Exploring the Journey of Nontraditional Students in the Music Therapy Field:

A Phenomenological Inquiry

By

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EXPLORING THE JOURNEY OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN THE MUSIC THERAPY FIELD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Exploring the Journey of Nontraditional Students in the Music Therapy Field: A Phenomenological Inquiry

My journey to the field of music therapy was one I initially thought was a random amalgamation of events completely unique to me. I earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in film/video and upon graduation, decided I did not want to pursue a career in the film industry. I shifted to playing music at a professional level. After some time, I began losing passion for the type of late-night work I was doing. I felt an interest in special education after having had some experience lifeguarding for a Special Olympics program in high school. At the suggestion of a friend, I decided to take a daytime job as a teaching assistant at a school for students with developmental delays. During this employment, I was deeply moved to witness the work of music therapists. The social and emotional connections students would achieve in music were moments I viewed as profoundly meaningful. These experiences informed my decision to go to graduate school to pursue a career I found deeply meaningful and fulfilling.

I have found from personal experience that it can be difficult to find passion in one’s employment. I feel many individuals stay employed at jobs for which they have little to no motivation. Of those individuals, it can be assumed some do take action to change their situation for the better. This leads me to wonder why some people change careers while others do not. Where does one find fulfillment in their day-to-day life, and how does that relate to career choices? What makes it worth it? In discussing altruism and occupational choice, Morduch and Szafarz (2019) state pure altruism is achieved when “the donor derives utility from the utility experienced by others” (p. 4). It is this pull towards altruism that ultimately led me to the field of music therapy.
Music therapy is a growing field practiced by individuals from vastly different backgrounds and life experiences in the United States and around the world. Many music therapy students begin their music therapy education as traditional undergraduate students immediately after high school in an approved music therapy program. Others come to the field later in life as a nontraditional student, perhaps studying music therapy as a second career. This nontraditional route can be accomplished through (a) an equivalency program, meeting the requirements for board-certification with no newly earned academic degree; or (b) a master’s equivalency program which both meets the requirements of board-certification and advanced practice required for a master’s degree (American Music Therapy Association [AMTA], 2022a). I chose the latter option. Through my graduate training, I became curious about other students who were like me in coming to the field later in life. In this research, I aimed to explore the experience of the nontraditional music therapy student in an effort to explore what salient factors play a role in their decision to pursue a career in music therapy.

**Literature Review**

There are many ways to define the term nontraditional student. For purposes of this research, “nontraditional student” is defined specifically as a student who has earned an undergraduate degree in one field, and after professional experience is attending a higher education institution studying for a career in a new field.

**Nontraditional Students**

The characteristics that may define a nontraditional student are vast in number and scope as found in the literature. They include factors such as aged 25 or older, delayed college enrollment, part-time attendance, financial independence, full-time employment, having
dependents other than a spouse, single parent status, or lack of high school diploma (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Traditional students, in comparison, typically attend higher education full time, enroll directly after high school, and live on campus. Seventy-four percent of all undergraduate students in the United States had at least one nontraditional characteristic in the 2011-2012 school year (USDOE, 2015). While this research is focused on a highly specific nontraditional student as described above, it is important to note the breadth of the term nontraditional student and that a majority of all students can be described as such to at least a small degree.

A nontraditional student may experience both benefits and challenges in their education related to these characteristics. For one, many nontraditional students are adult learners. Compared to traditional-aged students, adult learners were found to be more engaged academically, had less interaction with their peers and faculty, had positive perceptions of teaching practices and interactions with others, and found their campus to be less supportive (Rabourn et al., 2018. p. 22). In addition to demographic differences of nontraditional students, there are social and developmental differences worth noting when compared to traditional students in higher education.

Nontraditional students often possess characteristics that may make them more likely to succeed than their traditional peers in academics and careers. Specifically, nontraditional students appear to possess higher levels of resilience through age and experience equipping them to be more successful at managing stress and overcoming challenges (Babb et al., 2021). This resilience and distress tolerance are connected to higher levels of cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation in individuals (Arici-Ozan et al., 2019). This means the “everyday”
experiences, specifically of a nontraditional student prior to their higher education experience, have inherent value related to their education and future career success.

Nontraditional students with multiple defining characteristics as described above are even more likely to emphasize their own role in their education, or in other words, display less academic entitlement than traditional peers (Crone et al., 2020). Nontraditional students were reportedly perceived to have higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning than traditional students (Bye et al., 2007, p. 141). Positive affect was found to correlate with intrinsic motivation in nontraditional students. Bye et al. (2007) surmised that this phenomenon may be affected by an individual's own personal and cultural experiences that factor into their decision to pursue higher education at that later point in life. Oleski and Subich (1996) found that employed adults in the process of changing careers through college education felt greater congruence between their prospective work environment and personality structure. This suggested a higher level of overall satisfaction may be indicated within an individual even during the education process towards the new career.

Additionally, Sedlak (1999) discussed critical thinking differences in nontraditional and traditional nursing students. Descriptive data was collected from student journals, interviews, and researcher observations. Three major dimensions were found to be prevalent in describing the students' critical thinking: exploration of thoughts/feelings, demonstration of humility, and use of analogous experiences. Nontraditional students in the study were entering academia with critical thinking skills and placed value on the opportunity to share their subjective experiences (Sedlak, 1999). Nontraditional students by definition are re-entering an academic setting chronologically with more life experience than a traditional student. While this study is specific to a small pool of
nursing students at one point in time, implications for generalization to nontraditional students in other fields such as music therapy may be considered.

Nontraditional Music Therapy Students

Prior Musical Education and Musical Identity

Inherent to music therapy, music therapy professionals must be musicians with some level of musical experience and training. As such, prior to music therapy training, music therapy students begin their education with a preexisting musical self-identity (MacDonald, Hargreaves, & Miell, 2002). For example, these might include identities such as opera singer, jazz musician, or DJ. The identity of therapist becomes elucidated in a student’s self-identity as their experience and education unfolds.

These role identities, as described by Feldman and Ng (2007), influence the success or failure of the school-to-work transition. Meanings are attached to role identities by an individual which may result in some role identities becoming more prevalent than others. Role identities provide greater schemata for an individual’s choices in how to respond to life events, supporting a sense of direction and offering guidance in the face of uncertainty (Feldman & Ng, 2007). The role identity of musician may be generally more prevalent in music therapy students entering the education process than the role identity of therapist. Additionally, nontraditional students, having had their own unique set of life experiences after a previous academic experience, may take on the identity of student as a secondary identity instead of a primary one. For example, nontraditional students may have taken on primary identities such as “mother” or “professional” in the intervening years before returning to school. These identities may influence their academic progress as the responsibilities involved with these primary identities can take precedence in
day-to-day life over secondary identity responsibilities associated with being a student. These primary identity roles also may influence how a nontraditional student forms relationships with peers and professors in an academic setting (Feldman & Ng, 2007). It is likely that nontraditional students will come to the field with other primary identities or having experienced other primary identities before entering or re-entering the academic realm.

**Music Therapy Education**

The American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) is the membership organization for music therapists and music therapy students. It maintains the Standards for Education and Clinical Training that establish the criteria for academic training required for individuals to earn certification as music therapists (AMTA, 2022a). The organization has established and maintains competency-based standards in music therapy curriculum across bachelor’s and master’s degree programs in the United States. These competencies are organized into three categories: musical foundations, clinical foundations, and music therapy foundations (AMTA, 2022a). Doctoral degree programs are more flexible and independent in their content, though are still informed by the AMTA education and clinical training standards. These undergraduate and graduate standards are in congruence with the appropriate curricular structures set by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) (AMTA, 2022a).

There are both academic and clinical components to an AMTA-approved music therapy education. For typical students studying to attain a bachelor’s degree in music therapy, their academic focus will be on learning professional competencies in three main areas: musical foundations, clinical foundations, and music therapy foundations and principles (AMTA, 2022b). NASM standards divides these areas of study by proportion of the overall educational program:
musical foundations (45%); clinical foundations (15%); music therapy (15%); general education (20-25%); and electives (5%).

The clinical training component of an undergraduate music therapy education consists of a minimum of 1200 hours of clinical training, including at least 180 hours of pre-internship training and at least 900 hours of internship. This pre-internship may come in the form of a practicum or fieldwork placement which are comparable to internship though bear less responsibility on the student. Internship sites may be approved by an academic institution for a university-affiliation, the AMTA as a national roster site, or both. Students are supervised by an internship supervisor in adherence with the qualification standards for definition of pre-internship and internship supervisor (AMTA, 2022a). Upon completion of an undergraduate program, graduates will be expected to be proficient in professional competencies as defined by the AMTA Professional Competencies document (AMTA, 2022b).

Within the musical foundations, areas of professional proficiency include music theory and history, composition and arranging skills, major performance medium skills, functional music skills with voice, piano, guitar, and percussion, conduction skills, and movement skills. Within clinical foundations, professionals are expected to be knowledgeable in therapeutic applications, therapeutic principles, and the therapeutic relationship. Within music therapy foundations, professionals are expected to be knowledgeable in music therapy foundations and principles, client assessment, treatment planning, therapy implementation, therapy evaluation, documentation, termination/discharge planning, professional role/ethics, inter-professional collaboration, supervision/administration, and research methods (AMTA, 2020b).
Regarding master’s programs, students pursuing the master’s degree with no bachelor’s degree in music therapy and/or the music therapy board-certification credential (MT-BC) must complete a minimum of 30 semester hours or 45 quarter hours graduate credits toward advanced competence. As noted previously, there are different ways to obtain a master’s degree in music therapy. There are master’s programs that are designed for current board-certified music therapists, and others that either are designed for or can be tailored for those without undergraduate education in music therapy. The latter programs are typically referred to as equivalency master’s programs. In the equivalency master’s programs, students must not only develop the skills to meet the AMTA Professional Competencies required for board-certification that are typically met in undergraduate education, but also must complete at least 30 graduate credits toward AMTA Advanced Professional Competencies (AMTA, 2022a).

Each graduate program in music therapy is designed uniquely but must impart education and advanced clinical training to meet these advanced competencies. These advanced competencies are organized into two sections: professional practice and professional development. Within these sections, advanced professional practice is defined by advanced knowledge in the following areas: theory, clinical practice, clinical supervision, clinical administration, advanced clinical skills, academic teaching/administration, and research (AMTA, 2022c). Advanced professional development is defined by the following schema: musical and artistic development as well as personal development and professional role (AMTA, 2022c).

Within the master’s degree program formats, differences exist within scope of education and intended outcome depending on the educational institution. There are practice-oriented degrees, research-oriented degrees, as well as combination of the two (AMTA, 2022a). While
each program is unique in their interpretation of the AMTA standards, all music therapy graduate programs require students to produce a thesis or culminating project in order to complete the program.

In addition, there are different degree titles that can be earned, depending on the focus of the educational program. These different degrees include Master of Music, Master of Music Therapy, Master of Arts or Master of Music Education, or Master of Science (AMTA, 2022a). Each program has differences in curriculum depending on the intended outcome for the education of the student.

Once the required curriculum is completed and competencies have been achieved, the graduate must pass the board-certification test administered by the independent Certification Board for Music Therapists (CBMT; 2022). Upon passing the exam, they will receive the credential, Music Therapist, Board-Certified (MT-BC).

In summary, there is not only one path to becoming a music therapist. It is a unique process to the individual affected by the type of degree and the focus of the program in which they study. While there has been success in a concerted effort to standardize the music therapy practice and education process via organizations like the AMTA and CBMT, each individual’s experience throughout their educational process and into professional practice is unique. In addition, students who enter the study of music therapy later in life, considered “nontraditional” students, will face other unique challenges.

**Research Questions**

The experience of a nontraditional student is unique to each student, yet patterns can be seen specifically regarding the use of prior life experiences to engage more thoroughly in their
education and chosen career. The challenges that nontraditional music therapy students face are similar to that of the greater academic community of nontraditional students, yet they are likely more equipped with their unique set of cognitive and emotional skills learned via their own life experience which has in part informed them of the career path they wish to take (Arici-Ozan et al., 2019). I have focused my research on the experience of the nontraditional music therapy student as I myself fit the label and am studying in a master’s equivalency program. This caused me to want to explore other students’ experiences and compare them to my own. The factors that play into experiences as a traditional student or nontraditional student, specifically in music therapy, have not been discussed in research though have been noted in this larger academic context.

After reviewing the literature, I came to the conclusion that the terms “nontraditional student” and “second-career music therapist” were ostensibly non-existent in music therapy research. I feel there is value in experience and even more value in sharing those experiences with others. This thesis intends to shed light on the phenomenological experience of music therapists that came to the field in a comparable manner to my own as a nontraditional student and what factors played into that decision in an attempt to draw themes among the data included.

Based on the literature review above discussing the experience of nontraditional students, the research questions and relevant sub-questions are as follows:

1. What is the experience of the nontraditional music therapy student?
   a. What factors led to their decision to study music therapy as a nontraditional student?
b. How did they perceive their skills, including musical, personal, and academic, upon entering music therapy educational programs?

c. What challenges, if any, did they overcome that were related to being a nontraditional student?

d. What benefits, if any, did they perceive from being a nontraditional student?

2. How do nontraditional music therapy students perceive their experiences in music therapy education compared to those of traditional music therapy students?
Epiloge

This section is intended to share my own perspective, biases, and ways in which I came to this point in time researching this subject. I grew up in suburban New Jersey and on my own accord began playing bass guitar at the age of 13. It became a large part of my identity and personal support system for how I approached, interacted, and interpreted the world around me. I used playing and listening to music as an outlet for frustration, accomplishment, recreation, and catharsis.

I feel this may influence my perspective to prefer music as an answer to a host of issues one may be addressing internally and/or externally. I therefore feel this is why I have been drawn to a career as a music therapist, in order to share this resource of music with others in ways that are most effective and appropriate for each individual.

I first heard of music therapy from a fellow musician at a local jam during the summer before my first year of undergraduate film school. She was pursuing the career path of a music therapist and it seemed interesting to me at the time. I was young and had other aspirations that led me in a different direction. Though I had made a mental note to myself about this field having no other context for it other than the words “music therapy.” It was intriguing.

Years would pass until I would come across the field again. This time I had the opportunity to witness the work that music therapists were doing in a school specializing in teaching students with developmental delays. I was working as a teaching assistant and was able to observe students both in the classroom setting as well as the music therapy session setting.
This juxtaposition was eye opening to me about how powerful a tool music can be to help individuals communicate. I feel in many ways my journey to the field is due to witnessing the power of music in this prior professional experience.

My time employed at the school would change my life. I was introduced to the DIR/Floortime model of developmental education (Greenspan, 2006) as well as the work of a team of music therapists implementing improvisational music therapy from a Nordoff-Robbins music therapy (Aigen, 2001) framework. I witnessed musical conversations between students and therapists that I had thought impossible. These experiences of seeing children making strides at developmental growth through music affected me profoundly. I knew this was work that I could do and find fulfillment in the process. It is not music to serve oneself; it is music to share, converse, play, and express.

As a performer, I had always asked myself the question, am I making music for the audience or for myself? There is truth to both in every musical experience. But after years of performing my balance was beginning to lean towards a sort of self service, when in reality I wanted to serve others in music. This was the major factor in my decision to study music therapy.

In this research, I share my story as a non-traditional music therapy student as well as explore similar stories of colleagues who came to the field in a comparable manner. I initially set out towards a narrative inquiry approach which is the study of human lived experience portrayed through engaging, meaningful, and personal stories (Hadley & Edwards, 2016). Stories are the glue that hold the human experience together. One’s own story informs how one draws meaning from the various experiences in life. I subsequently decided to research from a phenomenological inquiry approach as it was the phenomenon, as opposed to the story itself, I
was seeking. The stories of participants are part of the data, so I feel it important to note the initial narrative inquiry thought process of this research.

**Method**

This research is firmly within the qualitative paradigm. The epistemological framework is based in the interpretivist methodology. More specifically, the research is based in hermeneutic phenomenology. The phenomenological inquiry approach aimed to focus on understanding conscious experience and how meaning is ascribed to that experience, individually or collectively (Patton, 2002). Additionally on phenomenological inquiry, Jackson (2016) states it “provides the means to explore the subjective, human experiences that occur in music therapy” (p. 451).

Considering my experience as a nontraditional student, I worked from a hermeneutic approach, meaning to share my experience within the research and give personal insight. Aigen (1995) states the goal of hermeneutic research is not to develop fixed, singular bodies of knowledge, but to engage deeply in the circle of understanding in order to develop insightful and plausible interpretations of events. According to Polkinghorne (1988), this research is rooted in a descriptive format as opposed to an explanatory format. This left room for my own subjective point of view while conducting the research. This research is topic-centered, as I attempted to connect themes among the content of the nontraditional music therapy students’ interviews (Reissman, 1993).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with other nontraditional music therapy students about their experiences. Semi-structured interviews are conducted “in a way to help both the researcher and the participant to access and develop knowledge on the topic at hand; the lived
world of the research participant” (Keith, 2016, p. 234). The decision to utilize semi-structured interviews was indicated in the nature of the research as I was interested in collecting individuals' stories of their experience as they perceive them. The list of pre-determined questions served as a platform to guide the interviews, and I followed the lead of the participants keeping in mind the story is the most salient data. A list of questions for these semi-structured interviews are found in Appendix A.

The interviewees were chosen via purposeful sampling as this type of sampling “focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 273). Because of this sampling and my own personal connection to the topic, the participants included in the study are either classmates of mine or are otherwise connected through the music therapy community. Thus, I navigated a dual relationship as researcher and classmate/peer to the interviewees. In some situations, a sensitively managed dual relationship is conducive to richer content and participation. When conducting qualitative research with her colleagues as the participants, Wagner (2012) concluded that “it was helpful to have a colleague as a facilitator, yet someone with a somewhat removed relationship” (p. 29) in order to establish trust with her participants. This was found to be helpful as participants felt more comfortable and willing to share with someone familiar to them. It is this shared geographic and academic setting I navigated within via purposeful sampling to compare and contrast narratives in the nontraditional music therapy student community. Our commonalities as nontraditional students may be indicated to further conversational discussion of the experience during interviews, potentially resulting in more rich, in-depth results. I emailed potential
participants to invite them to the study and sent a follow-up email two weeks later (see Appendix B).

The interviews with three nontraditional music therapy students were via video conference. Each participant was assigned a moniker (A, B, and C) to be used for further portions of the research process. The contact information sources of data about participants including name, email address, and corresponding moniker were stored on a password protected document in a password protected folder with unique passwords for an extra level of security. The audio recordings of the interviews were stored in a separate password protected folder with a unique password from the other folders to ensure security of the content of the interviews. They were labelled with monikers and will not contain any personal identifiers in the file names. Table 1 below illustrates demographic information about the participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moniker</th>
<th>Age, Gender</th>
<th>Degree Being Sought</th>
<th>Prior Degree</th>
<th>Music Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>30, Female</td>
<td>MS in Music Therapy</td>
<td>BS in Music Education</td>
<td>Choral, Band ensembles, School musicals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>37, Female</td>
<td>MS in Music Therapy</td>
<td>BA in Music MM in Classical Voice</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>32, Male</td>
<td>MS in Music Therapy</td>
<td>BS in Business Administration</td>
<td>Drums, Guitar, Piano hobbyist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The calls were recorded on a separate audio recording device via voice memo application on my iPhone and stored in a password protected folder to which only I had access. No video was recorded as this visual data is not relevant to the research, though during the video call both the participants and I were able to see each other. If participants requested only a phone call without video, the same protocol was taken but without video during the interview. Names of participants are not recorded in any data collection and participants have been assigned a moniker as described above. In order to participate, the interviewees gave permission prior to the start of the interview as the audio was recorded (see Appendix C). This permission form was read aloud by the interviewer prior to the start of the interview. The recorded interviews were stored on a password protected server and only accessed by me. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and were de-identified to protect confidentiality. These transcriptions were sent to the participants for review to allow them to check for accuracy and to note if there was other information they wanted to add or clarify. The de-identified transcriptions were reviewed by my academic thesis advisor to aid in the data analysis process. When the transcripts were complete, the participants again had an opportunity to review and add or omit any details with no repercussions.

The data from those interviews were then winnowed (Guest et al., 2012) focusing on salient parts of the data while disregarding unrelated portions and segments. I then generated descriptions and themes from the winnowed data within the stories. A small number of themes were drawn from the data, initially five as recommended by Creswell (2013). Continuing further, I represented the descriptions and themes with a more in-depth exploration of the themes found (Creswell & Creswell, 2019). The analysis process was conducted as follows:
1. Organize and prepare data from stories for analysis

2. Read or look at all the data

3. Begin coding all the data

4. Generate a description and themes

5. Represent the description and themes

As part of the analysis, I explored my interpretation of these themes to compare and contrast my experiences as a nontraditional music therapy student with that of other nontraditional music therapy students.

I decided to try multiple analysis frameworks of the data to diversify my analysis phase of research. Upon completion of the initial phase and having been informed by Creswell and Creswell (2019), I then began with a new initial coding phase to familiarize myself again with the data considering some months had passed since the first initial coding phase.

In this second initial coding phase, the goal was to remain open to all possible theoretical directions as suggested by my interpretations of the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 135). These initial codes were intended to focus and distill the data that was collected in the interviews. From there, this led to interpretation of the codes, and informed how to proceed with further analysis of the collective data.

The transcribed data that was collected in this initial phase was utilized to conduct two different coding methods: in vivo coding and later through process coding. The purpose of in vivo coding was to “help preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 135). This is important to my research as the experience of the nontraditional music therapy student is the phenomenon which I initially sought out to explore. It
was valuable to this research to include the voices of the interviewees as it is their individual and collective experiences to better understand the experiential phenomenon as a whole. For this reason, I attached direct quotes to themes in order to honor the interviewees’ perspective throughout the coding and analysis process.

After the second initial coding phase, a phase of process coding helped to provide descriptive gerund or action words within the interviews. This organized words which guided a trajectory to the stories of the interviewees as “processes also imply actions intertwined with the dynamics of time, such as those things that emerge, change, occur in particular sequences, or become strategically implemented through time” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 253). After reading on a variety of coding methods in Saldana (2021), I came to the conclusion that the in vivo coding method was more aligned with honoring the words of the participants, so I utilized those codes when moving forward with second phase coding.

I used a method called code mapping which is meant “to bring meaning, structure, and order to data” (Anfara, 2008, p. 932). This helped me winnow and focus the data into related themes. I did this in three iterations for each interview: lists (See appendix D), categories (See appendix E), and a second category iteration to condense related categories. I then conducted a fourth iteration to compare the found data between interviews. Upon completion of the code mapping phase, I began analyzing the results.

Results

I am a nontraditional music therapy student researching other nontraditional music therapy students so in this way all perspectives within this research paradigm fit such label. I also navigated dual relationships with each interviewee as we are all nontraditional music therapy
students in the same graduate program at a state university in the Northeast United States. These dual relationships as well as homogeneity serve the research in that researcher and interviewees were able to more fully explore the phenomenon being studied within the same geographical and educational context.

Dey (2007) discussed the integrated nature of the theory-building process by advising that researchers “do not categorize and then connect; we connect by categorizing” (p. 178). While I was not building a theory in this research, the process was influenced by this type of thinking in how I derived the most salient themes from the data as I connected and categorized simultaneously per interview. Below in table 2 are the results of the code mapping iterations followed by discussion.
### Table 2

**Code Mapping Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaningfulness:</td>
<td>a. Power of music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to help people in a meaningful way</td>
<td>“I realized that music can reach people when they’re so within themselves and have had no connection with so many people for years. That was when I saw the power of music and knew that I wanted to use it to help people.” (Participant A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Meaningful work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I saw it as a career where it could really be something meaningful and impactful and profound on a day-to-day basis.” (Participant C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation:</td>
<td>a. Personal journey towards music therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision later in life to pursue a new career in music therapy</td>
<td>“It has served every part of my life. I’m glad that I went back and I’m glad I went back at this time of my life.” (Participant B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Desire for growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Me wanting to progress forward in my life played a big role in my decision.” (Participant C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges:</td>
<td>a. Academic expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual and collective challenges as nontraditional students</td>
<td>“I feel if I were a younger student that might have been difficult for me. So (as an older student), I feel like I had an advantage honestly going through all those classes” (Participant B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I was an outsider that would drop in for a couple hours, go to class, then leave.” (Participant C)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I found, via the code mapping method, the most salient theme throughout all three interviews to be each interviewee’s desire to do meaningful work to help people. They found this potential through a career in music therapy. Secondly, this desire for meaningfulness in work was influenced by each participant’s prior, undesirable employment in other fields or industries. This led them towards a desire for personal and professional growth, ultimately informing their
choices to pursue a music therapy career. While in school, each participant had found challenges in being a nontraditional music therapy student.

**Theme 1: Meaningfulness**

The three interviewees each described a similar theme of desire for meaningfulness in employment. In describing their journey to music therapy and why they decided to pursue it as a career, Participant B stated, “If I have to work, it has to be meaningful work to feel useful to the world and to serve a bigger purpose.” This meaningfulness is achieved through the connectiveness and interaction with the power of music.

**Power of Music**

Each participant discussed the profound nature of music and how it has the potential to truly affect people emotionally, socially, cognitively, and spiritually. When describing prior work experience playing music with a student in a special needs program, Participant A stated:

I realized that music could reach people when they’re so within themselves and have had no connection with so many people for years. That was when I saw the power of music and knew that I wanted to use it to help people.

Similarly, participant C discussed their formative experiences observing music therapists work with students with developmental delays: “I saw them in music therapy or interacting with music. It was like this whole new world opened up with them where they wanted to do. They wanted to be a part of it with you.” From a slightly different perspective, Participant B discussed the power of music relating to their grandmother who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease: “My grandmother could sing the lyrics to Peter Piper. She would play the organ for the tune. She remembered the tune because she played it and also sang it, but she could not remember
anyone’s name.” These experiences witnessing and engaging with the power of music with others affected the participants’ decision to pursue music therapy as a career.

**Meaningful Work**

Each participant discussed prior unfulfilling employment which led them to pursue a career in the field of music therapy. Participant C stated most succinctly, “Every day I hated going into work.” This participant discussed leaving an advertising/marketing job to take a more emotionally fulfilling, less lucrative job as a teaching assistant. Here they were working with students with developmental delays, which is where the participant saw meaning in the work of music therapists. During this employment they decided to pursue music therapy as a career: “I saw it as a career where it could really be something meaningful, impactful, and profound on a day-to-day basis” (Participant C). This participant valued meaningfulness in their work above monetary gain. In discussing meaningful work versus meaningless work, participant C stated, “For as difficult as that (teaching assistant) job was, and as difficult as music therapy is sometimes, there is always meaning in it.” This desire for meaningfulness in work, regardless of difficulty, was highly prevalent for this participant. While attending a music therapy graduate program, this participant was employed managing multiple group homes for individuals with developmental delays as well as employment as activities coordinator at a psychiatric hospital.

The theme of meaningful work was explored by participant A while discussing subtleties in choosing a path of music education or music therapy. Participant A stated:

I realized I definitely want to work with kids with music. But not in the capacity of education. I wanted it to go deeper... music was my escape, so I wanted to create that same escape for kids through music.
The notion of “deeper” as explored by participant A pertains to the social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual engagement music therapy can bring to individuals and groups. Whereas in comparison the goal of music education more appeared to this participant to focus on technical competencies in a perfunctory manner. While there is immense value in music education, this participant found more personal meaning in a career in music therapy when compared to music education.

Participant B described their thoughts on the meaningfulness in professionally shifting to music therapy: “If I have to work it has to be meaningful work to feel useful to the world and to serve a bigger purpose.” This participant is self-employed as a private voice teacher and decided to pursue a music therapy degree in order to serve the various social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual needs of their voice students more fully when appropriate. Participant B had seen individual needs arising in students and felt limited in an ability to be as helpful as possible without a music therapy background and thus decided to pursue a degree in the field.

This desire for meaningfulness implies there was a lack of meaning in prior employment. The lived experience of each participant affected their desire for meaningfulness in work. The lived experience also closely relates to the other salient theme found in the research: the motivation later in life to pursue this career.

**Theme 2: Motivation**

Each participant in this research was in a master’s of science program in music therapy from a university offering a masters equivalency program, meeting the requirements of the AMTA as described in the literature review (AMTA, 2022a). Each participant was motivated later in life to enter the music therapy field as opposed to pursuing it traditionally, directly after
high school. Participant B reflected on returning to school: “It has served every part of my life. I’m glad I went back and I’m glad I went back at this time of my life.” This motivation was influenced by the life experiences of each participant, ultimately leading each to the field in their own unique trajectory.

**Personal Journey Towards Music Therapy**

Each participant came to the field, later in life, in their own way. Broadly, two had experience in music education while one had prior experience in corporate business as well as special education. Each shared the professional shift towards music therapy in ways that were both unique to each, as well as similar to the other participants’ experiences. Participant B described an early thought about their journey towards music therapy before they decided to pursue the field: “I was a skeptic 10 years ago. I was young and, in my twenties, had different goals, different life dreams.” This best illustrates this participant’s awareness of a shift in personal goals over time towards the work of music therapy.

Participant A, earlier in life, decided to not pursue music therapy as a career. They then described the phenomenon of eventually deciding to matriculate into a music therapy master’s program after viewing the power of music as described earlier: “This time I was personally ready to pursue it.” Life experience over time informed their decision to study music therapy. Participant A discussed this personal apprehension towards academic settings and how the long-term positive aspects of the career outweighed their apprehensions.

As for participant C, observing music therapy in action was a major catalyst to influence their decision to pursue music therapy professionally. This, along with the desire to more fully embrace music within their life and identity, affected the personal journey towards the field for
this participant. They stated, “Music therapy would give me a push to work on myself and dedicate myself to something.” The action of working on oneself by pursuing a music therapy education and career was a common theme expressed by the other participants as well.

The three participants all shared some commonalities in their respective journeys. Each utilized music with children to some degree in an education setting prior to entering school. Each also experienced unsatisfactory employment prior to their enrollment and were motivated towards helping others within a satisfying work environment.

Desire For Growth

The unique life circumstances brought each participant to a similar conclusion was best described by participant C: “Me wanting to progress forward in my life played a big role in my decision (to pursue music therapy)”. The notion of forward was different for each participant though all expressed growth and “forward” trajectory in helping others via a career in music therapy.

Relatedly, participant B stated, when discussing their choice to pursue music therapy instead of only teaching music: “I wanted to affect change in a larger way than just teaching voice. So I thought music therapy, that component could definitely help.” This decision to add music therapy to voice teaching fulfilled participant B’s desire for more meaningfulness in their career. They were content in teaching and wanted to affect change in a “larger” way than only teaching hence the music therapy trajectory.

Participant A described the desire and action towards personal growth in the music therapy field: “I’m doing something that makes me happy and I’m doing it because I want to be
there.” They discussed a prior career trajectory as a music educator and why music therapy was a better fit for personal and professional growth.

**Theme 3: Challenges**

A common experience discussed by each of the participants was some form of challenge in the process of education and training in music therapy. This is innately ingrained in all types of achievements, accomplishments, or milestones such as earning a master’s degree. However, there are some challenges that are more salient for individuals who meet the criteria of a nontraditional student. Some challenges were common among the nontraditional student participants while others were unique to each. This section is organized into two salient themes: academics and identity.

**Academics**

All three participants discussed the academic expectations as both challenging and ultimately rewarding. A challenge all three participants faced was reacclimatizing to the academic setting in some form. Whether it was re-utilizing writing skills for two participants or learning new musical skills for another, each participant had a challenge to overcome academically during their education. Participant C described their approach to academics in shared classes with undergraduates: “I never had issues with getting things done on time or finishing readings because I was a little bit later, a little bit older when I started.” The life skills acquired over time and with experience were beneficial to this participant’s overall success in the academic setting as a nontraditional student.

Participant B echoed this theme when discussing how they approached early academic challenges: “I feel if I were a younger student that might have been difficult for me. So, I feel
like I had an advantage honestly going through all those classes.” This participant indicated their prior experiences in higher education, as well as life experiences, helped them succeed in their studies. The participant then also shared challenges that arose later in their schooling: “It was like having four jobs which was tough. I would say the hardest semester was doing my thesis with the internship and classes. It was like I was drowning.” The balance of school, internship, work, and home life was challenging to maintain as free time or self-care is pushed aside for higher priority obligations such as homework.

Interestingly, one aspect that was discussed by two of three interviewees was a lack of time to procrastinate. When discussing work/schoolwork/life balance strategies, Participant C stated, “I did not have time to procrastinate.” This participant needed to use a small window of free time during their week to do homework; often only amounting to a few hours once per week. Participant A also discussed a lack of time to procrastinate: “I got it all done. It was a matter of not having to be as structured because of the lack of time.” This was indicative of the lack of free time these participants possessed due to homework, school, and work obligations.

Identity

The other challenge that each participant shared pertained to their identity as a nontraditional student within a greater academic community. Identity arose in the themes for each participant though each in different ways. Each participant discussed the congruence and contrast between the identity of traditional students and nontraditional students. Each participant had the prior experience of being an undergraduate student, so each had personal context for behaviors and motivations of undergraduate or younger classmates. In contrast, one participant
described a desire to learn from their classmates, regardless of age or experience as each person has a unique perspective to offer.

Participant A described being at an age between younger undergraduates and older nontraditional graduate students:

I was not quite as young as the people graduating undergrad and was not as old as people who have lived their lives and now decided to go back to school. So, I felt myself trying to weave in between the two groups of people.

Each participant described age awareness in some way when discussing their peers.

Participant B made an interesting point about identifying more with teachers than with peers. They noted, “I empathized more with the teachers than with the students being a teacher myself.” They discussed other students' never having been teachers’ left them with little to no knowledge of “the other side of things.” This identity of being a teacher was beneficial to success in the academic setting though illustrated minor challenges with peers who had not had that experience yet in life.

Another interesting aspect of identity discussed by Participant C was this sense of outsider-ness within the academic setting. They stated, “I was an outsider that would drop in for a couple of hours, go to class, then leave.” This encapsulates a theme all participants expressed as peer socialization was not prioritized.

Lastly, two participants identified as musicians and music teachers before pursuing a career in music therapy. The third did not describe themself as a musician prior to their enrollment in the music therapy program. This participant instead described a desire to experience music as a more wholly, central aspect of their life instead of adjacent to other aspects
of life. Participant C shared, “I always had been adjacent to music. I did work in music; it was always a real interest of mine, but I never performed or played for anyone other than myself.” This participant runs a small independent record label which is the work in music they describe. As noted in previous sections, this participant desired to grow both professionally and personally: “So, I think that music therapy also gave me a way to incorporate that piece of myself into what I wanted to do long term with my life. In a way that would also be benefiting people.” This participant wanted music to be a bigger part of their personal identity which factored into their decision to become a music therapist.

**Discussion**

This research has illuminated both the similarities and unique characteristics of the journeys of three nontraditional music therapy students. This inquiry aimed to shed light on the phenomenon to more fully understand the real experiences of nontraditional music therapy students, which may be helpful in consideration of the process of music therapy education and in efforts to grow the music therapy workforce.

In this section, I will relate my findings from the participants of my study to both published literature and my own experiences as a nontraditional music therapy student. I have a great deal of relatability in my own experience to the themes that were found in the research. This may be indicated as a bias as I also conducted and coded the interviews. However, I place value in the qualitative aspects of this research and intended to share my own experience to further explore the phenomenon being discussed. There is transferability in this research as other music therapy students may gain insight or new perspectives from the participants’ interviews and the data that was collected.
Each participant felt more equipped to face the challenges that arise for students in higher education being nontraditional students. The participants’ words reflected Bye and colleague’s (2007, p. 141) findings as each reported being more motivated to learn considering their status as nontraditional students and the journey that brought them to this point in their life. In turn, this positively affected their personal work ethic within both the academic and clinical training settings. This is not to say that traditional students are not motivated, rather that nontraditional students’ motivations are affected by previous unsatisfactory work experience.

This motivation was accompanied by higher levels of resilience gained through age and experience, equipping them to be more successful at managing stress and overcoming challenges. This was noted by Babb et al. (2021) and correlates to the results from these participants as each found their success to be attributed to resilience gained through age and experience. The participants also described in some form their use of cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation within the academic setting to their benefit. This is relatable to the findings of Arici-Ozan et al. (2019) which describe these skills to be exercised at higher levels by nontraditional students than traditional students. The participants’ use of experienced critical thinking skills and emotional regulation were more conducive to their success as students and ultimately as music therapists in both academic and clinical education settings. The participants were more easily able to navigate and learn in their clinical placements having developed these regulation skills in prior professional experience. These skills also positively affected each participant in learning to use self-awareness as required by AMTA master’s education standards (AMTA, 2022c) in turn making them better music therapists. As Bruscia (2014, p. 59) describes, this self-awareness plays a key role in further developing the participants’ abilities to address
countertransference within therapeutic relationships. In addition, each participant described their exploration of thoughts/feelings, demonstration of humility, and use of analogous experiences which is similar to the findings given by nursing student participants in Sedlak (1999). While music therapy and nursing are different fields, I found this relatedness to illustrate potential themes within the common experience of nontraditional students attending higher education programs in allied health fields. The commonality of a desire to help others as well as an ability to utilize cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation are potential themes to explore across nontraditional students studying in allied healthcare fields.

More so related to the music therapy field, each participant in this study shared about their musical self-identity prior to music therapy education such as singer, drummer, pianist, group member, or label manager. MacDonald et al. (2002) also described the concept of musical self-identity and how it plays a role in how one conceptualizes themself in a given setting. I found musical self-identity and role identity to be related in some way throughout this research process. As described by Feldman and Ng (2007), role identities provide greater schemata for an individual’s choices in how to respond to life events, supporting a sense of direction and offering guidance in the face of uncertainty. Participants made connections between their musical self-identities and evolving role identities such as music teacher to music therapist as well as music hobbyist to music professional. The musical self-identity of a prospective music therapy student I found to be ontologically related to role identity in the results of the research as well as personally. This time period prior to each participant’s music therapy education helped foster a deeper appreciation and utilization of their prior and learned clinical musicianship skills. The
experiences each had prior to their formal education provided anecdotal context for future musical encounters with clients, patients, or students.

I myself came to the field in a comparable manner to the participants. Their stories and mine were what connected us as classmates and ultimately friends. During graduate school it was challenging at times to relate to younger classmates, so I gravitated towards the older graduate students. I found myself valuing their input during class discussions relating their prior professional work to the material at hand. This is not to say younger classmates did not have valuable input. This is only to accent the value of the lived experience prior to attending higher education.

My experience as a professional musician I feel was the greatest education I could receive via interaction with others in music. I learned by playing traditional Irish music in and around New York City with any individual who decided to come to the jam, or session on any given night. It taught me how to listen as well as offer my own input musically in an open, welcoming context for all. This base of experience then led to more nuanced and curated playing with more experienced professionals in a variety of settings. I personally place intrinsic social and emotional value on musical settings open for all to join in playing as opposed to the monetary value of professional musical performance settings. I would not have had this experience if it were not for the chronological gap between undergraduate and graduate school. A traditional student who decides to pursue graduate school directly after undergraduate coursework will lack the chronological life experience of an individual who reentered academia with a gap between degrees. This period of time can better help inform an individual what kind of career path they may or may not want to take. This was described by each participant in this
research, though most poignantly by Participant A’s advice: “More people need to take a break before jumping into grad school.” They described knowing what they want to do in part due to having the time and experience to do things they later learned they did not want to do. Bye et al. (2007) also discussed this phenomenon of an individual’s own personal and cultural experiences which positively factor into their decision to pursue higher education at that later point in life. Over time their experiences led to an increased level of maturity equipping them to better address health-related needs of clients in their clinical placements.

This is not intended to discourage prospective students from pursuing graduate degrees directly after receiving undergraduate degrees. Rather, the research intends to suggest traditional music therapy students, as well as educators, place value on the unique lived experience of nontraditional students and in turn learn from it to become better music therapists.

The issues and challenges that arose for the participants in this study, as well as for me, were not unique to our experiences as nontraditional students but appeared more generalized to almost all graduate students. While almost all graduate students could be described as nontraditional, the definition herein of nontraditional student is meant to note the potential for different underlying motivations of nontraditional music therapy students.

A related aspect to also note is the work-life balance of all nontraditional students and how to address this phenomenon. The participants in this research discussed the difficulty of getting their work done though ultimately were able to do so. Their school and professors appeared to be flexible when it came to life occurrences conflicting with education timelines. I also have experienced this as a positive towards the school though it is unclear if other educational programs are as willing to adapt to the needs of nontraditional students.
Implications for Educational Programs: Contextualizing the Results

The learning style of nontraditional students or older students is unique to that of traditional counterparts. Rabourn et al. (2018) found compared to their traditional-aged peers, adult learners are more engaged academically, interact less with their peers and faculty, have positive perceptions of teaching practices and interactions with others, and find their campus to be less supportive. I found this relatable in my experience as my professors respected my autonomy as well as my engagement throughout the education process. Chen (2017) discussed three implications for faculty to consider when teaching nontraditional adult learners. They consisted of facilitating self-direction, personal narrative as a primary learning medium, and transformational versus instrumental learning. Transformational learning refers to the deeper transformation that happens during the education process which could be closely related to the phenomenon of self-healing (Daloz, 1999, p. 241). I found these implications to be highly related to the educational process and success of the three participants in this study as well as for myself. Each participant discussed their sense of self-direction or motivation in the education process while utilizing their personal narrative as a primary learning medium. This is to say they used their prior life experiences as tools to enhance their learning during their time in school. During each clinical placement, the participants were able to address each new experiential learning opportunity with a variety of populations across the lifespan. This manner of learning and subsequent academic achievement ultimately led to transformative learning for the participants towards their goal of becoming music therapists. They each expressed positive feedback towards their professors' flexibility and open communication throughout their education.
Some negative aspects of the education process that were highlighted by the participants included having to take ample undergraduate prerequisites before being able to take any graduate classes. This experience is unique to nontraditional music therapy students who enroll in an equivalency master’s program. They also discussed commuter related issues and frustration with class times scheduled during typical work day hours. They expressed their school changed many of these requirements in an effort to better address the needs of students moving forward.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

After contemplating the findings of this research, I recommend for further research in two key areas: music therapy student motivators/deterrents, and student assessment of academic programming. What makes someone want to become a music therapist? What prevents someone from pursuing and achieving that goal and how can success be improved? How do students personal and/or professional lives intersect with their academic responsibilities and how might those be improved for future students? These are questions that are not necessarily fully answered by the research herein, yet are related to the types of results that came from the interviews and coding processes.

While this research illuminated aspects of the journeys of three nontraditional students, there is much more to be learned about the phenomenon of nontraditional students both in the music therapy field and in the greater academic community. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent societal effects appear to have caused an increase in individuals seeking a career change. Future research may benefit from both qualitative and quantitative analysis as to the reasons why individuals seek employment in the music therapy field specifically and how those findings may or may not align with the results found herein.
An increased number of participants in this type of qualitative research will also be beneficial to understanding the phenomenon of nontraditional student. Future research may include studies with a variety of nontraditional students, from a variety of schools, and a variety of life experiences to better understand who is attracted to this type of work and why.

Conclusion

In conclusion, no two music therapists journeys' to the field will be the same but some similarities may be notable. A desire to help people and a desire for personal growth were common among the participants as well as relative challenges. This is true for this researcher as well considering the common experience of a personal and professional journey towards the music therapy field.

Additionally, I suggest the field of music therapy make a concerted effort to attract and recruit more professional musicians to the field that have experience as live or studio musicians. This was not discussed within the research though I feel worth noting as prospective music therapy students who are professional musicians entering the field will likely fit the definition of nontraditional student and offer an immense amount of valued life experience to their work in the music therapy field. I feel this will make for high quality musicianship in music therapists and thus high-quality music therapy for clients across the lifespan.
References


Wagner, H. (2012). The use of music and mandala to explore the client/therapist relationship in a therapeutic day school. *Qualitative Inquiries in Music Therapy, 7*, 1-32.
Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. When and how did you first hear about music therapy?
2. When did you decide to pursue music therapy as a career?
3. Why did you choose to pursue music therapy as a career?
4. Were you employed prior to becoming a music therapist and if so what was that employment experience like?
5. What played the biggest role in your decision to become a music therapist?
6. What was your academic experience like as a nontraditional student studying music therapy?
7. Were there salient moments of congruence or contrast amongst you and your classmates or professors?
Appendix B

Email to Potential Participants

Subject: Research Study on Experience of Nontraditional Music Therapy Students

Hello Music Therapy Students current and former,

My name is Sean McNally and I am a graduate student studying music therapy at SUNY New Paltz. I am conducting a qualitative research study on the experience of the nontraditional music therapy student.

The criteria for a nontraditional student is someone who left academia at any point after high school, undergraduate, or graduate levels for any number of reasons, then later in life re-entered the academic setting. I am interested in documenting the stories of what that experience was like for those students and why they decided to pursue a degree and career in music therapy.

I am looking for a very small number of participants to take part in the study giving attention to each individual’s own unique story. The research will be conducted via semi-structured interviews. The participants will receive the general interview questions before the interviews are conducted. The interview(s) may be via email, video conference, or a combination of both. They will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Themes will be drawn from the analyzed data. Participants will have the opportunity to read and amend before anything is finalized if they so
choose. All participants must consent to audio recording. Participants’ identities will remain confidential and information will be de-identified to the greatest extent possible.

If you fit this criteria and would like to participate in this study, please reply to this email within ten days.

If you have any questions please feel free to email me at: mcnallys4@hawmail.newpaltz.edu

My supervisor, Dr. Heather Wagner can be reached at: wagnerh@newpaltz.edu

Thank you very much,

Sean McNally
Appendix C

Informed Permission Form with Permission to Audio Recording and Transcription

Title of Study

Exploring the Journey of Nontraditional Students in the Music Therapy Field: A Phenomenological Inquiry

Summary of Information

This research study seeks to explore the experience of the nontraditional music therapy student through the student’s perspective to better understand the experience as a whole. The researcher is a nontraditional music therapy student. If you agree to be interviewed, they will be recorded in a semi-structured interview style leaving space for a flow of conversation. The interviews will take roughly one hour with potential for a shorter follow-up interview if needed. The interviews will then be transcribed verbatim and the participant will have an opportunity to read and redact any information they would like to leave out of the interview. The transcripts will then be coded and analyzed for themes. Again, the participants will have an opportunity to read and potentially redact any information in the themes they wish.

There is no greater risk than what participants would experience in everyday life. They will receive a consent document in advance of the interview via email. When we meet for the interview I will review the consent document orally, give the opportunity for questions, and obtain verbal consent to conduct the interview and research resulting from the interview. Participants may choose not to participate at any time for any reason with no penalty or reason given. Physical risk is unlikely as the interviews will be conducted remotely. Psychological and
social risks are no greater than that of everyday life for the participants. Legal risks are low and no greater than everyday level of risk. Economic risks are low and no greater than everyday life risk.

By taking part in this research study, you agree to be recorded for the purpose of furthering the understanding of the nontraditional music therapy student’s experience. Personal identifiers will be redacted as to maintain participants confidentiality with contact information stored on a separate password protected in case follow up in requested to clarify information. Participants may terminate their participation at any time during the research without penalty. The research will give readers a better understanding of individuals’ journey to music therapy and the factors that play a role in that journey.

**Researcher Information**

Sean McNally, Music Therapy Graduate Student

State University of New York at New Paltz

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Faculty Advisor

Heather Wagner, PhD, MT-BC

wagnerh@newpaltz.edu
Permission

I have read/been read aloud the permission form and agree to take part in the research study as a current or former nontraditional music therapy student. I understand I will be recorded. I understand my answers to questions will be transcribed and analyzed. I understand my identity will be protected to the best of the researcher’s abilities. I understand I can withdraw my participation at any time during the study.

Date: ____________________
Appendix D

First Coding Iteration

A Summary

Familial suggestion to pursue career in field

Prior career ambitions before music therapy (teaching, music related)

Resistance towards MT field, preference to performing.

“The process of trying to get into grad school scared me”

Desire to help people

Catalyst event in work experience to pursue music therapy

Graduate school motivation later in life after undesirable work experience

Desire to go “deeper” in work

Personal connection to music informs desire to pursue career

Distaste for academic setting

Academic/personal growth in graduate school

Age difference. Not young enough, not old enough

Value systems different from undergraduate classmates

Open-mindedness towards all classmates' perspectives

Distaste for close-mindedness

Distaste for unclear academic expectations/prerequisites

2-year program turned into 4-year program

Lack of social engagement due to commute
Decided to move to town to cut down on commute

Geographic hurdles

Advocacy to go back to graduate school after having work experience

Self-motivation in graduate school

Burn out in undergraduate

Monetary investment in graduate school

B Summary

Familial suggestion to pursue career in MT field

Initial lack of passion for the field/job market

Performance background

Dislike for school music teacher career

Catalyst event in seeing grandparent w/ Alzheimer's playing piano

Prior work experience in music. Combine therapy w/ music

Desire for growth

Additional familial suggestion to look into MT field

Unique perspective having worked for years before career change to MT

Geographic job market greater than it was prior

Influence from personal therapy journey

Commute was manageable

Tuition was manageable

Equivalency program was lucrative
Initial passion for performance, shifting passions over time
Desire to help others in meaningful way
Teaching singing - deeper than education
Combination of therapy and music
Previous work experience in music related fields (teaching, performing)
Current employment as a private music teacher and independent contractor (music)
Work challenges in past- unmotivated students/clients
Dislike for one dimensional teaching
Desire for deeper growth in clients
Monetary necessity
Feels personality conducive to therapeutic relationship
Personal experience led to a desire to help others in similar situations
Betterment of individuals and society
Older age helped in academic setting
Undergraduate classes were easy
Difficulty in reentering the academic setting - expectations of writing
Familiarity with internal feelings being older
Personal journey sharing in school/therapy
Life experience brings understanding of the material
Difficulties with work/school/life balance during graduate school
Preference for online classes. No commute
Difficult amount of work to do
Advantage in being nontraditional student

Relate more with professors than classmates

Relate more with other performers than non

Contrast with some students due to age and life experience

Resiliency

Grow, learn, challenge, personal/emotional growth

C Summary

Prior work experience in special education. First catalyst moment/ view of MT

No prior MT knowledge or experience

Transitionary job after unsatisfactory business career

Witnessed impactful MT work as part of greater special education team

Power of music

Desire for meaningful impact on a daily basis

Identity as music adjacent. Desire to make music central part of identity

Music incorporated into long term life goals

Benefitting ppl through music

Informal experiential opportunities gave the confidence to pursue MT graduate school

Desire for career growth

Monetary restraints informing growth decisions

Self-worth, growth, well-being

Happiness, fulfillment, meaningfulness
Unrelated work experiences out of undergraduate (business)

Dislike of business career path

Transitionary job happenstance into music therapy field

Familial support of career change

Impostor syndrome as musician

No formal music training

Four years for masters equivalency

Maturity served graduate school well - homework/deadlines

Perceived lack of maturity in undergraduate classmates

Self-described outsider

Full time work while also going to graduate school

Lack of free time motivating factor to do homework

Self-discipline

Work schedule plus school schedule challenging

Traditional vs nontraditional may or may not have same experience in work/school balance
Appendix E
Second Coding Iteration

INTERVIEW A

1) Desire to help people

   a. “I realized that music can reach people when they’re so within themselves and
      have had no connection with so many people for years. That was when I saw the
      power of music and knew that I wanted to use it to help people.”

   b. “Music was my escape, so I wanted to create that same escape for kids as well
      through music.”

   c. Desire to go “deeper” in work

   d. Personal connection to music informs desire to pursue MT career

   e. Catalyst event in work experience to pursue music therapy

   f. Familial suggestion to pursue career in field

2) Grad school motivation later in life

   a. after undesirable work experience

   b. “it shows to me basically I can do whatever I put my mind to”

   c. Academic/personal growth in graduate school

   d. Monetary investment in graduate school

   e. Self-motivation in graduate school

   f. Open-mindedness towards all classmates' perspectives

   g. Advocacy to go back to graduate school after having work experience

   h. Prior career ambitions before music therapy (teaching, music related)
3) Challenges

a. Distaste for academic setting

c. Age difference. Not young enough, not old enough

d. Value systems different from undergraduate classmates

e. Distaste for close-mindedness

f. Distaste for unclear academic expectations/prerequisites

g. 2-year program turned into 4-year program

h. Lack of social engagement due to commute

i. Resistance towards MT field, preference to performing

j. Burn out in undergraduate

k. Geographic hurdles

INTERVIEW B

1) Desire to help others in meaningful way

a. "If I have to work, it has to be meaningful work to feel useful to the world and to serve a bigger purpose."

b. "I wanted to affect change in a larger way than just teaching voice. So, I thought music therapy, that component could definitely help."

c. Catalyst event in seeing grandparent w/ Alzheimer's playing piano

d. Influence from personal therapy journey

e. Desire for deeper growth in clients

f. Feels personality conducive to therapeutic relationship

g. Betterment of individuals and society
h. Personal experience led to a desire to help others in similar situations

2) Grad school pursuit later in life

a. "I was a skeptic 10 years ago. I was young and in my twenties, had different goals, different life dreams. I wanted to be a performer."

b. Geographic job market greater than it was prior

c. "Being in (Eastern US State) there's so many more job opportunities for it."

d. "I feel if I were a younger student that might have been difficult for me. So, I feel like I had an advantage honestly going through all those classes."

e. "It has served every part of my life. So, I'm glad that I went back and I'm glad I went back at this time of my life."

f. Performance background

g. Prior work experience in music. Combine therapy w/ music

h. Desire for growth

i. Unique perspective having worked for years before career change to MT

j. Commute was manageable

k. Tuition was manageable

l. Equivalency program was lucrative

m. Initial passion for performance, shifting passions over time

n. Monetary necessity

o. Older age helped in academic setting

p. Familiarity with internal feelings being older

q. Life experience brings understanding of the material
r. Resiliency
s. Grow, learn, challenge, personal/emotional growth

3) Challenges
   a. Dislike for school music teacher career
   b. Work challenges in past- unmotivated students/clients
   c. Dislike for one dimensional teaching
   d. Difficulties with work/school/life balance during graduate school
   e. Preference for online classes. No commute
   f. Contrast with some students due to age and life experience
   g. Difficult amount of work to do
   h. Initial lack of passion for the field/job market
   i. Difficulty in reentering the academic setting - expectations of writing

INTERVIEW C

1) Desire for meaningful impact on a daily basis
   a. “I saw it as a career where it could really be something meaningful and impactful and profound on a day-to-day basis.”
   b. Power of music
   c. “For as difficult as that (teaching assistant) job was, and as difficult as music therapy is sometimes, there is always meaning in it.”
   d. Benefitting ppl through music
   e. Informal experiential opportunities gave the confidence to pursue MT graduate school
   f. Self-worth, growth, well-being
g. Happiness, fulfillment, meaningfulness

2) Desire for career change

a. "Every day I hated going into work."

b. Prior work experience in special education. First catalyst moment/ view of MT

c. No prior MT knowledge or experience

d. Transitional job after unsatisfactory business career

e. Witnessed impactful MT work as part of greater special education team

f. "Me wanting to progress forward in my life played a big role in my decision."

g. Music incorporated into long term life goals

h. Desire for career growth

i. Dislike of business career path

j. Monetary restraints informing growth decisions

k. Unrelated work experiences out of undergraduate (business)

l. Transitional job happenstance into music therapy field

m. Familial support of career change

n. Maturity served graduate school well - homework/deadlines

o. Traditional vs nontraditional may or may not have same experience in work/school balance

3) Challenges

a. Identity as music adjacent. Desire to make music central part of identity

b. Self-described outsider

c. "I was an outsider that would drop in for a couple hours, go to class, then leave."
d. “I didn’t have time to procrastinate.”

e. No formal music training

f. Impostor syndrome as musician

g. Four years for masters equivalency

h. Perceived lack of maturity in undergraduate classmates

i. Full time work while also going to graduate school

j. Lack of free time motivating factor to do homework

k. Work schedule plus school schedule challenging