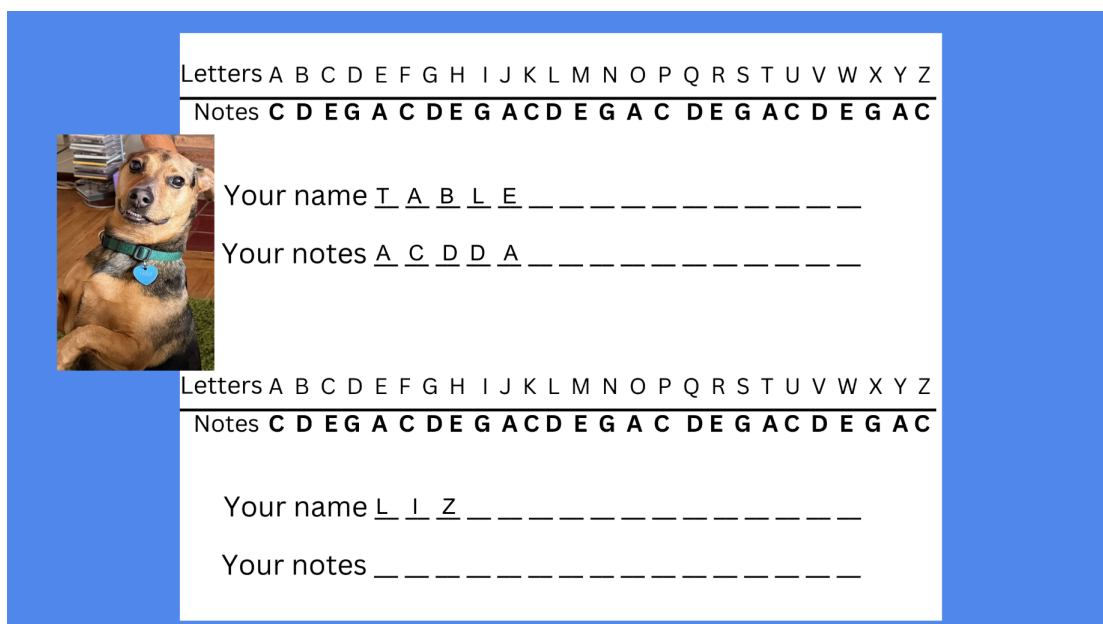
The second theme I recognized was that the process of creating and sharing musical compositions during class fostered increased student confidence and promoted greater personal agency when it came to making decisions in the music room. Both activities described in the previous section, drum circle improvisation and mallet instrument improvisation, involved creating music, which is a powerful form of self expression. These activities are not only auditory but also deeply kinesthetic. Students use their bodies to convey emotion through rhythm and motion. For example, if a student were feeling angry, their drum solo might sound loud and fast, they may hit hard and quickly. In contrast, a content or peaceful mood might result in a soft, smooth and repetitive mallet solo. Drumming, in particular, has been shown to promote emotional release and social bonding as observed through the study in the article *Complementary Therapy for Addiction: “Drumming out Drugs”* (Winkleman, 2003) wherein participants of a substance abuse rehabilitation program took part in a pilot drum circle program.

Importantly, neither of these improvisation activities required a high level of technical proficiency, which leaves room for all students to participate fully. Students did not have to worry about being “right,” they were simply invited to be present and responsive. This freedom gives students an opportunity to focus on expression over perfection. The act of making music in this unencumbered way encouraged students to be present in the moment, and enhanced student confidence in a way that was welcoming, non-judgemental and student-centered. In other words, students are able to *just be in the music*.

This ability to self express through music strikes me as particularly useful for students who may be experiencing trauma elsewhere in their lives, or may have experienced trauma in the past. When researching for my literature review I found several journal articles referencing drum

circles as tools for groups of people with higher levels of trauma like veterans, mental health service users, and even for people with Parkinson's disease. (Gooding & Langston, 2019; Martin & Wood, 2017; Wainwright et al., 2024) If these populations can benefit from group drumming, then I believe my students, many of whom face their own challenges, are likely to benefit in a similar way. These activities provide a regulated space in which to safely process feelings that may be too difficult to verbalize.

Additionally, during the third session in which I collected data, students used defined strictures to make their own name into a personal motif or theme. I called this activity "Your Name is a Song" in homage to the children's story by the same name about a girl who takes back power from her teacher who wouldn't learn to pronounce her name, written by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow (2020). The set element of this activity were the notes which were involved (again, we used a pentatonic scale to ensure that student's contributions would easily sound good together). Students wrote their names down and then correlated the letters of their names to the note names I provided on the worksheet. The notes that they came up with were required to be used in their motif but the rhythm, timing, and repetition were up to them, allowing for a significant amount of creative freedom within some limits. I've included my google slide from class that day first using my dog, Table, as an example and then using my own name, which we quickly worked through as a class to ensure all students understood how to turn their own name into a motif (see Figure 3).

Figure 3*Composition worksheet*


Letters	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
Notes	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C

Your name I A B L E _____

Your notes A C D D A _____

Letters	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
Notes	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C	D	E	G	A	C

Your name L I Z _____

Your notes _____

Students used this worksheet to turn their own names into motifs.

A name is something so personal to each individual. Within this class I have three students who use chosen names instead of their given birth names. I also have students with culturally specific names of Vietnamese and Hispanic origin. Having each student give their name special attention in the form of turning it into a song had an empowering and affirming effect. During this activity participation was 100% with students asking to share their motif well before we gathered as a whole group to do so. Once students finished their first name, many then asked if they could use their whole name. Students were eager to show me their creations and obviously felt excited to share with their classmates. When we gathered as a group to let each student volunteer their motif, every student was eager to share and some who felt they had “messed up” asked for a second turn.

When we shared our motifs as a class we naturally began giving a little bit of feedback to each student after we heard theirs. Almost every time we discussed as a class whether their motif “sounded like them.” When we decided as a class that one student’s motif didn’t “sound like them” they quickly reworked it and asked to show their motif again. This resulted in an about face from the class with everyone agreeing that it “sounded like them” now. After one student’s motif we all agreed that it sounded like a tune that would be in a Studio Ghibli film. Studio Ghibli is a Japanese animation studio that makes cerebral children’s movies. When we left class that day I heard that student excitedly relay to their classroom teacher, “We decided my song sounds like something from a Studio Ghibli movie!” A different student at the end of class asked me, “Can we do this with every instrument?” And many students asked if I could hold on to their worksheet for future usage. I journaled, “Students had so much fun today. There was a lot of joy and excitement during both activities, but especially during the motif writing exercise. I enjoyed sharing my name with everyone just as much as the kids, even though mine was a little underwhelming.”

Although much more limited in its scope, this quick composition exercise reminded me of the Lost Voices program I read about in *Finding the beat: A partnership to address the relationship between a music program and health among youth who have experienced trauma* (Munro-Kramer et al., 2024) in which students write a song with the support of adult musicians as a means of self expression, processing trauma, and building trust. This quick activity provided some similar results such as a means for self-expressions and a way to build trust with their classmates and their teacher.

This activity was the final *creative* music therapy activity that I utilized within my five days of observation. From the first drum circle improvisation, to the mallet improvisation, to

creating songs out of our names I noted a real increase in confidence when it came to sharing. Initially, during the drum circle, students all ended up participating but not first without some hesitation and preemptive embarrassment. I also noted some flushed cheeks after their solo moments. It's hard to do something that is unfamiliar *alone* within minutes of being introduced to the concept, so their hesitation made a lot of sense. During this first improvisation session I made sure to let the kids know, "There is no wrong way to do this!" but I think what really cemented that was the class clown making it into somewhat of a joke. His comical improvisation on the drums made it feel less intimidating for the rest of the class and really set the drum circle in motion. Throughout these creative activities I was able to see their confidence grow and their fear decrease. For the mallet activity students were far less hesitant to solo than with the drum circle, because they knew what they were getting into. Finally, as aforementioned, when it came time to share our motifs, students were so eager to do so that they couldn't wait until we gathered as a whole group.

During lunch, both fifth grade classes are allowed to come into my classroom to play instruments for a bit. We just jam and chat and mess around. I gave up my lunch period to develop stronger relationships with these students as I came into a precarious situation by starting teaching halfway through the year. After our drum circle and mallet instrument jams, student interest in coming into the music room at lunch increased. Kids I'd never seen during lunch stopped by, got out a xylophone and began messing around. It really seemed like these students felt more intrinsically motivated to play after I implemented music therapy elements into our learning. Starting with something low stakes but vulnerable (like a 4-8 beat improvisation) made my students more comfortable trying something new.

These activities provided an unintended effect in future music classes as well. Since I've implemented music therapy elements into my classroom there seems to be more earnestness and confidence when learning new repertoire. There was a general air of, "I'm too cool for this" when I first got into the classroom and now students are impressed with themselves and each other as they learn parts and learn to operate as a unit. I think that providing a means for self expression and a means for a personal connection to music helped build some internal drive that then enabled these students to exist more comfortably within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), a place where students can work on their own with just a little help from more experienced peers or teachers.

Deep Listening for Environmental and Self-regulation

Implementing a period of deep listening during class immediately transformed the classroom environment and contributed to improved self-regulation from the students. During my five days of focused observation and data collection I utilized an element of music therapy in three of the five classes. On the final day I implemented a period of deep listening. However, this was not the students' first experience with this practice. We started a period of deep listening in most classes immediately after I came to the school. The early application of this practice was my first successful attempt at connecting with my students.

This practice was profoundly inspired by the text *Deep Listening, a Composer's Sound Practice* by Pauline Oliveros (2005) in which the composer Oliveros guides the reader through several deep listening exercises in an attempt to expand and deepen the reader's relationship to all sound. Oliveros describes listening as a form of healing meditation that invites the practitioner to become more aware of and in tune with their surroundings and the sounds within.

The qualities of these meditative practices are closely aligned with trauma-informed education, in that the environment is calm and safe, as well as empowering.

During deep listening I use two pieces of music which we compare and contrast as a class. The students select one of the pieces and I select the other. We listen in complete silence for a set period of time to each song. We then have a period of think, pair, and share or we skip straight to a classroom discussion about things we noticed in each song. I sometimes use a version of the 3-2-1 strategy in which students will point out three things they noticed in either song - this could be regarding instrumentation, lyrics, production- truly, anything they noticed, then we find two similarities between the songs and finally one way in which they are completely different. For my contribution, I usually try to choose a song that has some secret link to the song they chose. Recently we listened to the song “Die with a Smile” by Bruno Mars and Lady Gaga. The song I chose to pair with it was “All Flowers in Time” by Jeff Buckley and Elizabeth Frasier. The secret link was that both are duets. After a moment of questioning and thinking about what they heard one student figured it out! The elementary music function of this activity is to get the students to practice using sustained listening skills, to begin analyzing the music they hear out in the world, and to develop the skills to discuss their opinions with peers. The result of this activity provides something much more potent than just this.

The first time we practiced deep listening students were asked how long they thought they could silently listen to a piece of music. Even posing this question to the students during our first session was a feat. As aforementioned, this class has trouble with self control and in particular with talking over each other and me. We settled on 30 seconds for the first session and we had great difficulty reaching that goal. We restarted each song multiple times in efforts to get all students to stay quiet. When we finally met our goal several students burst out laughing and

fidgeting, making noise with their bodies and chairs. This outburst was confusing to me and at first I couldn't understand why being silent for such a short period of time was so difficult for them. I slowly began to realize that just listening in earnest might feel really vulnerable for a lot of these students, thus the outbursts and noise after. For some reason though, after that first session the kids were hooked.

Deep listening was my first real success towards relationship building in this class, occurring prior to my period of data collection. Students are surprisingly upset when I don't have a deep listening period planned for a class and will ask why. During my five days of data collection I only did one session of deep listening, on day five. In the data I collected on students' self reported mood, this day saw the greatest increase in mood from the beginning of class to the end (which was right after our deep listening portion of class.) Students' moods started at an average of 3.37/5 and ended at an average of 4.25/5, an increase of .88 over the course of the class. At the end of the five class periods in which I collected data I took a vote on favorite topics pursued thus far in class. Seven out of the sixteen students chose deep listening as their favorite activity, making it the most popular element of music class.

For the deep listening session we had during week five we had finally reached two minutes of completely silent listening for each song. This was a hard won two minutes as it has taken since January for students to be capable of silent listening for that long. The student's choice for this week's session was "Luther" by Kendrick Lamar (Lamar, 2024) which I paired with "Never Too Much" by Luther Vandross (Vandross, 1981). I include a slide in the day's slide show which includes a link to the audio of each song (I intentionally don't show the music video to keep the emphasis on listening) and the list of questions for our discussion after. Refer to figure 4 to see the slide for this class's deep listening session. Of course, the secret link between

these two songs is that the “Luther” Lamar is referencing is Luther Vandross. His legendary singing voice is also sampled in Kendrick’s song.

Figure 4


Slide from deep listening session

DEEP LISTENING


3- things you notice

2- musical elements they share

1- way they are completely dissimilar



Never Too Much- Luther Vandross



Luther- Kendrick Lamar

Slide which includes links to each song the class will listen to and the prompts for discussion after.

The students love “Luther” and they were committed to finding the link between the two songs, so they listened intently to “Never Too Much.” The resulting conversation was one of invested exploration, one where students politely listened to each other’s opinions and were invested in what I had to tell them about each song. We got to talk about sampling (the act of repurposing someone else’s music into something new for your own music) and its rich history in hip-hop. They learned about Luther Vandross and the idea of paying tribute to important musicians who define genres and musical innovation. This element of culturally responsive

pedagogy is important to trauma-informed teaching as it emphasizes the importance of students' identities, histories, and communities (Gay, 2000).

During this session students were completely silent and totally regulated and calm. This is a far departure from the typical classroom environment which is one that I've found difficult to manage. Students often come in dysregulated, which is a known effect of trauma (Center For Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014) and leave either more or less so depending on the events of the day's class. During deep listening the classroom environment was one of intense concentration as well as enjoyment. I believe that the fact that deep listening calms these students and makes for a regulated classroom environment will ensure that they are able to take the subsequent lessons with them when they leave the classroom.

In my journal I reflected, "Sharing music that the kids and I care about feels like the most important thing I can do as a music educator. This music has real value in these students' lives outside of school. It's incredible to get to have these conversations with the students in a calm environment conducive to learning." I believe one of the great missteps of traditional music education is the assumption that every student should be prepared for a future as a classical or orchestral musician. This narrow focus on Western classical easily lends itself to a disinterest in music from much of the student population. In reality, most students will interact with music through listening to the music their peers and families enjoy. Those who do end up making music in their future will do so from their home on popular and accessible instruments like the guitar or keyboard, or increasingly so, on their computer. It's important for students to be able to know and talk about what they like in music and why. Deep listening helps students to develop their own musical tastes and gives them the vocabulary to describe and analyze music critically, something I didn't learn until recent years. It also teaches them that their opinions and

preferences matter and that music is a powerful tool for connection, emoting, and expressing identity.

Together, the music therapy-inspired activities that I implemented into my classroom: improvisation, composition, and deep listening supported improved student relationships, promoted personal agency, and led to a calmer, more regulated classroom environment. This change is helping to cultivate a space where students can feel safe, continue to invest in their own music education, and most importantly feel assured that the music room is a space for self expression and catharsis.

Chapter 5

Music therapy has a wide swath of methods and implementations. For my project I chose to focus primarily on deep listening, improvisation, and composition. Guiding my study was my knowledge of the natural intersection of music therapy and music education. I became aware of the shared elements of the two during my research and during my time learning to be a teacher while still a student myself. Group music making and composition made regular appearances during my time as an undergraduate and graduate student both observing and student teaching at several schools. During my literature review, I was happy to see these real-life observations affirmed when reading through journal articles by Metic & Svalina (2020) and Dweck (2023) which referenced the usage of Orff, free improvisation, and creative music therapy pedagogies in general elementary music.

During my research I found that there were others who wondered why so many elements of music therapy were often present in elementary music, but were not looked at through said pedagogical lens. McEvoy & Salvador (2020) in particular, highlighted these overlapping elements and made suggestions for potential uses of music therapy in the classroom but did not implement them into a study. I also learned about the prevalence of trauma within elementary-aged students and the ways trauma may present in the classroom, as well as some ways elementary music education can be harnessed to address these traumas in a safe environment. Hess & Bradley's (2020) journal about John Dewey's assertion that trauma can be transmuted through the arts had a meaningful impact on my work as the authors pointed out that, although Dewey made several important contributions to the work of addressing trauma within the classroom, he did not fully acknowledge the unpredictability of trauma and the irregularities

from student to student in the way it is outwardly presented. This information stuck with me when implementing and assessing activities in my classroom through a music therapy lens.

Gaston's (1968) idea that music is sound without associated threat, may have some latent flaws in regards to the inconstant presentation of trauma. For example, I tried to remain aware of student's levels of comfort and ease when participating in deep listening activities. Remaining quiet and still is definitely a challenge for most elementary students, but those with added trauma may find it even more difficult or even impossible. It may have been sheer coincidence or luck that my students, although *extremely* chatty, were able to safely and consistently sit through extended elements of quiet listening. In the future, it may be pertinent to ask or give space for students who may feel uncomfortable with that activity to let me know.

Gaston's philosophy of music therapy is based around the pursuit of relational intimacy and freedom within a safe space. This philosophy doesn't necessarily account for the complications in providing a safe space for students who may have extremely varied experiences with trauma, or just safe spaces in general. In reflecting on my own education, the classroom itself was an unsafe space, one where I would never feel comfortable being my true self. I think that the small size of my classroom and the closeness of the school itself enabled my students to quickly, but not without some initial reservations, let their guards down during the music therapy-centric elements of class.

I also noted that much of the work regarding music therapy in the elementary classroom did not touch so much on the somatic effects of deeply listening to music. Most of the research I reviewed spoke to the effects of active music making. I think that my work of implementing both active and somatic music therapy elements sets it aside from much of the work I became familiar

with. Interestingly, the activity that seemed to have the greatest effect on my students was the deep listening portion of our class.

I feel that the act of implementing these music therapy activities, analyzing the results through a music therapy lens and then sorting through the acquired data using open coding revealed some concrete effects that were often alluded to during my literature review but infrequently documented. I'm looking forward to following up on my research in my own classroom in the future as well as continuing to read and learn from experts in the fields of elementary music education, music therapy, and trauma-informed pedagogy.

Limitations

The theoretical limitations I came upon were logical and even helpful for my future work as an educator. I wanted to focus on the unfortunate fact that so many students experience trauma at a young age, but quickly found that addressing this directly would not be possible within a general music classroom. I'm amply aware that I am not a therapist and that my knowledge of trauma-informed pedagogy is in its nascent stages. These facts and the structure of an ARP, in which the researcher changes their own teaching and then measures the effects, ensured that my methods were generalized enough to potentially help students dealing with trauma without accidentally triggering or furthering said trauma. I'm thankful for these limitations because, as an elementary music teacher, my means of teaching must be applicable to all students, regardless of their past experiences.

I did find that my findings aligned with the core tenets of music therapy. Improvising seemed to improve both student-student and student-teacher relationships (tenet one- the establishment or re-establishment of interpersonal relationships), students seemed to come out of their shells and take pride in their musical discoveries (tenet two- the bringing about of

self-esteem through self-actualization) , and deep listening, in particular, seemed to have a positive effect on the classroom environment (tenet three- the utilization of the unique potential of rhythm to energize and bring order).

The methodological limitations of this study were the most frustrating for me throughout the course of my research. Due to the limited amount of time in which I was able to study the implementation of music therapy activities into my classroom, I cannot know how long term additions of these activities would sustain or decay the effectiveness I was able to deduce from this time. I plan to implement these elements into my classroom henceforth and will hopefully be able to reflect on their long term effects in the future. I also found that, due to the limited time frame, I wasn't able to undertake longer, more involved elements of music therapy like songwriting. I did utilize a quick composition activity that had promising results but I remain curious if songwriting with my students would've been an extremely difficult and complicated task, or one that yielded great changes within the classroom and healing effects for my students.

The practical limitations of my study primarily involve my newness to the community and classroom. Recreating this particular study would be somewhat difficult as it would require newly entering an established community of learners. This practical limitation also leaves me with some ambiguity regarding the successes that I did measure. I still wonder whether the improvements I witnessed were due primarily to the implementation of music therapy elements into my classroom or if they were just a byproduct of my students getting to know me and having spent more time with me as the weeks progressed.

Conclusion

My action research project explored music therapy's potential as an agent for change and improvement within students and classroom environments. My work in a Title I elementary

school prompted an interest in trauma-informed pedagogy and its potential integration into my classroom through music-as-therapy. My focus was on one fifth grade classroom over the course of five sessions. Three primary themes emerged throughout this study: improvisation as a tool for relationship building, creating and sharing to improve confidence and personal agency and deep listening for environmental and self-regulation. The themes that emerged aligned closely with the tenets outlined by E. Thayer Gaston (1968) which include the establishment or re-establishment of interpersonal relationships, the bringing about of self-esteem through self-actualization and the utilization of the unique potential of rhythm to energize and bring order.

My own experience with music as a therapeutic tool informed my initial interest and motivation in the pursuit of this research. By recognizing the broad, culturally diverse tradition of utilizing music for healing I found an opportunity to bring therapeutic elements of music into my classroom without compromising the integrity of my work as an elementary music educator. As I continue to pursue my own healing through an involved music therapy practice, I hope to in turn become a practitioner and promoter of a shift within elementary music education, in which the healing power of music can be harnessed in tandem with the joy of learning to be a musician. This holistic approach is rooted both in meaningful tradition and forward momentum, which I will be delighted to honor as my career progresses.

References

- Annesley, L., Curtis-Tyler, K., & McKeown, E. (2020). Parents' Perspectives on Their Child's Music Therapy: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 57(1), 91–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/thz018>
- Center For Substance Abuse Treatment. (2014). *Trauma-informed Care in Behavioral Health services*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>
- Child Trauma*. (2024). Samhsa.gov.
<https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/child-trauma>
- Dweck, J. (2023). Children as songwriters: The social-emotional benefits of songwriting in the elementary grades. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 46(2).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103x231189387>
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed : 50th Anniversary Edition*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Gaston, E. T. (1968). *Music in Therapy*. New York : Macmillan.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching : theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Giles, M. M., Cogan, D., & Cox, C. (1991). A Music and Art Program to Promote Emotional Health in Elementary School Children. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 28(3), 135–148.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/28.3.135>

- Gooding, L. F., & Langston, D. G. (2019). Music Therapy With Military Populations: A Scoping Review. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 56(4), 315–347. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/thz010>
- Hess, J., & Bradley, D. (2020). Dewey's Theory of Experience, Traumatic Memory, and Music Education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09706-z>
- Johnson, R. E. (1981). E. Thayer Gaston: Leader in Scientific Thought on Music in Therapy and Education. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 29(4), 279–286.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3345004>
- Lamar, K. (2024). *Luther*. PG Lang, Interscope.
- Martin, K. E., & Wood, L. J. (2017). Drumming to a New Beat: A Group Therapeutic Drumming and Talking Intervention to Improve Mental Health and Behaviour of Disadvantaged Adolescent Boys. *Children Australia*, 42(4), 268–276.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2017.40>
- McEvoy, C. A., & Salvador, K. (2020). Aligning Culturally Responsive and Trauma-Informed Pedagogies in Elementary General Music. *General Music Today*, 34(1), 104837132090980. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1048371320909806>
- Metić, M., & Svalina, V. (2020). Potential use of music therapy elements in Music teaching. *Metodički Ogledi*, 27(1), 149–173. <https://doi.org/10.21464/mo.27.1.12>
- Munro-Kramer, M. L., Beck, D. C., Ball, M., & Pardee, M. (2024). Finding the beat: A partnership to address the relationship between a music program and health among youth who have experienced trauma. *Psychological Trauma Theory Research Practice and Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001776>
- Oliveros, P. (2005). *Deep listening: a composer's sound practice*. Universe.

- Patey, H. M., & Darnley-Smith, R. (2003). *Music therapy*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- “Peanut Butter Sandwich” Rhythm. (2021). In *World Drum Club*.
<https://youtu.be/z-VTt518EkE?si=9TA0LLOZx8Rjv8W7>
- Sagor, R. (2000). *Guiding school improvement with action research*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Salvador, K., & Culp, M. E. (2022). Intersections in Music Education: Implications of Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Education, and Trauma-Informed Education for P–12 Praxis. *Music Educators Journal*, 108(3), 19–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321221087737>
- Salvador, K., & Pasiali, V. (2016). Intersections between music education and music therapy: Education reform, arts education, exceptionality, and policy at the local level. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 118(2), 93–103.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2015.1060553>
- Smith, J. C. (2017). Hidden in Plain Sight: A Music Therapist and Music Educator in a Public School District. *International Journal of Music Education*, 36(2), 182–196.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761417712319>
- Thompkins-Bigelow, J. (2020). *Your name is a song*. The Innovation Press.
- Vandross, L. (1981). *Never Too Much*. Epic.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wainwright, L., Kang, K., Dayanim, G., Bedell, C., Devlin, K., Lanham, D., Gerson
 Suarez-Cedeno, Baker, J. A., Serap Bastepe-Gray, Bang, J., & Pantelyat, A. (2024).
 Drumming-PD/HD: The impact of a pilot group drumming-based music therapy

intervention on people living with Parkinson's disease and Huntington's disease and their caregivers. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 1–16.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08098131.2024.2435875>

Walsh, L. (2023). *Understanding Child Trauma | SAMHSA - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*. Samhsa.gov.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma>

World Federation of Music Therapy. (n.d.). Wwww.wfmt.info. <https://www.wfmt.info/>