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# An exploration of mindfulness in my music therapy sessions with a child with suggest autism spectrum disorder

Kimberly Lau

This research was completed as part of the degree requirements for the [Music Therapy](#) Department at Molloy College.

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MOLLOY COLLEGE

AN EXPLORATION OF MINDFULNESS IN MY MUSIC THERAPY SESSIONS  
WITH A CHILD WITH SUGGESTED AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

by

KIMBERLY LAU

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Molloy College  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of  
Master of Science

Degree to be conferred - August 2011

Thesis Committee:

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AN EXPLORATION OF MINDFULNESS IN MY MUSIC THERAPY SESSIONS  
WITH A CHILD WITH SUGGESTED AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Science  
In Music Therapy

by

KIMBERLY LAU  
Molloy College  
Rockville Centre, NY  
2011



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## ABSTRACT

This is a self-awareness qualitative research study in which the researcher explored the essence and realization of mindfulness that occurred during her music therapy sessions with a child with suggested autism. Due to the range of emotions she felt from her therapeutic relationship with the student, she was inspired to look into the practice of mindfulness to deepen self-understanding, develop self-awareness, and be more present in the sessions. Themes/motifs and feelings/emotions that emerged during the musical moments were identified by analyzing logs and analytic memos. The researcher chronicled her continuing revelation and formal and informal practices of mindfulness and how that had a positive effect on her therapeutic techniques and musical engagement with the student. Being mindful encompasses elements such as awareness, observation, attunement, openness, and acceptance. It is suggested that the practice of mindfulness

could contribute valuable attributes to the music therapy and other multidisciplinary health fields.

*Keywords:* mindfulness, mindful, music therapy, awareness, openness

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH STUDY

#### Introduction

In my thesis, I explored the essence and realization of mindfulness that occurred during my music therapy sessions with a child with suggested autism. Elan was a 12-year old boy who had music therapy with me from September 2010 to June 2011 at Rebecca School in New York City. I met with Elan as part of my music therapy internship. We met twice a week, with sessions lasting approximately 30 minutes per session. During our sessions, Elan offered an abundance of ideas and took on multiple musical activities simultaneously, which sometimes hindered his continuous flow of thought and communication. I realized I was influenced by his multitasking as I lost my concentration and adapted my practice to complement him by trying out different musical interventions. When he did not respond to my attempts to engage him, I experienced internal frustration and disappointment. The range of emotions I felt from my therapeutic relationship with Elan inspired me to look into mindfulness in my professional work. The insights may help me become a more competent music therapist.

#### Background Information on this Topic

Music is an authentic medium for self-expression as it is a symbolic form of expression relieved of the need for languages. “Of all the arts, music may in fact be the most direct means of self-expression” (Hagman, 2005, p. 117). Hence, the experience of therapeutic music could allow one to articulate genuine feelings. Besides the value of using music as a medium to treat clients, there are additional intrinsic attributes needed for being an effective music therapist, such as understanding, tolerance, trustworthiness,

musical skills, and creativity. An additional quality to be considered is mindfulness, a secular concept with Eastern meditation roots. In the therapeutic arena, mindfulness often expands to include *nonjudgment* (Germer, Siegel, & Fulman, 2005). According to Kabat-Zinn (2003), nonjudgment is the awareness that emerges through attention to purpose in the present moment, and through the unfolding of a moment to moment experience. Since nonjudgment is one of the essential qualities in working in the mental health professions, the practice of mindfulness has been integrated into various psychological therapies in recent years.

Buddha's teaching, called the Dharma, is the doctrine of deliverance he realized through enlightenment. The Sanskrit word for Enlightenment is "bodhi", which means "awakened" and to realize enlightenment is to be awakened from delusion in order to end the vicious cycle of suffering. Mindfulness is the core practice and the body of Buddhist psychology (Germer et al., 2005). The Dharma is structured by the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Suffering (*duhkha*) is the central problem of human existence that includes birth, aging, sickness, and death. A lack of awareness to the true nature of things could trigger one to seek external pleasure and enjoyment, known as craving. The excessive appetite for wants and desires would trigger human suffering, such as greed, anger, envy, or vanity. Given that suffering arises from craving, the destruction of craving would eliminate suffering. Buddha teaches the way to nirvana (a state of unconditioned peace beyond birth and death) through the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes the right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Bercholz & Kohn, 1997). Concentration and mindfulness could help to remove distraction and

interruption when the mind is liberated by a nirvana experience. Amongst the wisdom lectured in the *Dhammapada*, a collection of 426 verses of simple moral advice attributed to the Buddha, the main message is to “keep always mindful and aware, so that your heart will not slip into sidetracks that will lead to unhappiness” (Bercholz & Kohn, 1993, p. 66). One of the verses is even dedicated to “Mindfulness”.

In modern psychology, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies mindfulness as a sense of inner harmony, which is the result of the concentrated investment of psychic energy that leads to a sense of inner growth through intrinsically rewarding interaction with some aspect of the inner and outer environment. Individuals who experience the flow process, a psychological state that arises during optimal human experience, have clearer goals and also perceive a merging of action and awareness through concentration and attention (Wright, Sadlo, & Stew, 2007). Essentially, being mindful is to be in the present mindset, to gain self-awareness, and to be nonjudgmental. It is a concept of balancing one’s state of thinking and committing to the moment. Thought reflection and the act of tuning into one’s physical senses could foster an internal connection. Through the acceptance of the client’s and the therapist’s feelings and thoughts and by becoming more conscious of the physical and mental well being, mindfulness can help to foster acceptance and awareness as part of therapy practice and also allow the therapist to enjoy their work more fully (Germer et al., 2005).

### Description of Thesis

This is a “self-awareness as a music therapist” qualitative research study. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to investigate one’s personal values and beliefs through the process of engaging a client in particular activities or tasks (Wheeler, 2005).

### Reason for Choosing this Topic

I chose this topic because as a Buddhist, I believe the practice of mindfulness could provide a positive attribute to the client-therapist relationship, wherein a caring rapport is an important factor in a client's therapeutic process. An insight into mindfulness could also offer wholesome self-care for the music therapist.

Our daily living may benefit from convenience and efficiency. No longer do we have to walk to work (driving or taking the train becomes an option) or we now have the luxury of online research right at our finger tips. There is also a positive correlation between advanced technologies and multitasking. On any given day, it is no surprise to encounter a person performing several tasks at once. You might see a female driver putting on make-up while driving behind the wheel; a mother attempting to grab the milk carton in the supermarket, while chasing after her child and talking on her cell phone; or an office colleague talking on the phone, typing a report, plus ordering lunch online. Contemporaries strive to condense and maximize with minimum effort and waste.

Generally, modern society believes in the efficiency of multitasking. Employers highlight this keyword in resumes, equating it to a lucrative payoff. Killing two (or three...or four) birds with one stone? Sounds like a great deal. Yet, is multitasking rewarding? Does it really maximize rewards? And why do people engage in such behavior? Out of necessity? Habit? Or because it is the *right* thing to do?

I personally experienced less productivity and creativity when my concentration got consumed by multiple events. My final products' qualities became inferior and I would reprimand myself for the poor results. However, when I devoted my attention to one given task, I found myself more immersed and engaged, all while enjoying the



process. Most importantly, I was deepening my self-understanding and developing self-consciousness. Thus, I believe the practice of mindfulness can help music therapists to improve our works and also promote positive self-care.

### Literature Review

Mindfulness is an Eastern meditation tradition in which an individual increases the capacity to focus on awareness in the present moment, creates a sense of being present through the quality of listening, attitude of receptivity, and opens style of engagement (Epstein, 2003). There are many approaches to practice mindfulness, such as meditation, yoga, and qigong. In one qualitative study, journal collection was used as data and the music therapists who practiced daily meditation reported increased awareness and comfort with silence, more attentiveness to therapy practice, and expanded views to include physical and spiritual dimensions (McCollum and Gehart, 2010). Marom's (2004) qualitative study also showed that the music therapists (her study's participants) found themselves guided by their intuition as the non-religion-based, spiritual moments evolved during a session. The instinctive music that came out of the therapeutic process supported the spiritual experiences.

When one practices mindfulness, one is seeking a deepened understanding of oneself by concentrating on one action or thought, even something as primal as eating, sleeping, or breathing. This practice dispenses the notion of multitasking, a common view of efficacy and self-worth in modern society. In today's social and commercial development, humans have to keep up with the changing trends and global movement. The ideology of accomplishing work faster and sooner is to do things fast and neat. Yet, multitasking does not necessarily deliver better quality. Many studies have reported

mental and time costs for multitasking (Girard, 2007). When a person attends to more than one task at a time, what actually happens is a rapid change of focus between tasks ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org), 2001), and thereby a loss of focus on each particular assignment.

“Executive control” is the cognitive function used when people perform higher level tasks that has two main activities: Goal shifting and rule activation to help people unconsciously switch from one task to another (Girard, 2007). The rapid shift in attention intensifies concentration division. Not only is it unsafe in our daily tasks (for example, it is illegal to talk on the cell phone while driving in New York), but it is not a therapeutic practice in the mental health field, in which a therapist’s poor listening skill might miss out some vital information about the client.

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) concept of flow experiences is identified as the optimal, most rewarding experiences. When an experience is enjoyable, action and awareness are merged, self-consciousness disappears, the activities become autotelic, (Greek for something that is an end in itself), and distractions are excluded from consciousness. Thus, a flow experience helps to promote creativity and clarity of reaching therapeutic goals.

Besides our efforts to help our clients achieve their goals, as health care professionals, sometimes we prioritize clients’ cases over our own well-being, thus neglecting self-care. “To put patients’ welfare above our own is not skillful and can lead to deleterious consequences” (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 108). A common concern is stress. The negative consequences of stress could increase depression, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, psychosocial isolation, decreased job satisfaction, reduced self-esteem, disrupted personal relationships, and loneliness (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). But

through the practice of mindfulness, we learn to recognize and acknowledge these issues and eventually advocate self-care to balance and cultivate a healthful life style.

In the field of music education, Elliott (1995) states that musical experience and flow experience share these common grounds: self-growth, self-knowledge, and self-esteem (p. 122). Aigen (2004) further applies these values to music therapy by stating that musicing (the making of music) is a music-centered notion of reaching clinical goals that draws from an enjoyment in itself, such as an autotelic activity. So, there is a common denominator between musical experience and the practice of awareness. In Fidelibus's dissertation (2004), his study explored the therapists' experience during musical improvisation with their clients. He evaluated and analyzed the therapists' impressions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in order to gain a deeper understanding about the music flow in clinical improvisation. While previous studies have touched upon the concept of the flow experience in the creative music process, the exploration of mindfulness has been limited. Hence, additional studies that examine the understanding of mindfulness in the music therapy profession should be pursued.

Mindfulness is a valuable practice when evaluating a client because it keeps us in a conscious state and allows us to be in the presence with the assessed client. Bruscia's Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) is a model of client assessment based upon clinical observation, musical analysis, and psychological interpretation of the client's improvisation (Bruscia, 1989). Because this assessment focuses on the process of improvising, it is critical to be aware of each moment during the session. The assessed information is used to derive significances and insights for nonmusical areas of issues, formulate treatment goals, and develop interventions for musical and clinical processes.

Similar to the IAPs, the Developmental Individual Difference Relationship-based (DIR) model emphasizes on the importance of experience rather than memorized skills. This model, employed at Rebecca School where this study took place, followed the methodology developed by Dr. Stanley Greenspan and Dr. Serena Wieder. The basis of this approach is to help clinicians, parents, and educators to conduct a comprehensive assessment and in developing an intervention program tailored to meet the social, emotional, and intellectual areas for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other developmental challenges (<http://www.icdl.com>, 2010). As this program aims to customize the specific needs for each child, the purpose and practice of music therapy at Rebecca School also reflects upon this individualistic value, too. Because improvisation is a spontaneous activity, any changes in attendance or awareness could affect a client-therapist communication. When a therapist and a client engage in a here-and-now experience, they become mindful of their mental and physical beings through shared attention and relatedness. Social interaction or referencing could only be achieved through attentiveness and empathic understanding, which could be attained through the practice of mindfulness.

The Nordoff-Robbins approach believes that everyone has an innate responsiveness to music that can be utilized as a form of communication (Bruscia, 1989). It emphasizes the concept of the 'music child', in which every child has one's own special musical voice. Like the DIR model, the Nordoff-Robbins approach is also relationship-based (Aigen, 2005). The client is encouraged to make music with the music therapist, thus becoming an active participant and showing presence in a client-therapist relationship. This shared attention and communicative interaction aims to support the

client's expressiveness and relatedness to others. The Nordoff-Robbins therapeutic services offer improvisational music therapy for children and adults with different needs. Aigen (2005) states that one of the key concepts of Nordoff-Robbins music therapy is to achieve a state of being where both the therapist and client are living as completely as is possible in the music. The art of music as therapy is the essence of a clinical-musical experience (Aigen, 2005). Such experience is reinforced by accepting the importance of being in the moment with the client in order to motivate the client's personal growth and development, which could be reinforced by being mindful and practicing self-awareness.

The findings from the literature review, studies, therapeutic concepts and goals provide a foundation for the importance of the practice of mindfulness to increase self-awareness, nonjudgmental thinking, and appreciation for the present. When Buddha taught his students about his discovery to the path to freedom, he never asked them to revere him like an idol; rather, he invited them to discover the truth of his teachings in their own experience (Germer et al., 2005). I shall follow his wisdom to realize my own mindfulness and freedom.

## CHAPTER II

### THE RESEARCH METHOD

#### Participant

The research participant was a 12-year old male student with suggested autism spectrum disorder, who was seen in music therapy with the researcher from September 2010 to June 2011 at Rebecca School in New York City. He has a twin sister and both were premature infants. He had gone through 6 surgeries since birth. He was diagnosed with Ataxic Cerebral Palsy and Hypothyroidism and suggested ADHD, Asperger's Disorder, and Autism Spectrum Disorder. Medically, he has a weak lung and suffers from constipation issues that might affect his mood and behavior.

#### Procedure

Elan met with the researcher for two sessions per week for three months. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. All sessions were held at Rebecca School in New York City. The music room was equipped with various instruments, such as a piano, a guitar, a keyboard, drums, flute, horn, cymbal, shakers, and other percussive instruments.

Since this study's musical approach was inspired by improvisational music therapy (Fidelius, 2004; Marom, 2004), in addition to the DIR's commitment to creative and spontaneous interaction with the students, the pace of the musical activities corresponded to the student's feelings, energy level, and musical offerings. The researcher's role was to support and encourage the student in a safe and supportive environment. She and the student were engaged in an interactive music-making process

through the use of instruments and/or voices. The student was given free choices in individual improvisation or a dyad with the researcher providing musical structure.

### Data Collection

This qualitative research study employs a naturalistic design, which is an approach where the researcher does not manipulate with the settings and allows the study to take place in natural or real-world settings (Wheeler, 2005). Hence, the musical interaction between the researcher and the student happened in the here and now in order to support spontaneous flow of thought and communication to occur freely and openly.

Data collection procedures included observations, interviews, and/or the examination of documents, artworks and artifacts (Wheeler, 2005). Since this is a self-awareness thesis study, the data sources were collected and analyzed by examining the interaction and action between the researcher and the student during musical activities on the recorded videotapes. At the end of each session, the researcher kept a journal of logs to record significant details; self-inquiries, such as personal professional impressions, reactions, thoughts; and feelings that emerged from the sessions (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & McCormack Steinmetz, 1991). The day after each session, the researcher watched the videotape and wrote analytic memos (my spontaneous comments during the research process as part of the logs) by reviewing and observing the musical aspects and self-reflective concepts that materialized from the sessions (Ely et al., 1991).

### Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, I adapted the journal method for session reflection by McCollum and Gehart (2010), in which their study's participants were asked to reflect on the experience of learning mindfulness meditation and the effects that they felt afterward.

Additionally, I wrote analytic memos inspired from the recordings, a method that Marom (2004) used by extracting significant statements from the transcripts that she transcribed verbatim and then formulated themes based on those statements. Modeling after her formulation method, I analyzed the logs and analytic memos to look for motifs and/or themes at the completion of my sessions.

### Trustworthiness and Confidentiality

For privacy protection, the pseudonym, Elan, was used in place of the student's real name and only limited health conditions were discussed in the content of the thesis paper. Elan was selected for this study because he had inspired the researcher to look into her own mindfulness during the therapeutic works. There were no known risks to participating in this study. Consent forms were sent to the student's parent for participation permission. The parent could withdraw the student at any time during the course of the study without any penalty. In order to further safeguard the research's consistency, the session room, session schedule, and musical instruments were the same for the duration of the study. Attention to these details could help the student to have familiarity with the surrounding so to spend less time readjusting to a new environment.

This study has received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals from Molloy College and Rebecca School. With written permission from the Director of Rebecca School in New York City, the researcher videotaped the sessions held with the student. All videotaped recordings were kept by the researcher in a locked box and were only accessible by her and the faculty advisors. Finally, to ensure the research project credibility and the trustworthiness of my data in order to maintain a balanced and fair perspective of my analysis (Ely et al., 1991), I consulted with my faculty advisors and



received weekly peer group support throughout the analysis process, such as exploring my emotional state and receiving feedbacks. These recognitions are discussed in Chapter VI.

### Findings

I organized the findings from the data analysis by looking at themes/motifs that I categorized from the logs and analytic memos. Vignettes, a table, and a pictorial illustration were used to further describe the findings. As I reviewed the logs and analytic memos, I wrote observer's comments (ex: significant insights or speculations) to record my own thoughts and feelings (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982). These comments were useful for the creation of the table. The collective findings from the data analysis were used to extract and explore the connections between mindfulness and the emerging themes.

The chapters are mostly written chronologically, starting from the first time I met Elan and how he had inspired me to study about mindfulness to identifying the struggles and sharing these difficulties in supervision and peer group support. I prioritized the themes/motifs based on which had the most impact on my revelation and practice of mindfulness. The thesis closes with my final thoughts and personal reflection on this qualitative self-study.

## CHAPTER III

### GETTING TO KNOW ELAN

#### Our Prelude

When I started my music therapy internship at Rebecca School in September 2010, my supervisor informed me that I would become a primary therapist for one of her students currently receiving music therapy. The news brought both feelings of excitement and apprehension. It would be rewarding to follow a student's progress through the school year, but I was also anxious about my competency since my internship was still in its infancy. After working as a co-therapist with my supervisor, I had to make a choice and I chose Elan because I felt related to him in a special, insightful way.

In our first session, Elan greeted me in a welcoming manner and even remembered my name when we said good bye. I was attracted to his avid initiation and musical expressiveness (verbal and instrumental). His inquisitive mind and keen sense of musical awareness were apparent in his musical exploration in the music room. He spent a lot of time searching for and playing different instruments. However, during our sessions together, his developmental challenges sometimes prevented him from fully engaging in a musical experience. He struggled with his attention span during a musical activity or was preoccupied with scripting (repeating TV show phrases). He was hyperactive and could be easily distracted or might suddenly or unexpectedly leave in the midst of a musical dialogue. He also displayed impulsivity and showed no interest in turn-taking. Hence, Elan's music therapy goals this year were to increase his shared attention and increase inter-responsiveness and music-relatedness with the therapist.

“And now we have *another* instrument!” Elan exclaimed just a few minutes into the session. My first reaction was, “Wow, this kid sure cannot stick to one thing.” To paint a picture of my musical interaction with Elan, playing music with him was like a Tom and Jerry chase. We would be making music and he would abruptly jet off to grab another instrument from the closet. I witnessed this phenomenon many times over several sessions. Furthermore, Elan often switched from one instrument or one idea to the next without closure or resolution. In general, there was a lack of organization, concentration, and attentiveness to tasks. Here are two vignettes for illustration:

Vignette #1:

“Ooo...la fluta,” Elan stated. After a few quick huffs and puffs on a small metal flute, his eyes spotted two drumsticks. Holding the woodwind instrument between his lips, he took command of the drumsticks and began to beat on the drums.

“Beat! Beat! Beat!” the drum vibrated. A few measures in, Elan moved away from the drum and returned to the closet to look for more ideas.

“And here we have another instrument,” Elan said as he perused the closet. (April 5, 2011, 3’20”-3’55”, Session #48)

Vignette #2:

“The bells!” Elan called out as he reached for the box filled with eight colorful bells. He rested the bells on the floor and sat down. One by one, he took out the bells and rang them individually at first, and then one in each hand. “Ring, ring, ring...Ring, ring, ring,” the bells chimed. Just when the bells were getting warmed up, Elan stood up and declared his

mission to get the maracas. “Maaaracas,” he slurred slowly, matching the Middle Eastern dotted quarter and an eighth note rhythmic style. “Shake, shake, shake,” the maracas beckoned me to accompany with a Middle Eastern mode on the piano. (March 30, 2011, 5’40”-6’15”, Session #47)

In these two examples, the instruments were Elan’s eye candy that allowed him to express his musical and creative self, but in a medley-liked way.

### Candy Galore in the Music Room

For Elan, the music room was comparable to a candy store. The closets were the shelves and the instruments symbolized the sugary sweets. Any kid would love to try them all! Cannot have just ONE M&M, can we? When Elan got too excited about all the musical possibilities, he then showed difficulties in sustaining an idea. As he became overstimulated, he continued to alternate between the instruments and got more distracted than before. His actions conveyed a lack of consistency or suggested little therapeutic relatedness. Ultimately, his fleeting thought process and psychic energy were consumed by the flickering switches in his head. His intense energy made it a challenge for me to engage him fully. His actions also manifested my own disruption of flow in my music and consciousness, though it took me awhile to see this as my own countertransference, a phenomenon in which the interaction between the therapist and the client resembles a past relationship in either the therapist’s life or the client’s life (Bruscia, 1998). I saw glimpses of my past and present from observing Elan’s musical reactions, so looking into my countertransference could turn into valuable material to better understand how I carried myself in my work.

## My Countertransference

As I contemplated what interventions I could use to assist Elan in reaching his goals (to increase his shared attention and increase inter-responsiveness and music-relatedness with the therapist), I was actually sensing my own countertransference, my unresolved feelings that I unconsciously transferred to Elan. It turned out that my countertransference was my ambition to maximize productivity in a minimum time frame, as I had been taught to ensure success in life.

When Elan saw the variety of instruments in the music room, he was overwhelmed by the assortments and embraced the availabilities by spending a brief time on each instrument. Watching him was similar to seeing a mirror reflection and that shed light on my personal struggles. In my daily life, I would skip from task to task, leaving off lots of unfinished businesses executed hastily. Furthermore, juggling between academic, social, and financial commitment and responsibilities often confused my decision-making skill. The prioritizing dilemma was like falling into a spiraling abyss of uncertainty and helplessness.

Trying to figure out a strategy to resolve these struggles, my rationale insisted on *divide and conquer*, meaning I should split my attention to finish all the jobs faster. Much to my disappointment, dedicating a fraction of my concentration to each task only yielded passable results. When I was not aware that I was playing the piano with my back towards Elan, I probably missed out a lot of musical cues because of the polarized space between us. Thus, it was not a favorable way to approach my issues.

One day after a session with Elan, I suddenly recalled a wise Chinese proverb, “If you grow with melon seeds, then you will harvest melons. If you grow with bean seeds,

then you will only harvest beans.” Since I only put in minimum effort into each assignment, I should not be surprised by the substandard consequences. Additionally, limited consciousness also deprived me of the opportunity to gain self- and world- understanding. For example, a firm hand shake demonstrates more sincerity and genuineness than a fleeting brush against another’s palm, which might be interpreted as a disrespectful gesture. Only through an authentic implementation could I truly appreciate the essence of my work. This poignant revelation encouraged me to become more aware of my doings and find ways to be more mindful professionally and personally. In order to increase my relatedness with Elan, I must learn to build consciousness and be mindful to foster an authentic, supportive, and open relationship.

## CHAPTER IV

### MY BUDDING MINDFULNESS

#### My Wake-Up Call from Elan

Once I formulated my goals, it was so effortless to slip back into old patterns and practices or resume my usual routines of non-constructive multitasking. I continued to engage with Elan using my usual techniques to no avail, which meant that there was room for improvement. My contemplative processing finally discovered a thread that led to a common theme - I was not truly aware of what I was doing. I could not justify the connection behind my intervention to support Elan's ability to sustain on an initiated idea and increase musical relatedness with me. In Fidelibus's dissertation (2004), Jennifer was a music therapist who found herself playing in an habitual and unrelated way with her client and I could relate to her feelings. I tend to stay within my musical comfort zone and was not conscious of Elan's creative nexpression. To illustrate, in Session #43 (March 4, 2011), Elan spoke in a robotic way, "E-X-I-T. That's the exit song." I worked that phrase into a staccato, syncopated rhythm. When I turned around to think of what style to use next, Elan poked me to get me to notice him. I neglected his response because I was too self-absorbed on what *should* be played rather than interacting with him. But he poked me again as if to say, "Hey! You're not with me. Come back!" With this wake-up call, the struggle had been identified: being mindful of self-awareness and the client-therapist relationship with Elan was paramount to an effective clinical working relationship.

According to Siegel (2010), the term *mindful* is the state of being conscientious and intentional in what we do, being open and creative with possibilities, or being aware

of the present moment without grasping onto judgment. The practice of mindfulness enables us to be flexible and receptive and to have presence. In my analysis of the data, it seemed that my musical expectation overtook the non-musical elements, such as non-verbal responses and the physical environment. In one session, Elan continued to play the bells and did not respond to my singing, but when my music stopped, he called out, “Kim, Kim” to reach out for connection (February 18, 2011; Session #23). So, he was following my music all along because he recognized my silence, yet I was fixated on receiving a verbal feedback that I had neglected a nonverbal expression counted as a response, too.

Presence involves all senses and is vital in clinical and therapeutic work. Siegel (2010) states: “We can say that being present with others involves the experience of openness to whatever arises in reality [...] we come to acknowledge our own proclivities and in that awareness, free ourselves to move [...] with ease and will” (p.13). Through personal processing, I wondered if the practice of presence could be learned. Presence is an attainable skill by learning to loosen the grip of habit and ingrained aspects of our personality in order to become more mindful (Germer, Siegel & Fulton, 2005; Siegel, 2010).

Relieved that there is a possible way to cultivate this skill, it was still a daunting task to achieve this self-realization through internal understanding and actual practices. Learning from past experience, rather than overwhelming myself with multiple tasks, I decided to take small steps to accomplish my goals. The first step was being open to possibilities and staying in the here and now with Elan, so I could utilize music as a communication tool in order to interact in a meaningful and present way.



## Being Open and Being Present

This process requires openness, tolerance, and receptiveness. Sessions with Elan were always an adventure because there was almost always an unexpected surprise waiting to happen. While a session has a certain structure (hello song, musical interaction, and good bye song) and I was always prepared with a few familiar songs, the session's development depended on Elan's reaction and present state of mind. In the following excerpts from log transcriptions, the first musical outcome was initiated by a familiar idea Elan had introduced, but the second outcome was inspired by a spontaneous event:

Elan wanted to sing a hello-themed song, so I supported his initiation by following his lead. He brought in a precomposed song, the Carpenters' "Sing a Song". Elan sang loudly, "Sing, sing a song. Sing out loud. Sing out strong." (March 4, 2011; Session #43)

In another session (March 11, 2011; Session #44):

Elan found a Rebecca School staff photo in the room and carried the photo to the window. He was very focused on identifying the teachers he knew. I instinctively switched from the piano to the guitar because I wanted to stay with him. He became interested in the guitar and we interacted musically as I held down the chords and he strummed the strings. He made moaning sounds that were in tune to the key we were playing in. I imitated with "Mmmm..." His vigilant observation spotted a bruise on my finger. He said, "Kim's got a boo-boo." I improvised a boo-boo song on the guitar using a blues progression in A Major and I sang along, "Kim's got a boo

boo. But it's OK 'cause we're gonna make it [better]" (Elan closed the phrase).

In the first excerpt, Elan introduced a familiar, precomposed song. The tune resonated with him as he expressed the lyrics confidently and strongly (such as the lyrics implied). In the latter excerpt, my immediate intuitive decision was to join Elan by the window with a guitar to reengage him. Elan associated with me when he turned his attention to the guitar and got involved in a joint music-making experience. My openness to possibilities was partly responsible for our musical connection. I freed my thoughts to accept and work with what was presented. When Elan sang "Sing a Song", he was sharing his musical idea and when he looked at the staff photo, he was telling me the teachers he knew. Instead of taking the photo away, asking questions about it started up a conversation. Once we exchanged ideas in a musical dialogue, I was more readily able to invite him back into a music experience, such as when he strummed the guitar strings as I held down the chords.

### Mindful Practices

The concept of being open or showing presence might seem abstract because it is difficult to quantify its significance numerically. Although it is possible to count the number of call and responses in a musical dialogue or calculate the number of minutes Elan could participate and sustain in an activity, the intention of mindfulness purports a qualitative understanding and awareness, while supplementing a richer and more insightful description than numerical data could provide. Additionally, the building of a meaningful and respectful relationship should not be based on a numerical figure, but on the human connection and bonding.

There are formal and informal practices to cultivate mindfulness: formal training refers to mindfulness meditation or breathing exercises, whereas informal refers to the application of mindfulness skills in everyday life (Germer et al., 2005). I started with formal training because structure would build a strong foundation for future challenges and ventures. The idea of structure was inspired by Elan because precomposed songs and musical predictability helped to prolong his attention span, thus lessening the likelihood of losing focus. For example, learning that grounding music could fortify his concentration, I incorporated ostinato into my piano music, such as a walking bass, pentatonic scale, or repetitive chord progression. Consistency and repetitiveness relieved Elan from his decision-making tension. To further validate this intervention, whenever we concluded a session with his favorite good-bye song, “Thank You for Sharing” by Conio Loretto, he would return to the piano and sing with me. We stayed together for the remainder of the session.

### My Formal Mindful Practices

In my formal mindful training, I followed a simple breathing exercise:

Find a comfortable place to sit quietly, and assume a sitting posture that is relaxed yet upright and alert. Focus your attention on the breath as a primary object of attention, feeling the breathing in and breathing out, the rise and fall of the abdomen, the touch of air at the nostrils. Whenever some other phenomenon arises in the field of awareness, note it, and then gently bring the mind back to the breathing. If any reactions occur, such as enjoying what arose in your mind, or feeling irritated by it, simply note

the enjoyment or irritation with kindness, and again return to the experience of breathing. (Germer et al., 2005, p. 8)

Breathing is an instinctive respiratory process. It is not a learned skill, but an inborn ability to gasp for oxygen even when we try with all our might to hold our breath. However, normal breathing is different from mindful breathing, which centers on psychological rather than physiological functioning. By attuning to the flow of breath through our nostrils, into our body, and then bathing our cells with fresh oxygen, the process creates a continuous awareness of our bodies, emotions, and thoughts. Instead of rushing into my session with Elan, I would first do a brief breathing exercise to collect and cleanse my thoughts.

Once I began my formal mindful practices, I began to realize the non-salient responses that I might have dismissed before. For example, there was a musical disagreement in one of our sessions with the familiar good-bye song at the end of Session #49 (April 15, 2011):

Hoping to expand on Elan's musical expression, I suggested if we could sing the good-bye song a little differently. Elan did not like my idea. He pushed my hands away, sang the original version louder than me, and held onto the F note (the first note and the dominant of the song) on the keyboard, seemingly to overpower my *revised* version. I did not want to upset Elan as it appeared that the familiarity of the tune offered him a special meaning. After singing the original version twice, I inconspicuously ended the melodic line on Bb, instead of the original on F.

Elan did not reject my idea for he did not brush my hand away as he had done in the beginning. (Session #49)

If I had not shown empathy for Elan, I would have continued with my original approach rather than validating the significance this song had for him. Instead of pressuring Elan to achieve the goal I set, which was to share and accept musical ideas with the therapist, I honored his feelings and communicated supportively by returning to the original tune. It seemed that Elan appreciated my gesture because in the third repeat, he did not display any verbal or physical rejection against a different harmonic ending.

### My Informal Mindful Practices

Formal mindfulness training and practice are beneficial for establishing a basic foundation and self-organization for self-awareness and consciousness; but ultimately, the skills must be put into practical, daily application. That is when informal mindfulness may be implemented via any exercise that alerts us to the present moment with acceptance to cultivate mindfulness (Germer et al., 2005). As an experiment, I integrated this practice into my dinner preparation time. I no longer considered washing and chopping vegetables a chore, but experienced solace and liberation as I relished every step of the preparation process.

The preparation process resonated with my session journey with Elan. I brought vegetables (resources) to the kitchen, just as I prepared a few precomposed songs for a session. I carefully soaked the vegetables in a sink of water, swishing the verdant leaves around to feel and sense the flow of water. Metaphorically, the music room was the sink and I opened up to feel where the flow of energy would lead me. Some leaves might be imperfect with yellow spots or tainted with holes chewed by worms. I would examine the

leaves carefully for their edibility. During a session, there might be a vulnerable moment of a disconnection between Elan and me. I learned not to place blame on anyone, including myself, but to accept the changes and reevaluate the situation receptively. Running my fingers through the leaves is similar to playing a glissando on the keyboard or strumming across the guitar strings. I bonded with the natural elements. Finally, I set up a colander on my prepping station to dry the vegetables in a way that indicated the ending to a session, like “Thank You for Sharing”. Working with water was symbolic to me because it embodied flow, flexibility, and freedom. Before, I would perform the chore thoughtlessly, but now I grew to appreciate and learn to relate one of nature’s bounties (vegetables) to my therapeutic work.

## CHAPTER V

### MY INNER CRITIC

#### Identifying My Emotions and Feelings

While I continued my formal and informal practices to develop deeper presence in my sessions with Elan, I also started to acknowledge my personal feelings that bubbled up during our interaction. From my analysis of my data, most of the feelings were related to self-doubt and insecurity. For example, I would improvise a harmony to match his instrumental rhythm, such as the drum or his flute playing, but I continued to question my interventions and have reservations on their effectiveness. In one of our earlier sessions, Elan was sitting with me at the piano and he asked, “What’s that noise?” I played a repetitive bass line (C, E, Ab, G) to structure his phrase into a baffling question form. The ostinato’s purpose was to provide a grounding and controlled effect. Meanwhile, I was wondering whether the walking bass line was therapeutically helpful. Once again, I doubted my assessment.

In another session, Elan was playing the eight bells on the floor and I was playing the piano. Unsure of which musical style to apply, I stopped the music and tried to strategize my next step. I felt defeated and frustrated when I could not gather any inspiration. During this silence, Elan reached out and poked me. He wanted me to listen to him playing the bells. It turned out that a fixation on self-criticism offered less presence and availability to the here and now. Thankfully, Elan approached and sent me a friendly reminder. A reminder that I kept in my heart since then.

During sessions when I felt vulnerable and incompetent, I became hesitant or immobile in thought. This mental vagueness clouded my alertness and objective perception that gradually augmented my propensity for self-doubt. Siegel (2010) also mentions that in a feeling of helplessness, therapists might become frozen, get stuck in a state of terror, and shut down the sense of possibility as we isolate ourselves from

involvements with others and ourselves. Sometimes, I would either try to handle an issue immediately or deny/ignore it. However, neither is the best alternative. Acting in a rush meant being careless with my performance; concurrently, denial or ignorance would not solve the problem either. Shutting and moving away from Elan would limit presence, thus jeopardizing the trust value in our client-therapist relationship.

When I found myself experiencing my countertransference of feeling of uncertainty and indecision because of my multitasking issue, it became more imperative to rekindle the concept of openness. “Being open to whatever arises can sometimes create a state of wonder...and presence requires a tolerance for both uncertainty and vulnerability. It is these very features that enable us to offer help to others who struggle with their own guardedness and drives for certainty” (Siegel, 2010, p. 23). I brought up my feelings of disconnection from Elan in supervision. I explained to my internship supervisor that no matter how much I tried to match his ideas or being in his physical vicinity, I was unable to engage and sustain him in a reciprocal musical interaction. I did not deny or purposely beautify the frustration and dissatisfaction. I honestly described those moments of disengagement.

As a supportive supervisor, she listened intently and openly, never once slighted my words. Then, she would assess the situation and would provide objective and constructive feedbacks to help me process through. She also provided helpful suggestions for future interventions. For example, my supervisor recommended and encouraged the use of precomposed songs as a form of musical structure to help with Elan’s mental organization. Looking back, he did sustain the longest attention span when we sang “Thank You for Sharing”, which was a structured song that he had been familiar



with since the beginning. With the support from supervision, I opened my heart and mind to greater possibilities and I acknowledged and confronted my weaknesses. Furthermore, my sense of uncertainty could be discerned by Elan, so it was crucial for me to be flexible and accept my feelings nonjudgmentally. My personal kindness could carry over to my relationship with Elan. Siegel (2010) states that as therapists it is essential that we monitor our internal world for [...] a return to a state of presence.

### Building Self-Trust

Uncovering my self-criticism made me think about my self-confidence level. My inner negativity illustrated my lack of self-trust with my clinical competency and musical skills. Feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, and uncertainty about one's effectiveness are among the most consistently reported hazards of the psychotherapeutic profession, regardless of the experience level of the practitioner (Mahoney, 1997). Emotions that I felt, such as frustration, lack of confidence, anxiety, and nervousness were exemplified musically by my excessive use of syncopation, emphasis on block chords, and absence of a structural framework in a piece of music or the overall session organization. (Table 1)

In the past, I would avoid emotional confrontation, but at this point, stagnant management was not a purposeful option anymore.

Table 1

Parallel Effect between Emotions/Feelings and Musical Characteristics

| <b>My Emotions/Feelings</b>            | <b>Musical Characteristics</b>  |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Doubtful, Indecisive                   | Excessive use of syncopation    |
| Anxious, Nervous                       | Emphasis on block chords        |
| Defeated, Scattered, Lost, Indifferent | Absence of an overall structure |

Metaphorical symbolism weaved between these two categories. When I felt doubtful and indecisive, I used a lot of dotted notes and shifted the accents on the weak beats, causing the rhythm to sound syncopated, uneven, and dissonant. At moments when I felt anxious and nervous, grounding elements helped to provide personal mental and musical support. My strategy was emphasizing on thick, block chords for sustenance and foundation. These chords resembled tall, strong pillars that anchored my wavering emotions when Elan repeated lines from a TV show or travelled away to another spot in the music room.

Despite much effort to get Elan's attention or when he did not reciprocate a musical exchange, I felt defeated, scattered, or lost; and in times, indifferent. Running out of possible techniques to use, a white flag slowly ascended above my head. The loss of communication triggered an unprofessional thought of wishing the session would end soon. The absence of musical structure demonstrated my uneven concentration and inadequate patience to compose a harmonized tune.

Once I openly confronted my self-criticism, I began the passage of reconnecting with my inner state. Self-exploration served as a platform for tuning into my awareness and consciousness. Getting in touch with my inner voice encouraged self-love and instigated a show of sincerity. I acknowledged and validated my feelings, no matter good or bad. "Feeling trust is a state-dependent process in which the interactions with a specific other person engender a feeling that being vulnerable...is a safe way to be" (Siegel, 2010, p. 76). I would not be able to establish an authentic relationship with Elan if I continued to betray my emotions or live in denial. By accepting my vulnerabilities, realizing that my music might not always be perfect, and accepting that critical thoughts could occur, I was capable of interacting with Elan more transparently.

## The Treadmill Effect

Such as the ebb of a tide, a musical experience also has its plateaus and its peaks. A plateau with Elan entailed musical disconnection because either he persistently scripted or I froze in space. The following illustrates this scenario:

Elan played the drum set with his hands. His tempo was even and steady, maintaining a 4/4 time signature, with five quarter notes. He began to script, “One more time”, “Now your turn”, “Try again”, “Try this”, “Try it again,” or “Now the whole thing!” He probably memorized these lines from a cartoon show. I tried to open up a musical dialogue with him by singing “Elan plays the drum one more time”, since it appeared he was applying turn-taking skill into his drumming. Elan continued to self-talk, his eyes on the drums, never looked towards my direction. I was stuck.

(April 15, 2011; Session #49)

Sometimes stagnation is more intimidating than a persistent reaction. A plateau indicated no sense of direction, no flow. Like a puddle of still water, the moment sat motionlessly, turning stale and inert. Through the repetition of an incommunicative melody, the disconnection silently droned, turning the spirit of the musical space into dense warm air on a balmy summer day. Breezes got lost in the cessation of flow.

With steadfast determination to overcome this plateau, I recollected my formal and informal mindful practices and remembered the wisdom I had understood. When asked what was his most difficult obstacle to overcome in his career, American novelist Richard Stern said, “I think it’s that rubbishy part of myself [...] I’ve tried rather hard to discipline that [...] I would say that the chief

obstacle is – oneself. I can draw strength from that...they're the sources of strength” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 134-135). In this situation, my rubbish self was my inflexibility and lack of confidence; fortunately, I learned to apply my mindful practices to move out of this stuck place. In one session, Elan once again jumped from one musical idea to the next. Instead of imitating his tempo and routine with unstable syncopation and accidentals, I integrated rest notes to the music to ground the ambiance. When Elan noticed a change in dynamic, he got curious and turned around. “It’s Kim! She’s playing the piano. Hi, hi. We found you!” he exclaimed. To acknowledge the spark of our rekindled shared moment, I improvised a celebratory melody using a major key and replied, “I’m here, Elan! Thanks for seeing me.” Soon, we were making eye contact and eventually, he returned to the piano and sang “Thank You for Sharing” together.

Elan and I experienced a similar parallel process – either we allowed rigidity to override our mental openness or we let fragmentation to disrupt our flow of thoughts. As a therapist, “to be trusted in a position of leadership, it helps to advance other people’s goals as well as one’s own” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 114). Working with Elan’s therapeutic goals was like working on my own. By taking care of myself, I was also nurturing Elan’s well-being. The practice of mindfulness has shown that authentic results only happen when my mind was present and aligned with my inner state. Like running on a treadmill, there were moments of plateau. Perhaps that was needed to build up the momentum to climb to the climax. I like to interpret a plateau as a dormant energy state. There is an underlying force that just needed a little attention to light a spark. It could be

changing the instrument, varying the dynamic, or suggesting a different timbre, but in summary, the foundation of openness was necessary to find the best therapeutic choices.

### Transition – Bridging Our Moments

After the success of prevailing over the plateaus, the future was yet unpredictable. Past sessions with Elan showed me that one minute I was able to engage him, yet a split second later, he might run off to search for another interest. This happened quite frequently in the beginning of our sessions, such as this example:

Elan wanted to sing a hello-themed song, so I followed his lead. “Sing, sing a song. Sing out loud. Sing out strong,” he sang. Just when I was about to repeat the verse, Elan jetted to the instrument closet for the flute. I called him back to the piano, but he was too quick. “Ooo...another instrument!” he exclaimed. (March 4, 2011; Session #43)

His unanticipated departure still took me by surprise. I was not mentally prepared for his sudden transitions. I then got confused and flustered, which triggered my defensive and authoritative behavior - jumping after him, like a cat pouncing on a mouse.

One of the major tenets of Buddhism is impermanence, which is the belief that everything changes (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). When we resist too much, suffering occurs (Bercholz & Kohn, 1993). Like a rubber band, the more you pull it, the more pressure would eventually cripple the elasticity; finally, the rubber band snaps. Before I understood the concept of impermanence, chasing after Elan was my way to grab his attention. My intervention suffered because I did not listen to Elan, but imposed my desire instead of reflecting on his needs. “Buddhism suggests that suffering is based not

on what is happening but on one's relationship to what is happening. It is the desire for things to be different than they are that causes suffering. When one resists, and does not accept what is, one suffers" (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 35). Thus, the more I hoped Elan would change for me though he did not, the more my frustration level increased. I was not being a mindful therapist and I suffered.

Simon was a music therapist who realized his focus and skills are interdependent by finding a balance between his piano and vocal skills (Fidelibus, 2004). Like him, I was also seeking a balance of using limitation as an organizational method. On one hand, I wanted to limit Elan's options so he could focus on one idea at a time, yet I did not wish to control his musical creativity. By being open and accepting, we compromised by honoring his preference to play the flute while I invited him to play it beside me. Together, he would play the flute and I would play the piano. Our musical balance built us a respectful and supportive therapeutic relationship.

Each session was a creative process, filled with unexpected opportunities. Opening up to the changing nature of inner and outer realities made me stop resisting and welcome new frontiers. I celebrated changes and differences. Unlike a salmon that swims upstream, I swam with the flow, freely with the ripples of water.

## CHAPTER VI

### CLINICAL AND PEER SUPERVISION

#### Benefits of Clinical Supervision

As much as I credit myself for cultivating my mindfulness, I also received support from other valuable resources, namely my clinical supervision hours with my internship supervisor and academic advisors. Clinical supervision is a necessary and constructive part of the process of becoming a practicing music therapist. Forinash (2001) states:

The focus of the supervision relationship is to address the complexities involved in helping supervisees in their ongoing (and never-ending) development as competent and compassionate professionals. Supervision is a relationship, one in which both supervisor and supervisee actively participate and interact. It is a process of unfolding- not simply following a recipe, but engaging in a rich and dynamic relationship. Supervision then is also a journey, or odyssey of sorts, in which supervisor and supervisee learn and grow and from which both will very likely leave transformed in some way (p. 1).

The professional and emotional support I received during my mandatory weekly supervision greatly contributed to my training and self-exploration. It was an interactive and safe environment where I could process my struggles and feelings. My supervisor offered, but never imposed, ideas that expanded my musical and therapeutic techniques. Being a skilled therapist, she proposed an objective point of view to the concerns I expressed and since I am working in the music therapy profession, she also strongly encouraged me to use music as a therapeutic processing tool, such as improvising a piece of music on the piano to reflect on my emotions.

My supervisor has a keen sense of awareness. When she noticed an emotional issue, she would approach me honestly and genuinely. Exposing personal feelings could be intimidating, but I did not feel threatened or pressured, so I felt safe within our supervisory relationship. Gradually, I opened up my heart to her. My supervisor would attentively listen and validate my feelings. Her presence and guidance supported my journey of processing and reflecting on my inner state. Her professionalism



demonstrated the important qualities of being a good therapist – empathy, authenticity, understanding and respect. It was a lifelong lesson that would carry through my professional career.

### Benefits of Peer Supervision

I also received group supervision in school. Often, we as therapists can experience professional isolation due to feeling unsupported, not having the opportunity to discuss issues with colleagues, not having anyone to turn to for advice, not feeling able to challenge weak practices in colleagues, and not having good practice and achievements recognized and praised (Bedward & Daniels, 2005). But meeting for group supervision reduced this professional isolation because my colleagues and I were provided with a safe and trusting environment in which to address challenges that occurred during sessions or personal concerns we needed to process. Our faculty advisors served more as mediators than commentators. They opened up the platform for us to bring in ideas, gave us full autonomy to direct the flow of the group, but did not forget to carefully redirect the group dynamic down a more constructive path if the conversation might soon veer off at a tangent. The act of sharing and hearing thoughts and comments from my colleagues provided moral, emotional, and clinical support. Group supervision reduced professional isolation by promoting collaborative work, providing emotional support, building self-confidence, and fostering a professional relatedness in our music therapy field.

Throughout the course of my thesis, my advisors and peers continued to check in with me and I would openly discuss any professional or personal concerns that could affect my study. I recorded my data on the day of the session so the details were still

fresh in mind. I also reviewed my videotapes when I needed to backtrack for additional understanding. For my references, I only consulted with scholarly-written literature on the study of mindfulness. Besides my self-reflection and processing, I strived to speak from an objective and neutral point of view in regards to the importance of mindfulness in therapeutic works. Lastly, I cross-referenced my ideas with previous academic studies and I consistently received feedback from my thesis advisors, which kept the voice of my thesis fair and non-biased.

## CHAPTER VII

### SELF-REFLECTION

#### My Perception of Qualitative Research

My past research experience skewed towards a positivistic method, so doing a qualitative research was a challenge. I was so used to conducting a systematic research that being spontaneous was daunting for me. “For some of us, set structure and a lack of flexibility had been viewed as virtues or at least as necessary vices. For others, the realization that we were less flexible than we thought was one of the surprises we had to

face and to conquer” (Ely et al., 1991, p. 182). Even my thesis advisor warned me so. Nevertheless, one of the benefits of qualitative research pertains to its scholastic approach in the interaction between emotional and intellectual aspects. Its inquisitive vision goes beyond measurable equations in order to find ways of looking at life. When the researcher is actively involved in a study, the data becomes richer, more descriptive, and more expressive to the readers and to the development and understanding of the music therapy field.

Coming from a background of Excel spreadsheets and linear graphic analysis training, my mindset was more accustomed to a disciplinary derivative than embracing flexibility and the significance of human relations. This explained my awkwardness when something unexpected occurred during a session with Elan. I was a creature of total control of variables. So it was natural that I questioned my thesis approach. “This is not me,” I said in my head. Then a pale light illuminated. Perhaps I think too much with my head and not with my heart. From then on, I slowly felt with my heart as well. I started to see more positive aspects in things. I underwent a gradual evolution of thought process. Using a qualitative research method gave me the opportunity to discuss my findings with passion and delicacy. The thesis became more involved and narrative because I was the subject of the study. It made the writing more meaningful and expressive because words and not numbers were used to represent my discovery.

#### A Final Note on a Grand Piano

During my research, I discovered limited resources on the exploration of mindfulness in the music therapy profession. Mindfulness is a practice that could benefit future researchers, therapist, and clients. The positive results I experienced from my self-

study will hopefully encourage future researchers or therapists to study more about this concept. It is a promising subject that could contribute valuable attributes to the music therapy and other multidisciplinary health fields.

To conclude my thesis, I would like to illustrate my self-reflection musically and symbolically. I chose a grand piano (Appendix C) to represent the elements that I incorporated in my mindful practices thus far. To reach and maintain a state of openness requires the monitoring of these components, which are represented by the three legs of a grand piano: awareness, observation, and attunement, which I abbreviated as A.O.A. With awareness, we are bringing in a deep sense of clarity; with observation, we are seeing ourselves in the here and now; and with attunement, we are acknowledging our inner self.

While the piano body is the therapist and the keys and strings are our musical tools, the piano lid signifies openness. Mindfulness is cultivated by the support of the three pillars (A.O.A), thus even one shortened leg could create a structural imbalance that might drop the lid or cause the piano to wobble. But when the lid is fully opened, the piano sounds that reverberate from the striking of the strings are clearer and more penetrating. The prop is also a crucial piece because it upholds the weight of the lid. The prop is the acceptance. Instead of acting on autopilot or other disorganized behaviors as a defense mechanism in the face of emotional confusion, by accepting the feelings, we become more flexible and tolerant. However, if we close our emotional door, the prop drops and the piano lid shuts down. In the end, we shut ourselves from the world.

The addition of a metronome symbolizes supervision. The feedback and support received by supervisors and colleagues are crucial to keeping the therapist in check

professionally and emotionally. Outside support offers an objective evaluation or critique that the therapist might not be able to see. The steady pulse from a metronome suggests the grounding effect of human communication, an element that strengthens dependence and trust.

A proper, well-built piano has sturdy legs, a solid prop, a wide open lid to let the music sing, a functioning metronome, and tuned strings, which personify the therapist's musical crafts. Each component has its own uniqueness and contributes to the overall therapeutic experience. Although my sessions with Elan have concluded, my mindfulness journey continues. It is just the beginning of a lifelong pursuit. Mindfulness is not a skill that we can frivolously master. We live in the present every second, meaning we are consistently reminded to seize each moment openly and fully. I am still a novice and I accept that. I am grateful for the strength I hold and I strive to use it with great awareness and mindfulness.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Consent Form for a Minor's Parent/Guardian**

**Title:** An exploration of mindfulness in my music therapy sessions with a child with  
suggested autism spectrum disorder

Student Investigator:  
Kimberly Lau  
Molloy College  
garsleat@yahoo.com

Faculty Advisor 1:  
Dr. Suzanne Sorel, ~~MT-BC, LCAT, NRMT~~  
~~Molloy College~~  
~~Tel: 516-678-5000, ext. 6975~~  
[ssorel@molloy.edu](mailto:ssorel@molloy.edu)

Faculty Advisor 2:  
Evelyn Selesky, ~~MT-BC, LCAT~~



~~Molloy College  
Tel: 516-678-5000, ext. 6367  
[eselesky@molloy.edu](mailto:eselesky@molloy.edu)~~

Dear parent/guardian:

As part of the requirement for my music therapy graduate course at Molloy College, I am conducting a research study to explore my self-awareness as a music therapist. As I become more conscious of my mindfulness during my music therapy work, I would be more readily available to engage with your child musically and communicatively during the sessions. An improved interactive client-therapist relationship would also encourage your child to reach his goals more efficiently and quickly.

Your child and the music therapy intern (the researcher) have been meeting for music therapy since September 2010 and will continue to meet two sessions per week for three months and each session lasting 30 minutes. All sessions are held at the Rebecca School in New York City. The range of emotions I experience from your child's flow of thought and communication has inspired me to look into mindfulness as it relates to my professional work. The insights could help me in becoming a more competent music therapist. Participation is voluntary. You may withdraw your child at any time during the course of the study without any penalty.

All sessions will be videotaped. Only the researcher and the faculty advisors would have access to the data. For privacy protection, your child's real name is withheld and limited personal health conditions are discussed in the content of the thesis paper. There is no physical danger inherent in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at 718-219-3153. You may also contact Dr. Sorel at ~~516-678-5000, ext. 6975~~. ~~For questions about your child's rights as a participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board, Molloy College, 1000 Hempstead Ave., Rockville Centre, NY 11371, (516) 678-5000.~~

~~Signing your name below indicated that you have read and understood the contents of this consent form and that you give permit to the researcher to conduct this study with your child. Please note that, if you decide to discontinue your child's participation in the study, he may withdraw at any time after signing this form, without consequences of any kind.~~

~~Thank you.~~

~~I understand that I will receive a copy of this signed form.~~

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's Name (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B

### **Permission to Videotape**

***Title:*** An exploration of mindfulness in my music therapy sessions with a child with suggested autism spectrum disorder

Student Investigator:  
Kimberly Lau  
Molloy College  
garsleat@yahoo.com

Faculty Advisor 1:  
Dr. Suzanne Sorel, ~~MT-BC, LCAT, NRMT~~

~~Molloy College~~  
~~Tel: 516-678-5000, ext. 6975~~  
ssorel@molloy.edu

Faculty Advisor 2:  
Evelyn Selesky, ~~MT-BC, LCAT~~  
~~Molloy College~~  
~~Tel: 516-678-5000, ext. 6367~~  
eselesky@molloy.edu

Your Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's/Guardian's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I give \_\_\_\_\_ permission to videotape

\_\_\_\_\_.

(Child's name)

The videotapes will be used only for research purposes. Only the investigator and the faculty advisors would have access to the videotapes. I have already given written consent for my child's participation in this research study. At no time will his name be used.

When Will I be Videotaped?

Every session the researcher and the child meet for music therapy.

How Long Will The Tapes Be Used?

I give my permission for the videotapes to be used from the start of the project until 3 months after the study is completed.

What If I Change My Mind?

I understand that I can withdraw my child from the project at any time. Upon my request, the videotapes will no longer be used.

For Further Information:

If I want more information about the videotapes, or if I have questions or concerns at any time, I can contact the investigators at the number at the top of this form.

I understand that my signature below indicates my voluntary consent for my child to be videotaped. I understand that I will receive a copy of this signed form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's Name (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Address

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX C

**A Symbolic Grand Piano**