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An evaluation of a musical learning exchange: A case study in a U.S. prison

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Abstract

Our research evaluates the effectiveness of a community musical learning exchange (MLE) that included group singing, guided conversations, and reflection. The respondents ($N = 290$) who participated in the MLE included members of the Soweto Gospel Choir ($n = 17$), Soweto Gospel Choir Crew ($n = 3$), prison choir incarcerated singers ($n = 41$), prison choir non-incarcerated singers ($n = 41$), and community guest-participants ($n = 188$). We studied: To what extent did respondents engage in singing and conversations during the learning exchange? To what degree did the respondents perceive the various components of the learning exchange helped them reflect upon the theme? What similarities and differences existed among various groups regarding these perceptions? Results suggest the MLE model was effective for intercultural sharing and most respondents engaged in singing and conversations. The guided conversations within a musical event were novel experiences, with the majority describing these as very effective components of the MLE. Respondents noted that both these guided conversations and spoken reflections prior to song selections from prison choir members and singing together most effectively helped them engage with the theme. We offer suggestions for musical leaders to implement MLEs and we make recommendations for future related research.

Keywords

Audience engagement, community learning exchange, community music, cross-cultural learning, prison choirs, singing

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This study is an examination of the first implementation of a Music Learning Exchange (MLE) in the context of a collaborative chorale event in a US prison. The MLE is based on the principles of Guajardo et al.'s (2016) Community Learning Exchange (CLE) model. According to Guajardo et al. (2016), a "Community Learning Exchange (CLE) provides an opportunity for diverse community members—leaders, activists, educators, youth elders—to come together for a period of engaged, deep learning" (p. 3). The CLE model developed from the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change initiative in the United States in 2002. This initiative involved 2 national organizations, the Center for Ethical Leadership and the Institute for Educational Leadership, and 11 communities through skill-building workshops and national conferences with the goal of building collective leadership in distressed regions of the country. The emphasis on collective leadership was so important to those who participated that the CLE network continued to grow organically and generatively after the Kellogg Foundation grant period ended in 2007 (Guajardo et al., 2016, pp. 5, 6).

CLEs are grounded in community-based pedagogies where people gather and build their sense of agency, learning together by engaging with questions that challenge their assumptions and ways of being. In CLEs, community is understood as both a place and a process in which relationship-building and purposeful conversations are geared toward meeting collective and individual needs. The CLE model uses a theory of change that is focused on "relationships, assets, stories, place, politic, and action (RASPPA)" (p. 4). It is embodied in five axioms: (a) learning as leadership and action, (b) assets and hopes, (c) encourage crossing borders, (d) conversation and dialogue are critical for relationships and pedagogy, and (e) local knowledge and action (pp. 23–27).

CLEs were first created to "*reframe school and community partnerships*" (p. 4) but could be used to bring attention to injustices in the U.S. prison system by building relationships between people in prison and the broader community. The U.S. incarcerates a larger percent of its population than any other country (Widra & Herring, 2021) with nearly 2.3 million people in state and federal prisons, youth facilities, jails, and immigration facilities (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). Researchers have reported how incarceration in the U.S. can exacerbate health problems and make people ill (Montross, 2020). Furthermore, in the U.S., incarceration rates are racially inequitable. In 2020 Black males were 5.7 times more likely to be incarcerated than whites, while Black youth ages 18 to 19 were 12.5 times more likely to be imprisoned compared to white males the same age. Native American and Alaska Native females ages 18 to 19 were 5.1 times more likely to be incarcerated than white females this age, while Black females this same age were 4.1 times more likely to be incarcerated than white females this age (Carson, 2021, p. 23). People need to be aware of these issues and make personal connections with incarcerated individuals in order to be motivated to make meaningful changes.

We designed an event inside a men's medium-security prison located in the Midwest of the United States that modified ideas from the CLE model to center communal singing and cultural exchange in what we call a Musical Learning Exchange (MLE). Whereas CLEs are geared toward conversation, MLEs are about embodied music-making with conversations integrated both formally and informally. We aimed to blur the traditional boundaries between performers and audience members by providing all present opportunities to sing, move, reflect, and dialogue with one another.

The primary host group for the event was the Oakdale Prison Community Choir, which is comprised of both incarcerated individuals (inside singers) and non-incarcerated individuals (outside singers). All inside singers voluntarily chose to participate in the choir and MLE. They could quit at any time. This choir had been in existence for 10 years with over 175 inside singers participating throughout that time. A power differential exists when incarcerated and non-incarcerated populations collaborate. In this choir, although consistent efforts toward a sense of equality among all

singers in learning activities and performances were prioritized, we acknowledge equality among all members was impossible. Prior to planning this event, choir activities included performing original songs, exchanging writing with one another, sharing these reflective comments at concerts, and inviting outside guests to come inside the prison gym for performances. This event, however, was intended to involve and engage all present in embodied music-making; it was not a traditional concert.

The event occurred through a collaboration of leaders from the community, the prison, and the choir. In May of 2018, the director of the local university-affiliated performing arts center asked the leader of the Oakdale Choir if the members of the Soweto Gospel Choir, who were preparing a U.S. tour, could join the prison choir in an event inside the prison on the afternoon of November 12, 2018. Once the warden approved of their visit, the Oakdale Choir leader and members began planning the MLE, including applying for and receiving approval from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Our MLE incorporated the five axioms of CLEs in ways specific to the context of our event. In implementing the first axiom, learning as leadership, we worked to incorporate collective leadership. Including all stakeholders in this process was challenging because the Oakdale Choir did not meet during the summer prior to our fall MLE, and the Soweto Gospel Choir was on tour. So, the Oakdale Choir leader met with a group of Oakdale inside singers and outside singers separately and communicated ideas between them. Each group discussed potential themes for the MLE to provide a clearer purpose and intention for the event. They agreed upon the theme, "Changes we Choose."

When deciding how to incorporate this theme into the MLE, we followed the second CLE axiom, assets, and hopes, which links directly to the CLE theory of change, called *"assets*-based development" (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 33). We did not want people to think about change from a deficit or regretful mindset. Instead, when choosing the prompts for the conversations, we centered the topic around past positive changes that people chose for themselves. Our intention was to emphasize personal strengths and asset-based thinking. Rather than focusing on deficiencies and problems which can make them become larger, recalling a story of a past positive memory can inspire hope (pp. 33, 34).

With respect to the third CLE axiom, encourage crossing borders, we aimed to avoid cultural appropriation and foster a more equitable approach to cross-cultural exchange. Cho (2015) explains that cultural appropriation occurs when members of dominant groups adopt the cultural works or elements from non-dominant groups without permission or an in-depth understanding of the context of their production and use. Cultural appropriation often results in the distortion of the appropriated culture, contributes to othering and devaluing of cultural knowledge, and is disrespectful of a group of people. Cho suggests that a more ethical approach to cross-cultural sharing is a cultural exchange, "where there is a sense of reciprocity and mutual respect" (p. 59). MLEs embody reciprocity and mutuality where people from differing cultural backgrounds take turns as teachers and learners. When engaging in the teaching role, culture bearers are afforded the time and flexibility to teach from their own epistemological frame and provide their personal contexts and music-making practices. In our event inside a men's medium security prison, we brought together two choirs with different personal contexts and pedagogical practices: (a) a U.S. prison community choir and (b) the Soweto Gospel Choir from South Africa. Both choirs shared songs and stories central to their cultural backgrounds.

In separate contexts with comparable legacies, both choirs in our MLE seek to harmonize human relationships through singing. The community prison choir intends to nurture cooperative relationships in *communities of caring*—communities grounded in the capacity to care for and about oneself and others (Cohen, 2019a). At the culmination of seasonal concerts, the prison choir

welcomes representatives from the public and private sectors along with family and friends of choir members. Through such events, this choir seeks to humanize the public's perception of incarcerated individuals and increase awareness of the harms of the prison industrial complex. The choir also works to inspire transformative change regarding harmful aspects of criminal legal systems and shift from punitive responses to crime toward caring for people impacted by justice systems—survivors of crime, people who are incarcerated, prison employees, and each of these group's families. One step toward these changes is learning about impacted communities. In preparation for the MLE, a social studies professor from the local university presented a historical overview of South Africa to the prison choir. Through conversations and choral singing at the MLE, the Oakdale Choir members hoped to learn how the Soweto Choir promotes harmony and expresses their resiliency through singing and share with them how we have attempted to build caring communities.

Conversation and dialogue, the fourth CLE axiom, played an important role in the MLE planning and process. Song lyrics served as a core communication tool during the MLE. In preparation for the event, we explored Sleicher's (n.d.) website called "Songs for the Great Turning" with a curated list of song that included Wheeler's (n.d.) song, "We Shall Come Together Singing" We asked Wheeler's permission to use her song for the event. She felt honored that her song would serve a central role in an event inside a prison with the Soweto Gospel Choir, so she and her musical colleague, Sara Thomsen, traveled to participate in the MLE and both facilitated songs.

We incorporated the fifth CLE axiom, local knowledge and action through drawing upon the South African concept of *ubuntu*, a Nguni Bantu term. This concept was both the grounding framework for the founding of the Oakdale Community Choir and central to the Soweto Gospel Choir's philosophy. Bishop Tutu (1999) wrote that ubuntu is difficult to describe in a Western language. According to Tutu, people who demonstrate ubuntu are caring, generous, hospitable, compassionate, open, available, do not feel threatened by others' ability, and realize the greater whole is diminished when others are tortured, oppressed, or treated like they are less than human. Tutu noted that ubuntu means, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours" (p. 31) and that telling someone they demonstrate ubuntu is high praise. This concept of ubuntu also aligns with CLE's community-based pedagogies that are focused on relationship-building. We applied ubuntu by having community members come into the prison for the MLE intending to develop an awareness of our common humanity through shared song and reflection. This approach to research and practice with music-making in prisons is fairly new. Researchers studying music-making in prisons have explored historical programs (e.g. Hash, 2007; Lee, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2015) and outcomes of music-making within prisons (e.g. Cohen, 2019b; Doxat-Pratt, 2018; Hickey, 2018). More recently researchers have explored possible roles of music-making in prisons in dismantling carceral logics (Cohen & Duncan, 2022; Swanson & Cohen, in press). Given the extreme disconnect between incarcerated individuals and people outside of prisons, and the differences in power and freedom with respect to incarcerated individuals and non-incarcerated individuals, we wanted to explore the possibilities of how a MLE might create a space for connections and dialogue inside a prison.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study was to explore participants' engagement with and perceptions of the effectiveness of the various components of this MLE. We were also curious about how the singing, moving, conversations, and speaking during the event prompted people to reflect upon the theme: "Changes we Choose." We use the term "respondents" to refer to people in attendance who completed questionnaires. "Guest-participants" were individuals who were not in either choir but were

encouraged to participate throughout the event through singing and conversing. These guest-participants were central to the event and its purposes. The following research questions drove the study:

1. To what extent did respondents engage in singing and partner conversations during the MLE?
2. To what degree did the respondents perceive the following components were effective in engaging with the theme "Changes we Choose?"
   a. Singing
   b. Partner conversations
   c. Spoken reflections by choir members prior to songs during event
   d. Discussion prompts sent via email prior to and announced at the MLE
   e. Other aspects of the event identified by respondents
3. What similarities and differences existed among various groups regarding these perceptions?

Method

Stake (2000) described case study research as primarily "a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 435) that can be conducted using various research methods. The current study is a what Yin (2012) calls a "case study evaluation" (p. 165) used to assess the effectiveness or outcomes of innovative program initiatives in a real-world context. Our case study evaluation assessed the effectiveness of a new MLE model in a unique case bounded by the Oakdale Prison and the combination of the Oakdale Choir, Soweto Gospel Choir, and community members participating in the MLE. Each of these subgroups constituted an "embedded unit of analysis" (Yin, 2012, p. 7) whose perspectives were triangulated to evaluate the effectiveness of various components of the MLE.

We employed a convergent mixed methods design with quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously and analyzed separately (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Our simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data was particularly suited for this study due to the finite timeline of the event. The point of mixing the qualitative and quantitative strands occurred during the interpretation phase of data analysis. This method allowed us to quantitively measure each subgroups' perceptions of the effectiveness of the MLE components and the qualitative data provided additional contextual information about the respondents' experiences.

Case description: MLE in Oakdale prison

All attendees of the MLE signed up to be on a guest list per the prison's visitor protocol. Many were friends or family of the Oakdale Choir, others learned about the event through a local community music column or through word of mouth. Most individuals knew at least one or two other individuals who attended the MLE. Prior to the event, all people on the guest list received an email with information about the MLE, its theme, the discussion prompts, and instructions about entering the prison. People arrived in the gym in different groups: (a) The Oakdale Choir members arrived about an hour early to warm-up and prepare for the event, then (b) the Soweto Gospel Choir members, followed by (c) guest-participants in groups of about 20 people, roughly 10 minutes apart to ease the check in process, which including walking through a metal detector and two sets of sally ports with electric power doors.

Tables with cake and punch were arranged along the long east wall of the gym and artwork created by incarcerated artists was displayed in the southwest corner. Rows of chairs for

guest-participants faced the short north end of the rectangular-shaped gym. Additionally, the paper program placed on the chairs around the gym stated:

> Our purpose is to provide a space to meet one another, reflect upon our theme 'Changes We Choose,' sing together, and share ideas with each other. Please introduce yourself to those around you and talk about how and/or why you are here.

This statement prompted those in attendance to engage in informal conversations for about 10 to 30 minutes before and after the MLE. Additionally, the program included lyrics for most of the songs with the invitation: "Singing is a LEARNED skill. We welcome you to learn with us! Join us on all songs you wish."

During the event which lasted roughly 75 minutes, the Soweto Gospel Choir members and the two guest song leaders, Maggie Wheeler and Sara Thomsen, sat close to the front left section of the gym facing the Oakdale Choir, the Oakdale Choir members sat in the further front left section of the gym facing the Soweto Choir. All the other guest-participants sat throughout the right section of the gym and behind the Soweto Choir on the left. At one point, the Soweto Choir leader came to the middle of the gym to teach, and everyone present turned toward the center of the gym, so the two halves of the long side of the gym faced one another. At other times, the Soweto members moved to the north edge of the gym to teach songs and movements.

The musical leaders of both choirs and the two guest song leaders each facilitated group singing and simple movements, inviting everyone at the event to participate. Additionally, we incorporated the fifth axiom of the CLE, local knowledge and action, with six members from the prison choir (four incarcerated singers and two outside singers) introducing sections of the event with their spoken reflections.

Incorporating the fourth axiom, the event leader provided prompts for partner conversations and dialogue after the first three songs. First, two choir members demonstrated a variation of an InterPlay activity called "babbling" (Winton-Henry & Porter, 2004, pp. 133–138)—a simple back and forth exchange where each person completed the sentence, "I could tell you about. . ." without telling a whole story. Then participants took turns sharing a positive change they had made in their lives. Specific instructions listed in the program stated "In partners. One talks, one listens" with a paragraph describing in detail what to do and questions for reflection. In a different portion of the event, the prison leader provided a short, guided reflection about the idea of ubuntu.

Data sources

The first phase of data collection was a five-item exit survey that respondents filled out prior to leaving the prison gym. This survey included (a) a space for group affiliation (guest-participants, incarcerated choir member, outside prison choir volunteer, or Soweto Gospel Choir member), Likert-scale items asking them to rate their level of participation in (b) dialogue and (c) singing during the event, (d) gender identification, and (e) open-ended comments about the learning exchange.

The second and final data collection phase was an eight-item follow-up questionnaire: (a) group affiliation, four quantitative items using a 5-point Likert scale, and three open-ended items. The quantitative items asked how effective four aspects of the exchange were to help respondents engage with the theme of "Changes We Choose:" (b) singing, (c) conversations, (d) spoken reflections, and (e) prompts. The respondents completed three open-ended items asking about (f) their perception on what worked best, (g) what should be different, and (h) open-ended comments about the event. We explained at the learning exchange that they would receive the follow-up

questionnaire via email in 1 week to provide them time to reflect upon their experiences and the MLE theme. Those individuals who did not have email addresses picked up hardcopies of the questionnaire with pre-addressed and stamped envelopes at the end of the MLE to complete and return via postal mail. Additionally, members of the research team wrote analytical memos throughout the event planning, data collection, and data analyses processes.

Research respondents

This study used a "convenience sample" (Miles et al., 2019, p. 28) drawn from each subgroup that participated in the MLE. Prior to the MLE, we provided a hard copy of the IRB information sheet that explained elements of consent to all incarcerated choir members. The IRB approved a waiver of consent for all individuals at the MLE. Near the conclusion of the MLE, the Oakdale Choir leader verbally described the study, explained that participation in the study was voluntary and completing the exit survey and/or questionnaire indicated their consent to participate. Individuals decided whether to participate in the research or not and had the option to stop participating at any time. Because these two instruments were completed separately, the participation rates were different. See Supplemental Table 1 "Group Affiliations," for an explanation the respondents' groups and response rates for each data collection. Due to the convenience sampling and response rates, our results reflect the views of only those who chose to respond to the exit survey and/or questionnaire and not all in attendance at the MLE.

Table 1. Group Affiliations.

Group Affiliation	MLE Participants	Exit Survey Respondents		Questionnaire Respondents	
		n	RR (%)	*n*	RR (%)
Inside Oakdale	41	10	24.4	17	41.5
Outside Oakdale	41	13	31.7	18	43.9
Soweto Gospel Choir	20	5	25	17	85
Guest-Participants	188	96	51	59	31.4
Totals (N =)	270	124	42.7	111	38.3

Note. The left column is the number of each group participating in the MLE. Response rates (RR) are represented as the percentage of the total MLE attendees that completed either exit surveys and questionnaires within each group affiliate category.

Analysis

All survey responses were entered into Qualtrics software for analysis. Quantitative responses consisted of Likert scale items and were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations by group affiliation (Oakdale, Soweto, or guest-participants) to assess for any differences between groups.

In phase one of the qualitative data analysis, two members of the research team separately open-coded the qualitative data line by line. These open codes inductively emerged from our analyses of the respondent questionnaire answers and, when appropriate, we used in vivo codes, which are codes derived from the data itself. In the second phase of coding, the three members of the research team independently analyzed the coded data sets and met to generate triangulated pattern codes that thematically grouped the coded statements from phase one.

Findings

Our findings are organized by our research questions. After the quantitative results for question one, we report quantitative results and summaries of the qualitative analyses for the remaining three questions.

Respondents' participation rates

In the first research question we asked: To what extent did respondents engage in singing and conversations during the MLE? According to exit survey data, over 97% of respondents sang at least once or twice and over 96% respondents engaged in partner conversations at least once or twice. Slightly over half of the guest-participants and Oakdale Prison Choir members sang all the allotted time compared to 80% of the Soweto Gospel Choir members. With respect to guided conversations, the largest contrast was between 100% of the outside Oakdale members who fully participated and 58.8% of the guest-participants who reported they fully participated. See Supplemental Table 2 for singing and conversation participation rates.

Table 2. Singing and Discussion Participation Rates.

Group Affiliation	Not at all		Once or twice		A few times		Often		All allotted time	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Singing										
Inside Oakdale ($n = 10$)	0	0	1	10	2	20	2	20	5	50
Outside Oakdale ($n = 13$)	0	0	0	0	3	23.1	3	23.1	7	53.8
Total Oakdale ($n = 23$)	0	0	1	4	5	21.7	5	21.7	12	52.2
Soweto Gospel Choir ($n = 5$)	0	0	1	20	0	0	0	0	4	80
Guest-Participants ($n = 96$)	3	3.1	6	6.3	25	26	12	12.5	50	52.1
Total ($n = 124$)	3	2.4	8	6.5	30	24.2	17	13.7	66	53.2
Partner Discussions										
Inside Oakdale ($n = 10$)	0	0	1	10	0	0	2	20	7	70
Outside Oakdale ($n = 13$)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	100
Total Oakdale ($n = 23$)	0	0	1	4	0	0	2	8.7	20	87
Soweto Gospel Choir ($n = 5$)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	20	4	80
Guest-Participants ($n = 96$)	4	4.1	4	4.1	9	9.3	23	23.7	57	58.8
Total ($n = 124$)	4	3.2	5	4	9	7.2	26	20.8	81	64.8

Note. Results are based upon the exit survey provided immediately following the event. Two guest-participants declined to answer the first question (singing) and one guest-participant declined to answer the second question (partner discussions).

Two notable trends in the participation rates for the singing and guided conversation rates were that all respondents tended to engage more with the guided conversations than with the singing and that about 20% to 25% of the prison choir and guest-participants indicated that they only sang "a few times" throughout the event.

Effectiveness of the MLE components

In our second research question, we asked what degree the respondents perceived how the four components (singing, partner guided conversations, spoken reflections, discussion prompts sent in

advance of the event), or any participant-identified components helped them engage with the theme "Changes we Choose." We also looked for any trends in the four groups. In Supplemental Table 3, we report these results.

According to the quantitative data, the singing and the prison choir members' spoken reflections were the most effective components that helped respondents engage with the theme. The majority of responses from guest-participants suggested that singing together was the aspect of the event that they enjoyed most. In the open-ended items, respondents indicated that the singing and movement/dancing were good ways to promote community and positive social interaction. Several respondents noted that the experience of people teaching songs and being invited to participate with the choirs was a powerful and inclusive experience. When asked to describe the most effective aspect, one (female) respondent wrote:

> Singing–specifically community building through singing. In spoken word, one person gets the floor and others must listen. In singing together, we share the floor together. We need opportunities to practice both, and the event gave us just that.

Several respondents similarly highlighted how they enjoyed the collaborative process of learning songs and dances and that all were invited to participate in singing. A few noted how songs with texts that aligned with the theme were particularly effective to help them engage with the theme. Conversely, some respondents noted that songs unrelated to the theme were less effective.

A handful of respondents did not like that guest-participants were invited to sing. These individuals came to the event expecting a more traditional concert and they described the desire to hear the choirs perform alone more. For example, in the follow-up questionnaire, one guest-participant wrote, "Less audience participation. I went to hear the choir, not the tone-deaf audience."

Individuals' musical self-concepts played an important role in their perceptions of effectiveness of and decisions to participate in singing (Ruddock & Leong, 2005). Some respondents chose not to participate because they had low musical self-concepts. For example, one guest-participant stated, "I didn't sing because I can't!! Totally tone deaf. But I loved listening and watching." Another guest-participant felt that the learning exchange and open invitation to sing provided an opportunity to participate in singing where they otherwise would not have done so: "I don't think of myself as a singer so singing out loud was a great positive experience."

Guided conversations

The majority of the respondents found the guided conversations to be an important component of the MLE. Almost 90% of follow-up questionnaire respondents indicated that the guided conversations were moderately, very, or extremely effective in helping them engaged with the theme. The majority of the respondents requested more time to discuss the prompts and more opportunities to talk with individuals from the other groups. Fifty-five percent of the respondents of the follow-up questionnaire reported that the conversations were "very effective" ($n=46$) or "extremely effective" ($n=21$).

Qualitative data suggest that respondents felt that the conversations offered opportunities to meet new people, develop interpersonal connections, and engage in community building with those around them. One of the guest-participants stated, "You even had us talk to each other. That seemed new and I liked it. It was effective. Even having two choir members lead was modeling ubuntu." Similarly, when asked about the most effective portion of the MLE, a member of the Soweto Gospel Choir answered:

> It was the ubuntu discussions, as a member of Soweto Gospel Choir and an African, subscribes to the broad meaning of ubuntu and with the better resources made available to it, would be able to contribute more meaningfully in making ubuntu not just a theory but an element of peace and forgiveness.

For many, the guided conversations were the component of the learning exchange that best embodied the concept of ubuntu because these interactions allowed participants to directly engage with another person.

Only 10.7% of the respondents commented that these guided conversations were "not effective" ($n=5$) or only "slightly effective" ($n=8$) in helping them engage with the theme. Qualitative data indicate that these individuals felt uncomfortable talking to someone they did not know or that they felt that the connections lacked depth. Additionally, some individuals were left out of the conversations because of the unstructured nature of this portion of the event: "I didn't speak to anyone during the 'turn to your neighbor' exercise because the folks on the other side turned away (sad face)." Lastly, some individuals felt that the conversations interfered with the flow of music-making. One guest-participant stated:

> Learning exchange is a difficult concept for people to understand, when in all actuality yesterday felt like a concert. It was ineffective to have all of the side conversations in the midst of a beautiful concert and confusing. It was refreshing to hear stories from the men. I know the theme was mentioned at the concert, but I have no idea how effective that theme was or what the point of having the theme was and/or is.

Another guest-participant reported discomfort with the guided conversations but understood their importance as an opportunity to reflect on the theme of the event:

> Although it is always a bit awkward to have to talk with the person next to you, it does make us think and perhaps it is one more way to take the theme with us at the end of the day.

These comments indicate that structured partner conversations during a musical event was new to some individuals. Possibly some people disliked the conversations because that part of the event did not conform to their expectations of a typical performance.

Spoken reflections

According to survey respondents, the spoken reflections had the strongest efficacy of all the MLE components, as 80.4% of them indicated that these were either very effective or highly effective. Some respondents described the spoken reflection as "moving" or "powerful" in reflecting upon the MLE theme. One guest-participant stated:

> Hearing the choir members reflect so articulately and deeply on positive choices in their lives was very moving and also created an opportunity for reflection on my own choices in life.

This statement best represents the purpose of the spoken reflections as a primer for personal reflection for all those in attendance. However, there were also respondent statements that revealed a lack of understanding of the complex issues of the U.S. punishment systems and a somewhat naive sense of the incarcerated individuals' situations. For example, one guest-participant commented:

> Hearing the words, creations, and performance of the Insiders, even those facing many years in confinement, helps create understanding about choice, circumstance, and the opportunity to change.

While it is unclear exactly what this respondent meant by this statement, one interpretation is that they viewed the entire event as a way for the inside singers specifically to think about their personal choices. The intention was for all participants to reflect upon the concepts of change and their own choices, not others' choices.

Discussion prompts

The majority of the respondents indicated that the discussion prompts provided via email prior to the MLE were either "moderately effective" (31.3%) or "very effective "(38.7%). While these are still positive indicators, respondents gave this MLE component the lowest rating. This finding was supported by a general lack of positive comments about the discussion prompts in the qualitative data. Some guest-participants reported confusion about the format of the MLE: "I wasn't entirely sure what the event would be about. It was good, but I wasn't fully in the mindset of what would occur at the beginning." Statements like these indicated that many respondents may not have read or understood the messages about the MLE process, theme, and purpose prior to the event.

Other effective aspects identified by respondents

We identified and categorized four additional elements that respondents found particularly effective or meaningful during the MLE. First, respondents most frequently mentioned the opportunity to engage and interact informally with others before and after the formal parts of the event. Some respondents noted that the informal time before the event, in particular, made them feel more comfortable about participating in the musical elements that came afterward.

Second, several respondents remarked that having the Soweto Gospel Choir and the two guest song leaders, Maggie Wheeler and Sara Thomsen, present made the event special. In particular, they felt that listening to and learning songs from the professional musical leadership was particularly notable and the Soweto members provided an opportunity to learn about South African culture.

The songs that the Soweto Gospel Choir and Sara Thomsen taught included dancing and movements. Some respondents felt that the movement in combination with the singing fostered better interpersonal connections with those around them. As one individual stated, "Singing [and] dancing together breaks down personal walls." Others indicated that the dancing contributed to the inclusivity, energy, and esthetics of the experience. An inside Oakdale member stated, "I was free for a while, full of energy, exciting, loved the dancing." Finally, our analytical memos and field notes indicated that the opportunity to move and dance had a significant impact on participation rates as there were some individuals who chose not to sing the songs but did participate in the movements and dances with other individuals near them.

Third, several respondents also proposed that no specific element of the learning exchange was "most effective" and that the gestalt of all the components working together made the event effective. For example, one individual stated:

> I don't think any 'one' part of the event worked best, but rather it was the conjunction of all the parts—Oakdale Choir singing with and without audience participation, the discussions, the spoken reflections, Maggie Wheeler and Sara Thomsen teaching songs, Soweto Choir teaching songs, all with audience participation—that really made it an effective, cohesive, and moving whole.

These comments suggest that the combination of all the components created a greater effect than the sum of each of them in isolation and that eliminating one of them may have limited the overall experience.

Lastly, many respondents commented that the context of the prison was particularly meaningful to them. In some cases, these comments reflected the concept of ubuntu. However, there were some comments that revealed a troublesome notion that the event was somehow helpful at "saving" the inside singers or to support their personal growth and reflection specifically.

Discussion

The data indicated that the majority of respondents found the four primary components of the MLE, singing, partner conversations, choir members' spoken reflections, and discussion prompts sent prior to the MLE, to be very effective. The guided conversations and singing both had high participation rates. The respondents also rated the effectiveness of the spoken reflections and singing components highly. The findings also suggested that respondents appreciated the ample opportunities for interacting and experiencing a sense of ubuntu at the MLE. The unplanned organic conversations that occurred before and after the event were an important aspect of building social connections and creating a sense of community. Sung lyrics as an aspect of shared dialogue added a rich dimension to the community learning exchange axiom of conversation and dialogue.

While all components received generally high effectiveness ratings and qualitative data suggested that the respondents enjoyed their experiences, there was also some evidence of needed improvements. For example, we discovered that the guest-participants were not effectively primed in advance to understand what to expect at the MLE. They did not understand what we meant by "learning exchange" through email descriptions or announcements at the MLE about the participatory components. Guest-participants had not attended anything like an MLE before, so some arrived anticipating a traditional concert. It could have been more effective to send the discussion prompts in an email separate from logistical information to increase the chance that attendees comprehend and contemplate them before arriving.

The guided conversations were clearly the most unfamiliar component. Analytical memos indicated a sense of hesitation from the participants at the moment that the leader of the event invited them to turn to one another to talk. They may have been reluctant because it is uncommon to be asked to speak with one's neighbors during musical events. Although we tried to prepare everyone for dialogue with one another, it was a new experience for many to have structured conversations during a musical event. Some respondents also indicated that they did not have a partner, which prevented discussions from occurring and may have made them feel uncomfortable. Future MLE organizers may want to explore ways to structure the pairing process so that everyone has a way to participate in the discussions. Despite these challenges, over half of the respondents indicated that the discussions were very or extremely effective in engaging with the theme, in part, due to their novelty.

Implications and future recommendations

This MLE model provides new ways for music educators and community musicians to create opportunities for meaningful connections with their respective communities. Many different applications are possible depending upon a group's needs and goals. We suggest musical leaders create think tanks and listen to the needs and interests of their constituents—students, students' families, and community members—in order to create a relevant and meaningful theme for their MLE. Key stakeholders in the community could collaborate to choose the songs, write spoken reflections, and

plan for activities in relationship to the theme, and invite people from a wide range of cultures to foster new social connections, similar to Hoffman's (2012) middle school arts-integrated curriculum project. We recommend including time before and after the event for informal conversations, displaying artwork around the space to encourage movement among participants, and having refreshments available. For private reflection space and for those who are not able to talk to a neighbor, we recommend providing blank sheets in the program and have writing utensils available. A series of MLEs could provide a deeper exploration into the topics and engagement with co-participants, and this approach aligns with the original ideas of CLEs.

The blurring of traditional categories of audience and performer resonates with the third CLE axiom, crossing borders. In a study of collaborative pedagogy in theater contexts, Allen and Laine (2018) encourage "boundary-crossing practices" where lines between performer and audience are crossed and recrossed to support and build learning processes (p. 608). Planners for MLEs might use a different term than "audience" to denote the focus on communal participation throughout the event, identifying the audience members as "pop-up performers." MLE leaders could also purposefully explain when the audience is crossing roles to join the performers. Brief, succinct explanations of the purpose of the event and instructions on specific components immediately before they occur may help everyone understand their roles.

To increase the possibility of social connections, name tags that indicate each attendee's group identity and a space on the name tag where they can add their choice of personal information may facilitate connections. Prior to the MLE, host choir members could teach their family members and guests the songs they will be singing, share strategies for connecting with others during the event, and discuss the theme of the MLE. During the event, the host musicians need to interact and circulate among all present to build a larger sense of social cohesion and to reach out to anyone who does not have a partner for the discussions. The host planners could also arrange seating, so the different groups are mixed.

The MLE model might also serve as an alternative to the typical competitive-based events that are prominent in school-based music classes (Abramo, 2017; Lowe, 2018). Music education research has questioned the educational value of competitive curricular structures (Abramo, 2017). Conversely, Lowe (2018) found that cooperative music festivals can have a positive effect on student motivation, and Austin (1991) noted that students who were assessed as having low music self-esteem preferred non-competitive curricular goals. Our findings suggest that the MLE model may build a deeper sense of social and emotional well-being through shared and affirming participation. Future research could examine any extent the MLE model promotes student motivation and positive self-esteem. Music educators who substitute an MLEs in place of competitive music events may alleviate student stress and anxiety related to these performative models.

Music educators can create MLEs to support interactions that fit their educational goals and their school's vision and mission. Research studies examining aspects of the five CLE axioms can help music educators and community music leaders design events that empower collective leadership, invest in relationships, explore stories, and discover solutions to meet their needs, all central goals of CLEs (Guajardo et al., 2016, pp. 4–9). Interactions among all participants is not common in typical exchange concerts, so if a music teacher and school community want to create a space for deeper social connections, a MLE model may be a good option. We suggest designing and implementing a program evaluation to explore what aspects of the MLE are effective, what needs changing, and ideas for the next MLE.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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