

Musical Pathways: From the Classroom to the Community

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In this article I will endeavour to share some insights into my continuing journey to understand and articulate the relationship between community arts and arts therapy. In recent years the nature of "community music therapy" work has come under much discussion in the music therapy community, as more music therapists seek work in community settings and work alongside community musicians.

I would like to present a snapshot of the development of musical pathways between my work in special education and the broader community, most particularly with a group of adolescents with intellectual disabilities who were participants in a music performance project.

In 1999 I somehow found myself in the job of musical pathfinder. I had recently developed a music performance project as part of the music therapy program at Mt Evelyn Special Developmental School. A band consisting of seven senior students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities had been formed. All students and staff participated with enormous enthusiasm, and the potential therapeutic benefits of group membership for this population started to become clear.

Some gains had been made during the first year. Group members exhibited increasing confidence during in-school performances, and became more aware of their own and other band members' developing musical skills. However it became clear that in order to achieve the fullest therapeutic potential the group would need to perform beyond the supportive school community.

A performance project had the potential to increase confidence and self esteem, to increase feelings of

acceptance in the broader community, and to develop social and team work skills. This type of success and recognition is vital for adolescents, particularly those with special needs, as they meet the challenges of adolescence.

"For an adolescent with developmental disabilities, the developmental tasks of adolescence can be especially challenging. They may enter adolescence with an established history of social, academic, and physical problems that will lead to continued, if not heightened, frustration and failure during this period without appropriate supportive services." (Bursuck and Rose, 1988)

In my role as music therapist it was vitally important, therefore, that I seek a musical pathway to the broader community. This proved more difficult than first anticipated. Barriers of stigma, ignorance, transport and resources seemed insurmountable. I was frustrated at the lack of accessible and appropriate performance forums for young people with disabilities.

At this point, my "other life" as a community musician and project manager directly intersected with my "music therapist" role. In partnership with the Dandenong Ranges Music Council, where I was employed as a community music development worker, we initiated the *Attitude* project. *Attitude* would be a place where the band and others could share their creativity, taking it from the school context to the community. This was a place where people with disabilities could be acknowledged and applauded for their creativity and achievements. It was something to look forward to - making a personal transition from closet performer to the big stage!

The project was launched with enormous success in April 2000. Following the initial sellout concert and art exhibition, one extraordinary performer who had made her debut as a "sit down" comedian commented that

"People with a disability can do something they enjoy doing and see the audience also enjoying it. It gives you something to think about other than "poor old me" - something to look forward to. I'm hanging out of my tree for it!!" (S.Power. (2000) The Big Issue.)



The school band also made their debut community performance at the first Attitude concert. It was nerve-racking and exciting not only for the students but for the teacher aides and musical director! This was followed by successful July and December performances, where we included dance in our repertoire.

There were marked gains following the initial community performances. The band members gained in confidence and in music skills, starting to extend to pitched playing, more complex dotted rhythms, combinations of more complex rhythmic patterns, and longer more sophisticated works. I also observed the development of an air of calm and confident excitement prior to performances, with students' certain in the knowledge that they "Can Do It!" In addition students displayed more focussed and goal-oriented behaviour, and the program took on a much higher profile in the community, adding to gains in self-esteem and acceptance. Performing was a fantastic forum for self-expression and the formation of a strong sense of identity.

I also noted my own development as a professional at this point. I began to gain a clearer understanding of the importance at working at many levels as a music therapist. For maximum therapeutic benefit for this group of students, it was vital that I work at a

broader community level to create opportunities for the group.

I had gained a better understanding of the therapeutic power of performance, and the importance of taking our work out to the community in order for the group to be validated in their accomplishments and creativity.

Due to the success of the senior band, both junior band and drama programs have also been developed. Both bands performed in front of thousands of people at the Melbourne Tennis Centre as part of the Association for Children with a Disability Expo in 2002, and this year will perform with over 6000 school students from all around Victoria in the Schools Spectacular at the Rod Laver Arena. Our steps into the community grow ever bolder, encouraged by the obvious benefits for the students and their families.

Community Arts and Arts Therapy - Where Do They Meet??

The arts therapist may interact with community arts on many levels. As described above the therapist may create new or access existing arts opportunities in the community to ensure that therapeutic goals are achieved. The arts are a powerful medium to effect change on a community level, as well as with individuals. Arts therapists may also view their work as creating positive change for whole communities rather than for individuals. In the case of the Attitude project, an arts therapist brought about positive change for the Yarra Ranges community by heightening awareness of the abilities of artists with disabilities, and also brought the lack of cultural opportunities for people with disabilities to the attention of local government and other authorities.



Arts therapists may work with community stakeholders, including special interest groups, local government, families, health and education services

and cultural organisations to create and provide opportunities for active artmaking for all people, regardless of background, age or ability. Arts therapists in the community also raise awareness of creative arts therapy and the power of the arts to effect change. They may address current local issues and may use the arts to develop a sense of community and shared vision.

Arts therapists may work on many levels simultaneously. In order for individual work inside institutions to continue and to be supported, there must also be an awareness of the power of the creative arts therapies and community arts in the broader community. No one of these aspects of the profession will flourish in isolation. All facets of creative arts work will benefit from the ability of

creative arts therapists to make connections between their work with individuals and work in the community.

References

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