

Music-Based Services for Young People Experiencing Homelessness: Engaging Strengths and Creating Opportunities

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This study explores a music studio in a transitional living program for young people experiencing homelessness. Using an ethnographic approach, data were collected to explore: (a) young people's experiences in the music studio, (b) the meanings they attach to their experiences, and (c) whether involvement in the studio engages their strengths. Study findings present a compelling narrative that supports the use of music-based services for young people experiencing homelessness as a way to engage their strengths and foster important opportunities for connection, engagement, and creative expression. Findings highlight the importance of challenging prescriptive notions of homeless youth and developing services that engage their strengths.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Agencies serving young people experiencing homelessness may build on the tradition of using recreational, art, and music-based services to engage clients' strengths.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2014) estimates that over half a million young people up to the age of 24 experience an episode of homelessness of one week or more annually. Given this high prevalence rate, a large portion of youth homelessness research is framed from a risks and consequences perspective. This research focuses on identifying youth populations that are at increased risk for experiencing homelessness, including young people who experience trauma (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010), family conflict (Congressional Research Service, 2013), and who identify as LGBTQ (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012a, 2012b). It also examines the consequences young people experience as a result of being homeless, including increased risk of exposure to violence (Finkelstein, 2005); physical and mental health problems (Beharry, 2012; Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012); engagement in risky sexual behaviors, which often result in sexually transmitted diseases (Kennedy, Tucker, Green, Golinelli, & Ewing, 2012); and substance use (Ferguson, Jun, Bender, Thompson, & Pollio, 2010).

Despite these harsh realities, there is a growing body of homeless youth research grounded in the strengths perspective, which suggests that individuals who endure terrible atrocities have an innate ability to rebound from those experiences; it promotes the idea that individuals inherently have a wealth of resources to draw upon to overcome traumatic events that seemingly threaten their ability to cope (Saleebey, 2012). Largely qualitative, this body of homeless youth research challenges the risks and consequences perspective by exploring

and prioritizing homeless youths' survival narratives. These narratives are explicitly framed as demonstrations of homeless youths' strength and resilience (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, & Patterson, 2010; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Kidd & Evans, 2011).

Social work and related fields have historically used recreational, art, and music-based activities to engage young people's strengths (Addams, 1909; Coyle, 1948; Kelly & Doherty, 2016). Social work scholars have argued for the need to highlight these historical relationships and the inclusion of recreational, art, and music-based activities in current social work practice with youth (Andrews, 2001; Breton, 1990). Researchers and practitioners have responded to this call and reported the successful use of these activities in engaging young people's strengths, including the use of photography in community engagement efforts (Gant et al., 2009), video production in promoting health literacy campaigns (Stewart, Riecken, Scott, Tanaka, & Riecken, 2008), theatre and drama techniques in assisting refugees and recently arrived young immigrants with social adjustment issues (Rousseau et al., 2007), poetry in providing young people with authentic and meaningful voices in school-based teacher/administrator-student relationships (Mitra, 2009), and rap and hip-hop as a means of promoting therapeutic dialogues (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012) and prosocial skills (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2004).

While music-based services have great potential for engaging young people's strengths (Baker & Homan, 2007; Travis, 2013; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson & Baffour, 2004; Wolf & Wolf, 2012), little is known about how music-based activities are used with homeless youth and whether these activities would engage their strengths. This article addresses this gap in the literature by presenting findings from a study exploring a music studio in a transitional living program for young people

experiencing homelessness. Using an ethnographic approach, data were collected to explore: (a) young people’s experiences in the music studio, (b) the meanings they attach to their experiences, and (c) whether involvement in the studio engages their strengths. Study findings present a compelling narrative that supports the use of music-based services for young people experiencing homelessness as a way to engage their strengths and foster important opportunities for connection, engagement, and creative expression.

Methodology

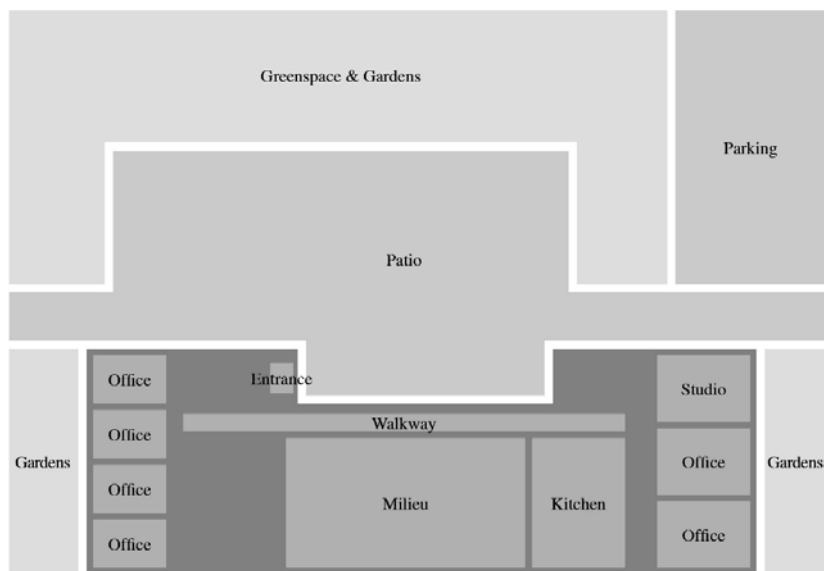
Site

The study occurred at Teen Living Programs (TLP) Belfort House, a transitional living program for young people between the ages of 18 to 22 experiencing homelessness, located in the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, IL. Bronzeville was home to many great artists and musicians throughout the 20th century, including Richard Wright, Ida B. Wells, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, and Louis Armstrong. This rich legacy lives on in the neighborhood, as evidenced by murals and statues that decorate neighborhood boulevards. Belfort House, better known simply as Belfort to young people and staff, is located in the heart of Bronzeville. With an efficient and modern design, Belfort adds a unique profile to the inner city spaces and structures surrounding it. As Figure 1 shows, expansive green space—including gardens, lawns, and a patio—line the north, east, and west sides of the building. Young people are encouraged to work in the gardens, which produce vegetables for community meals.

The music studio is a nondedicated space, serving the dual purposes of a conference room and music studio. Located in the northeast corner on the first floor of Belfort (see Figure 1), large windows look out on the green space and add natural light to the room, thereby making it feel open and inviting. The studio equipment is housed in a cabinet secured by a master lock in order to deter damage and/or theft. The studio equipment consists of a refurbished Apple iMac Desktop 21.5-inch 3.06GHz Intel Core 2 running Logic Pro 9, which is a software-based digital audio workstation complete with hard drive recording, playback, mixing, and mastering capabilities. Additional studio equipment includes a Korg X5 synthesizer that works as a MIDI controller, two Shure SM58LC dynamic microphones, one 15-foot microphone cable, one microphone stand, an M-Audio Fast Track Pro 4X4 Mobile USB Audio/MIDI Interface with Preamps, one 3-foot MIDI cable, and two sets of Sennheiser HD280 Pro Headphones for recording, monitoring, and mixing purposes.

All Belfort young people are eligible to use the studio during hours of operation, which varied throughout the study period. Staff with a background in music and audio production software train young people on how to use the studio equipment and provide additional technical support as needed. Once young people are trained, they are eligible to train other young people on how to use the equipment, thereby creating a peer-based learning environment. While staff spend some time in the studio with young people, they do not supervise them, instead preferring to allow young people to function independently.

FIGURE 1. *Belfort House interior floor plan.*



Sample

All English-speaking young people and staff who engaged in the music studio during the study period were asked for their permission to be observed, thereby employing nonprobability purposive and homogenous sampling. In nonprobability purposive sampling, the researcher intentionally includes participants thought to exhibit the phenomenon under study. This type of sampling is particularly useful in exploratory research (Fortune & Reid, 1999). Homogenous sampling seeks to reduce variation, thereby intensifying the phenomenon under investigation and simplifying data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Nonprobability purposive and homogenous sampling were useful for this study due to the primary interest in observing young people and staff who engaged in the music studio. For the purposes of this study, “engagement” was operationally defined as young people and staff working on music production and/or supporting the music production process. Continuing to employ a nonprobability purposive and homogenous sampling strategy, all young people and staff observed were invited to participate in in-depth semistructured interviews to further explore their experiences in the studio and the meaning they attach to their experiences.

Procedures

Two study information sessions were conducted prior to initiating immersion in the music studio. These sessions outlined the purpose of the study and the scope of my presence in the studio. A key component of this process was articulating my role as a participant observer. Whenever possible, I abstained from engaging in collaborative processes with the young people, such as writing, recording, mixing, or producing music with them, that could leave a lasting impact on their experiences. This did not preclude me from offering technical assistance, such as assisting young people by answering questions about how to operate studio equipment, as well as providing feedback, such as commenting on and/or complimenting their work when it felt natural and appropriate. In these moments, while my consequential presence (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) may have shaped young people’s experiences and the meaning they attach to their experiences, it also enhanced these participant observations by supporting young people’s work in the studio and deepening the researcher-participant relationship.

Jottings (i.e., small, minimally descriptive notes written in the field; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) taken from participant observations were later developed into field notes, which I wrote as soon as possible after leaving the studio. During participant observations I often engaged in brief, informal interviews (Bernard, 1995) with young people and staff regarding their activities

in the studio. These discussions were later developed into field notes as well and provided important insight into the development of in-depth semistructured interview guides. Study interviews were conceptualized as research partnerships (Weiss, 1994) and intensive opportunities (Charmaz, 2006) for young people and staff to further discuss their experiences in the studio and the meaning they attach to those experiences. I invited young people and staff to participate in study interviews during participant observations. All interviews took place in a private office on the third floor of Belfort and were audio recorded with respondents’ consent. Data collection for this study was a recursive process. Therefore, participant observation continued during and after interviews.

While conducting in-depth semistructured interviews with young people, I invited those most engaged in the studio to collaborate on developing an audio documentary exploring their experiences in the music studio and the meaning they attach to their experiences, the findings of which have been presented elsewhere (see Kelly, 2015; Kelly & Hunter, 2016). In addition to conducting study interviews with young people and staff engaged in the music studio, I worked with the agency’s clinical director and director of supportive services to identify staff members for key informant interviews. These interviews provided important contextual and historical information on the agency and the studio. All interview participants received a \$15 gift certificate to iTunes as compensation for their time. There was no incentive for participant observation. All study procedures were approved by the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board, protocol # 2011-0305.

Analysis

Field notes and interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo (Version 8, 2008), employing Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw’s (1995) iterative, recursive two-phase model of coding and memoing. Drawing on methods established in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), Emerson et al. (1995) extend the practices of coding and memoing to the analysis of ethnographic field notes. While Emerson et al. (1995) do not explicitly apply their model to analyzing interview data, their reliance on grounded theory methods often applied to the analysis of qualitative interviews suggests their model is appropriate for analyzing interview data as well. In the first phase of analysis, data were read as an entire set and openly coded, noting initial memos. In the second phase, I selected themes and performed more focused coding that was tied together with integrative memoing. I presented themes to young people and staff during a member check group in order to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Few discrepancies arose between young people

and staff’s perceptions of their experiences in the studio, the meaning they attach to their experiences, and the identified themes. When discrepancies arose, we entered a dialogical process and reached a consensual understanding. I used the themes to develop the thematic narrative presented in the Findings section.

Findings

A total of 17 young people and staff participated in the study ($N = 17$; 10 young people and 7 staff). All eligible young people and staff who were approached for permission to observe them in the studio consented ($n = 11$, 10 young people and 1 staff). All eligible young people expressed interest in participating in study interviews, but only 7 consented to the interviews due to some young people’s school and work schedules. All 7 staff members approached for study interviews consented. Table 1 presents participants’ pseudonyms as well as their self-reported race, gender, age, time spent as resident (young people), and role and time employed (staff).

Relationship With Music

Young people describe a longstanding relationship with music prior to entering Belfort. They discuss the important role their families played in providing them with

access to musical instruments and exposing them to various forms of music at a young age. Theo describes playing music from a young age and being surrounded by music everywhere he went, including family gatherings.

I got involved in music when I was about 3, because I had always been around music. My mother was a singer, and I was just always surrounded by music everywhere I went... I was maybe about 5 or 6 when I got my first keyboard. It was a little 61-key Casio that I thought was the greatest thing ever, and I just began to mess around.

Smiley discusses playing music at an early age with her family, noting her involvement in her uncle’s recording studio and how she has sung all her life.

Well, I’ve been involved in music since I was 2, actually, because my uncle, he had a studio, and I had recorded a song, and I would sing, whatever. So, I just was singing all my life, basically, and it’s, like, a gateway. Like whenever I feel stressed or mad or angry, I start to sing, you know, to keep my, to keep me happy, you know, to keep my hopes up. So, yeah, I love singing.

TABLE 1. Demographics of Participants ($N = 17$) in Teen Living Programs (TLP) Belfort House

Participant ^a	Race ^b	Gender ^c	Age ^d	Time with TLP ^e	Position (Staff only)
Young adult residents					
Bobbie*	AA	F			
Effen*	AA	M			
Hope*	AA	F			
Jay	AA	M	21	6 mo.	
Marcus	AA	M	19	6 mo.	
Outlaw	AA	M	20	1 mo.	
Smiley	AA	F	20	6 mo.	
Smurf	AA	F	20	1.5 yr.	
Theo	AA	M	18	4 mo.	
Young Louie	AA	M	22	Former	
Staff					
Anne	W	F	60	2 yr.	Executive Director
Herman	W	M	31	7 yr.	Director of Supportive Services
Leigh	W	F	33	4 yr.	Milieu Director
Pepper	AA	F	41	7.5 yr.	Clinical Director
Ray	AA	M	52	12.5 yr.	Supportive Housing Manager
Rochelle	W	F	51	10.5 yr.	Director of Operations
Zee	AA	F	24	1 yr.	Youth Development Specialist

^a Pseudonyms used; ^b African American (AA) or White (W); ^c female (F) or male (M); ^d in years; ^e in months (mo.) or years (yr.). * These young people were only observed, not interviewed. Therefore, age and time spent as resident are unknown; race and gender are reported as observed.

Young people describe this early access and exposure as important to their upbringing and continued interest and involvement in music. They note the benefits gained from their continued interest and involvement in music, including increased proficiency in musicianship, rapping, and writing skills. Outlaw describes how friends took notice of his rapping and writing skills as he continually developed and honed his style over the years. Note how Outlaw incorporates a freestyle rap in his response. In the freestyle passage, Outlaw demonstrates his skills as a rapper and writer “off-the-cuff” and in the moment.

I feel like as I got older, it just got like, the more I did it, it just became easy and all my friends used to be like, “man, Law, you already a celebrity. You could be a celebrity. You just making up whole songs off the top of your head,” and I used to always be like, “yeah, I know I’m raw.” I mean it’s just like when you feel like, I can come from off the top. I got style so my spirit gonna let these lyrics drop. It’s nothing, know my style kinda unorthodox. But I do this so you can call me Mr. Pops. You feel me? Like, just like that, like that’s just freestyle. Like, I wasn’t ready for that but I was like, “I’m just gonna let it go,” ’cause you know, that’s what it is.

Young people discuss how their continued interest and involvement in music provides them with important coping mechanisms. Marcus notes how music helps him through his trials and tribulations.

[Music] helps me to deal with my past. I don’t know what I could do if music wasn’t never invented. I’m glad music is here because without music I think I wouldn’t be able to focus on where I am now. I don’t think I’d be the person or the man that I am today because of my past. Music helped me through so much ways dealing with my past and my past brought me through a long way and until this day.

Jay describes how music and writing provide him with an outlet and an alternative to acting on his anger.

[Music’s] like a huge punching bag. It’s like it doesn’t break for me. It doesn’t get tired of me hitting it. It just is there for me to get at and take my frustration, anguish, angst, and all those other ratchet and foolish emotions that humans get. It kept me from doing a lot of stupid shit, a lot of stupid shit.

Theo describes how his interest and involvement in music kept him out of trouble and safe as child and continues to do so today.

I kind of stayed more so out of trouble by maybe sitting in the house for hours playing music. Like I did get in my share of trouble as a child, but music kind of kept me away from what I could have gotten into when I was younger. You know, as far as drugs and things like that, because that’s the type of environment that I lived in. So music kind of kept me shielded away from all of that. It kind of still does, especially now with all the violence that’s going on left and right. Music kind of takes my mind away from that where I don’t have to worry about going outside and worrying about whether I’m going to make it from point A to point B.

Theo goes on to describe how music has “been more of a lifesaver than a hobby” for him throughout his life.

Okay. Like when I was in high school, I would be in school every day. I would get to school at 7:00. We had a piano lab, and we had a band room. I would be at either one playing either one of the instruments rather than being outside hanging with people that were into negative things. Then, after school, instead of going out, hanging outside and getting into trouble, I was in the band room or in the piano lab practicing and learning. So it kind of kept me away from the environments that were dangerous and that kind of brought negative attention. So it kind of helped me keep my life together rather than go haywire and then being looked at as like a problem individual or somebody that doesn’t understand the importance of what they’re doing.

In these passages, Theo describes how his interest and involvement in music shields him from drugs and trouble, how it is a lifesaver, and how it keeps him from making poor decisions. These assertions of the importance of music in Theo’s life seem particularly relevant given the waves of crime and violence impacting young people where the agency is located on Chicago’s South Side.

Experiences With Music Production

Young people engage in music production in the studio. As the field notes developed over multiple participant observations demonstrate, young people seek each other out and develop collaborations based on existing compositional, performance, and production strengths. As young people engage in production processes, they develop various roles in the studio including beat maker, engineer, lyricist, musician, poet, producer, rapper, singer, and spoken word artist. As roles develop within production processes, young people form connections with each other, engage in creative forms of expression, and have fun while doing so.

Young people experience relational challenges and frustrations within their collaborations, including compositional challenges (e.g., writing lyrics, melodies, and beats), questions about engineering and production (e.g., recording and editing tracks), and general frustrations with collaborators (e.g., vocalists feeling pressured by producers and producers feeling misunderstood by performers). Bobbie, Smiley, and Theo collaborated on a song over the course of several sessions. During one of the sessions, Bobbie and Smiley expressed their frustration with Theo's feedback regarding their singing performances. Over time, Bobbie became frustrated with Theo and stopped coming to the studio to work on the song. Like Bobbie, some young people choose not to work through relational challenges and frustrations in the studio. But those who do have an opportunity to develop important intra- and interpersonal skills. Field notes from informal interviewing with Smiley and Theo following several weeks of participant observation demonstrate this point.

They both report experiencing the collaboration positively and note some interesting things about how the collaboration was offering them more than just a musical product. Smiley noted that the collaboration offers her an opportunity to "have a voice and be put on point." When asked what she meant by being put on point she explained that it's a chance to be challenged to be the best she can be. She gets a voice by being able to sing and by voicing her opinion in the collaboration. In discussing working through relation challenges, Theo noted you're always going to run into personalities, "everyone's got one!" He went on to state that collaborating "helps you learn how to work in the real world, 'cause this is only the studio." I probed a bit, wanting to get a better sense of what he was saying. "So the studio helps you deal with real world? These skills that you're talking about, like having a voice, being put on point, speaking your mind, learning how to deal with different personalities in the studio; they help you to deal with similar situations in the real world?" "Yeah," they both replied, nodding their heads. I asked one more question. "How did it feel to collaborate?" Smiley, smiling and laughing, stated that it felt, "Good."

In the above excerpt, Smiley and Theo describe their collaboration as a positive experience and frame it as an opportunity to learn to work with different personalities, acquire and utilize voice, and be pushed to be the best that they can be. Theo goes on to note how working in the studio helps him "learn how to work in the real world." When asked if these skills are transferable outside of the studio, Smiley and Theo verbally and nonverbally contend that they are. This suggests that

collaboration in the studio may offer young people an opportunity to develop important intra- and interpersonal skills that are transferable outside of the studio, including the ability to compromise and negotiate, increased confidence in one's ability as a performer and/or producer, and the ability to work under pressure and persevere.

Experiences With Music Education and Appreciation

Young people and staff engage in music education in the studio. Field notes demonstrate how staff educate young people and young people educate themselves and others in the studio. In terms of staff educating young people, Herman facilitates studio orientations, gives Logic Pro 9 lessons, and offers technical assistance utilizing an interactive, nonauthoritative teaching style that provides young people with opportunities to demonstrate and integrate audio engineering, compositional, and production skills. Young people responded positively to this approach and view Herman as an important, if not essential, part of their experience in the studio. Interviews with staff support young people's perceptions of Herman.

In terms of educating themselves, young people work through technical challenges with Logic Pro 9 and other studio equipment by using available resources, including Herman, YouTube tutorials, and me. In doing so, young people educate themselves on how to use the studio equipment and increase their studio competency and musical knowledge. They are better able to use the studio to meet their self-defined goals related to music production. In terms of educating others, young people provide informal mentorship and training to each other in the studio. In doing so, young people gain a sense of mastery by sharing their knowledge and demonstrating and solidifying their own understanding of the skills. In the following excerpt, Marcus describes training others in Logic Pro 9 and how it feels to do so.

It feels real good because it's like I could be that person that taught them things and they could say, "Well, Marcus did this. Marcus trained me real good and learned me how to use Logic. Marcus showed me the skills. He gave the knowledge, and now I'm using it." And they would be like, "Marcus, I thank you." And until this day, they still do it, and they say, "If it wasn't for you, I don't know what I'd do. I probably woulda learned by myself, but it woulda taken a long time."

Young people engage in music appreciation in the studio, whereby they share original and other artists' films, music, poetry, spoken word work, and music videos with other young people and staff. In doing so, young

people invite peers and staff to appreciate work that is meaningful to them, while at the same time educating others about the work and inviting them to engage in music-based recreation in the studio. Young people also educate other young people and staff about different eras and genres of music that are meaningful to them. In these moments, they collectively engage in music appreciation and recreation, by young people sharing the music they appreciate and inviting others to engage in music-based recreation in the studio. Field notes from one of several participant observation sessions with Smurf demonstrate this point.

Smurf pulled up a music video on YouTube. As the rhythm section locked into a groove, she closed her eyes, raised her arms, and let them sway over her head. “Mmmhmm. That’s my jam. That’s my jam,” she said. Marcus and Hope entered the studio as the slow jam played. Taking in the sounds and vibe of the room, Marcus said, “Smurf got that old school in her,” nodding his head, smirking and eventually laughing when Smurf replied, “You know I do. You know I do!” the latter stated empathically in a singsong way, all of us laughing along. About half way through the song, Smurf stopped it and pulled up another video. The room was quiet as it played out, everyone having their moment with the song. Smurf eventually broke the silence, poking fun at Hope. “Look at her! She pretending she sitting at the window, holding a glass of brandy, singing.” We all laughed. Hope continued to pretend, even hamming it up a bit, singing along and pantomiming that she was sipping brandy, smoking, and leaning on a window sill.

In this excerpt, Smurf brings her musical knowledge to the studio and creates a music appreciation moment. She invites Hope, Marcus, and me to listen to some of her favorite songs, while at the same time educating us on “old school tracks.” Through this process we are all able to relax and have a laugh in the studio. In a later conversation with Smurf, she offers additional insight into music appreciation in the studio. She notes that although young people have their own rooms at Belfort, they are not allowed to be in each other’s rooms without staff permission due to safety and security issues. Smurf describes the studio as a place where young people can come together to engage with and listen to music, and how important that is in a place like Belfort where privacy is often a limited commodity.

Connection and Engagement

In discussing their experiences in the studio, young people describe it as a space that provides them with a sense of connection through their common interest in music. Smurf touches on this idea during our interview.

All young people listen to music no matter what kind of music it is. All young people listen to music and that’s a common interest that everybody has. Everybody has that interest in music. Okay, well there’s gospel, country, you know, orchestra, opera, hip-hop, rap, R&B, old school. Everybody like music.

Theo agrees, noting that in addition to the studio providing young people with a sense of connection through their shared interest in music, it also provides them with an opportunity “to be free of the environment or the situation that they’re in.” He continues:

You can only focus on the negative for so long before it really begins to affect you. You just become consumed with that thought of being classified as homeless and all the negative connotations that come behind that. With music, people don’t just see you as homeless. They see you as a homeless individual that has extraordinary talent and that you’re proud to show that talent. That doesn’t happen too much, because you become so controlled by the situation that you’re in, you don’t really get a chance to live your life how you want to. You’re worried about what the next person is going to say about the situation, and it shouldn’t be like that because everybody goes through something. But, everything is different. It just so happens that the studio becomes a common ground for everybody.... Everybody has some type of relationship with music.

Interviews with staff support young people’s framing of the studio as a space for connection through shared and common interests in music. Rochelle describes how the studio provides young people with opportunities for connection in a culturally meaningful way.

[The studio] touches an artistic piece that we don’t otherwise touch. I mean you can do creative things in a number of different ways. You can learn to cook. You can help us paint. You can do various things at TLP to engage, you know, creatively. But I think that that’s a place where we can really connect with people that’s culturally meaningful... music is really important to young people...it’s something that’s very at the forefront of a lot of their activities.

Young people describe how working in the studio provides them with important opportunities to build relationships. Theo describes how his involvement in the studio allows him opportunities to build his skills as a producer and connect with others.

I’ve had some relationships with different clients where they come ask me to do songs or they want to

work on something. That goes back to relationship building. The studio has helped me build more relationships and has even helped the staff to understand the kind of person that I am.

Theo goes on to discuss how his work in the studio provides staff with opportunities to get to know him better and see him in a different way.

By the staff being here, a lot of times they hear the music, and it kind of draws them to observe. When they observe, they hear how we feel, and they can even see some of the talents that they didn't know we had. Like whether it be singing or as a musician, a lot of staff here, like they didn't know I could play. When they see me in the studio, they're like, "Wow, I didn't know you could really do it." When they see the relationships that I've formed here, they see us in a different way that they wouldn't have seen us had it not been for the studio.

Staff describe connecting and engaging with young people in the studio. Zee discusses her interest in helping young people cultivate an original sound.

I feel like a lot of the youth who utilize the space do have their own distinct sound, and I think that's awesome, especially for them being so young to kind of have their own sound. So then along the way, maybe people could come along and kind of teach them how to tweak it to make it sound like really their sound.

Zee also describes how the studio offers young people and staff unique opportunities to connect and engage around uncomfortable topics.

I feel like when it comes to topics that make them feel uncomfortable if they play a certain song, I may ask them, "Oh, what about that line? How does that make you feel? Can you relate to that?" And it kind of opens up a dialogue where you may have not been able to get that youth to open up to you because it just may have seemed awkward, but with the song, that's just something that they can relate to and it kind of takes the conversation to a different place where you may have not been able to really be able to, you know, connect with the youth.

Creative Expression

In discussing their experiences in studio, young people describe it as a space that provides them with an outlet for creative expression. Jay describes how the studio provides young people with a reliable form of release

while they are separated from other potential sources of support.

[The studio] keeps the clients sane for a point because even though [Belfort] provide good services they're still separated from the family, friends, and other well-wishers. It's a good outlet for the body and soul. It may not be much but it's something that we can rely on. It's always there for us.

Jay says more about the studio always being there and why that's important.

It's like an ear that... it's like talking to someone that doesn't respond. It just listens and then plays it back to you in your exact way and fashion to see how you sound, to see where your point of view is and how you really felt to that essence. You can read yourself. It's like if you speak into it you are writing chapters in the book about yourself or that poem and you can reread you, reread that mirror, that reflection.

Jay goes on to describe the TLP music studio as "the ultimate expression outlet." Outlaw agrees, noting that the studio provides him with opportunities for self-expression.

It's all about self-expression. I just feel like me being able to go in there and put together music is giving me the opportunity to be heard; to be understood in certain ways and it's giving me opportunities to just share more of like what I feel like I could give to the world. So when I'm there, it's giving me that opportunity.

Smurf discusses the importance of art in providing young people with a means of expression and release. She explains how young people need the arts, including the studio. "They need art. They need the writing. We need the studio. We need it all! It releases the tension out from my brain. Hate, love, pain.... People can't take it all, but art can."

Marcus describes how he feels when he gets in the studio and how the studio provides him with an opportunity to release "the negative."

How I feel when I get in the studio, it's like a releasing. It's like I'm releasing. As soon as I touch the keys and I hear a sound of one thing, it's like, "Okay. You fixing to release all this negative energy outta you and you fixing to put all this positive energy in you." I put all my positive energy towards my music and I let go all the negative.

Young Louie describes how the studio provides Belmont residents with an opportunity to work on any problems they might have and how doing so is the ultimate form of expression.

Because this Teen Living Program organization is a place for different kinda people have problems, and they came off the streets into a shelter. I'm sure they going through things, so I guess like putting it on the audio and getting out their problems is the best way to express their selves.

Staff note the importance of providing young people with outlets for creative expression. Pepper describes how the studio is a youth-centered space for creativity and expression.

We don't...that's their space. Staff don't...we don't need to go in there and observe them and listen to it and scrutinize it and see if it's up to a standard or any of that. It's their space. It is truly a youth space in that sense. Freedom of expression and creativity is the best way to describe it. It's a youth space, certainly not...I mean staff go in there, but it's not our space, it's their space.

Herman builds on Pepper's assertion that the studio is space for creativity and self-expression. He notes the importance of not censoring young people and creating a space for them to voice their experiences as formerly homeless youth.

If somebody's been out on the street for 3 years, I would think they have some things they want to express. They might have some perspectives on society or people or government or politics or anything that I don't have. That gives them a space to have those things heard. It's going to be recorded. It'll be there as long as they take care of it. This is a place of expression. We're not doing it in a public place. We're not putting TLP's name on it. This is art. This is people's expression. We're not going to censor that or try to interpret it in any kind of way; that's just what it is.

Leigh describes the importance of creative expression and how it aligns with a strengths-based approach, noting how the studio allows young people to demonstrate strengths that are often ignored.

"You need a job." That's usually what our youth are told the most, "You need a job." Like, education is not always valued. Creativity is not always valued.... There's lots of different aspects of an individual and what make them work. And so if any one of those

things, whether it's spiritual, emotional, physical aren't working, then there's not a balance. And so I think part of that is having that creative side, that creative outlet for different people that is different things. Some people, it's writing or hanging out with friends and just having that outlet that way. The music studio is also a way in which I think we're exposing our youth to a different outlet.

In discussing how they feel about the work they have done in the studio, young people describe a sense of pride. Smiley states, "I feel good. Like I said before, I'm proud of myself. Mm-hmm, I have talent." Theo offers a similar sentiment, "For the most part, I'm very proud of the work that I do." Smurf feels a sense of pride as well, adding that although she needs to continue to advance her skills she is content. Jay notes how he admires his work, but that he can always do better. Young Louie shares Jay's sentiment about his own work in the studio, "I feel great about it. I always can get better. That's with anything you do, so that's that."

Staff share a similar sense of pride in discussing how young people feel about their work in the studio. Herman states, "I know that they're proud of it. I know that it's a sense of pride, because of the CDs that get passed around." Zee agrees, noting that young people's work in the studio is a process.

They're very proud, very proud. And I mean some people who may be veterans may think, "Oh, it's all right," but I think that for them just even being able to come up with the stuff that they do, they should be proud, and it's a process. You know? Like Rome wasn't built in a day, so I definitely do see improvement with everyone that utilizes it, and just their openness just to them getting feedback from staff and their peers.

Discussion

Young people's initial and ongoing interest and involvement in music suggests it is an important and ongoing part of their environment. By engaging with music throughout their lives, young people gain recognition for their strengths (e.g., playing instruments, singing, and rapping) and develop important coping mechanisms that provide them with alternatives to acting impulsively and hanging out in unsafe environments. This suggests that young people's early and ongoing relationship with music provides them with an important form of ecological resiliency. Fraser, Kirby, and Smokowski (2004) note that environment plays a significant role in resiliency, arguing that environmental contexts may facilitate higher functioning through exposure to

opportunities for growth, thereby engaging existing protective and promotive factors and developing new ones. In their framework, the symbiotic relationship between environmental assets (e.g., young people's early exposure to music) and individual attributes (e.g., young people's ongoing interest and involvement in music) produces an ecological resiliency, where existing and newly developed protective and promotive factors may ameliorate risks (e.g., young people using their interest and involvement in music to develop alternative coping mechanisms to resist impulsively acting on anger).

This finding seems particularly relevant given the violence impacting African American youth on Chicago's South Side. Several recent documentaries have noted the incidents of youth-on-youth violence in the area (Glass, 2013a; Glass 2013b; Vice & Vice, 2013). Given that some young people in this study report that their interest and involvement in music provides them with alternatives to acting out in anger and keeps them out of unsafe environments, increased access to music-based activities may be a useful tool in keeping young people safe and may help decrease youth-on-youth violence in the city.

Additional findings suggest that young people experience the studio as a space to engage in music production, education, and appreciation. Music production provides young people with important opportunities to engage their music-based strengths while working through relational challenges that provide them with important opportunities to develop intra- and interpersonal skills. Music education and appreciation also provide young people with opportunities to engage their strengths. When young people share their knowledge of music with staff and each other, they enhance existing strengths, develop new strengths, and gain a sense of generosity and mastery.

Every individual has strengths (Saleebey, 2012). Yet, the majority of youth homelessness literature frames young people experiencing homelessness from a risks and consequences perspective. While it is important to identify youth populations at increased risk of experiencing homelessness and engage in research and prevention efforts to ameliorate the consequences they experience while homeless, it is also important to honor and recognize their strengths. Doing so challenges the dominant risks and consequences narrative in youth homelessness research, contributes to the growing research on homeless youths' strengths, and contributes to what Kidd (2012) refers to as an empowerment perspective, whereby young people experiencing homelessness are understood as navigating and surviving within societal oppression and discrimination by demonstrating resiliency and strength.

Young people and staff describe young people's experiences in the studio as opportunities for connection, engagement, and creative expression. These findings

are congruent with and expand upon the existing literature on the use of music-based activities as means to engage young people's strengths. Mattaini and Meyer (2002) conceptualize strengths from a systems perspective, positing that individuals are best served through collaboration, that through collaboration strengths are engaged, and that strengths are actualized through active participation. Young people's strengths were engaged in the music studio through active participation and collaboration. Even when working independently in the studio, young people still actively participated in their work and sought collaboration by inviting others into their process. This suggests that young people seek connection in the studio and that through connection, their music-related strengths are recognized and engaged, which plays an important role in their ongoing development.

Implications for Practice

This study builds on a longstanding history of using recreation, art, and music-based activities in social work. Far from being a new idea, the practice of providing young people, homeless or otherwise, with modes of connection, engagement, and creative expression through the arts lies at the origin of the social work profession. Over time, the profession has moved away from this practice, initially relegating recreation, art, and music-based activities to some forms of group work and eventually moving to dismiss them altogether as a form of nonimportant play irrelevant for the serious practice of social work. In doing so, the profession has lost sight of the importance of play and fun for young people, the connection and engagement opportunities those things offer, and the essential forms of creative expression that are vital to the healthy development of young people. This study provides important insight into ways in which service providers and organizations working with young people can build on the tradition of using music-based activities to provide young people with opportunities to build on existing strengths and develop new ones. While not all agencies will have the means to create this type of musical environment, there are other ways to explore young people's music-based strengths, including songwriting groups, open microphones and other forms of performance, and music education and appreciation sessions. Further research is needed to explore whether these types of music-based services would also engage young people's strengths.

Study findings challenge prescriptive notions of homeless youth, their capabilities, and capacities. Ongoing strengths-based research provides advocates invested in prioritizing the strengths of homeless youth with an opportunity to shape federal, state, and local policies that impact the lives of young people experiencing homelessness. Doing so may have important clinical implications

in regard to program development and service provision for young people experiencing homelessness. Homeless youths' basic needs must be met, including food, shelter, and health care (Karabanow, 2003). But, as this study demonstrates, youth homelessness service providers can develop additional strengths-based programming with positive outcomes. Given how much we know about the risks that lead to young people experiencing homelessness and the consequences they experience as a result of being homeless, it is important to develop, implement, and evaluate services that might engage their strengths and provide them with opportunities for connection, engagement, and creative expression.

Limitations

The selection of one field site may have limited the scope of the project. At the same time, it allowed for an in-depth exploration, which may not have been possible with multiple sites. The uniqueness of the phenomena under study limited the number of sites and the scope of the project as well. To the best of my knowledge, there are no other transitional living programs for young people that provide access to a music studio for their residents in the area. In addition, the decision to use homogenous and intensity sampling methods limited variation. By recruiting and consenting only young people who engaged with the studio, I did not have the opportunity to interview young people who chose not to engage with the studio, which may have provided important insight into why they chose not to engage with the space. In addition, all young people interviewed had prior exposure to music. Therefore it is unclear whether youth not exposed to music prior to entering the studio would have had the same ability to gain strengths. Given these limitations, findings should be interpreted as contextually specific and lacking in generalizability. It is unclear if a different population of young people living in a transitional living program with a music studio in another region would have similar experiences and attach similar meanings to their experiences.

Conclusion

Despite the very real risks and consequences of youth homelessness, there is a growing body of research exploring the strengths and resilience of young people experiencing homelessness. Findings from this study support the idea that young people experiencing homelessness are strong and resilient. Further, findings demonstrate how a music studio in a transitional living program for young people experiencing homelessness engaged young people's existing music-based strengths, helped them develop new music-based strengths through music production, education, and appreciation, and provided

young people with important opportunities for connection, engagement, and creative expression.

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Author's note. I would like to thank the young people and staff of Teen Living Programs who participated in the study, Drs. Mark Mattaini and Dina Birman for their feedback and support in conceptualizing and executing the study, and Olga Konyakova for her assistance in developing the manuscript. This study was funded through the Fahs-Beck Fund for Research and Experimentation Doctoral Dissertation Grant Program and the University of Illinois at Chicago Chancellor's Graduate Research Fellowship.

Manuscript received: December 1, 2015

Revised: April 22, 2016

Accepted: April 26, 2016

Disposition editor: Sondra J. Fogel