Can Community Music Contribute to More Equitable Societies? A Critical Interpretive Synthesis

Brydie-Leigh Bartleet[1] **· Emma Heard**[1]

Abstract

This article presents outcomes from a critical interpretive synthesis inquiry exploring whether community music can contribute to more equitable societies. Drawing on 74 cross-disciplinary articles, we identify equity-related outcomes across three key categories: outcomes to improve the immediate wellbeing and life trajectories for individuals experiencing disadvantage; outcomes relating to the development of skills, knowledge and understandings empowering individual participants to enact positive social change within their communities; and outcomes with the potential to affect the root causes of social inequity. This review provides a solid foundation for further conceptual and theoretical development within and beyond the fields of social justice research and community music. Our findings will also be helpful for translating the creative and cultural benefits that community music practice could bring to addressing social justice issues in a wide range of complex contexts.

Keywords Community music · Equity · Inequity · Equality · Inequality · Social justice · Arts-based practice

Introduction

Across the world, community music groups, arts organisations, local governments, and social enterprises are increasingly initiating community music programs that target a range of social inequities from gender-based violence to entrenched racism, from health inequity to poverty (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Hesser & Bartleet, 2020). We define community music as participatory music making by, for, and/or with a community. At its heart, community music involves the creation

✉ Brydie-Leigh Bartleet
   b.bartleet@griffith.edu.au

   Emma Heard
   e.heard@griffith.edu.au

1 Creative Arts Research Institute Griffith University, Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

of inclusive, locally-embedded, community-led opportunities for engagement in music. Rather than being characterised by a particular style, genre, medium or aesthetic, community music is distinctively reflective of its cultural context, and shaped by its participants and local setting (Bartleet, 2023). Higgins' (2012) provides a typology for defining community music according to these localised contexts, processes, and purposes, as: "(1) music of a community; (2) communal music making; (3) an active intervention between a music leader or facilitator and participants" (p. 3). While much of the literature to date has focused on the third category, the field of community music has continued to diversify internationally, resulting in increased curiosity about, and attention to, how we might develop our understanding of the first two categories through the lens of more anti-colonial approaches to community music (Bartleet, 2021; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Rakena, 2016; Sunderland et al., 2022). Given this focus on community agency, musical practices within this field customarily aspire to uphold values of inclusivity, access, equity, justice, and self-determination, even if they do not explicitly set out to do so (Bartleet, 2023). As such, this bourgeoning approach to community practice has the potential to make a significant contribution to broader social justice efforts (Bartleet, 2023; Bartleet & Pairon, 2021; Sloboda et al., 2020).

The body of research that accompanies this growing field of practice provides a compelling, yet highly disparate, evidence-base for the ways in which community music could have an impact on complex social justice issues, such as social inequity (see Bartleet, 2023; Yerichuk & Krar, 2019). However, much of this research occurs in an isolated manner and tends to focus on individual, interpersonal and community-level outcomes, rarely highlighting how these relate to macro, structural-level impacts where equity-related change occurs. While some studies are framed around social change, they tend to consider outcomes from music programs in terms of behaviour or symptoms rather than their potential to tackle persistent exclusion and entrenched inequity (Bates & Davis, 2004; Cespedes-Guevara & Dibben, 2021; Fancourt & Finn, 2020; Wilson & MacDonald, 2019). This means there is a key gap in current understandings about how community music might contribute to addressing entrenched social inequity.

As part of a major Australian Research Council (ARC) study called the *Creative Change Project* (https://creativechange.org.au/), this article aims to synthesise current literature to develop a solid foundation for conceptual and theoretical development around whether community music can help address entrenched social inequity. In our study we define social inequity as avoidable, unjust, and therefore inexcusable, disparities in the resources, opportunities, rewards, and rights a person has based on their social, economic, demographic or geographic position (Braveman et al., 2018; Golden, 2022; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1995). The foundations of social inequity are structural and relate to social systems of power that cause certain groups to thrive at the expense of others. In contrast, social equity means that every person, regardless of their position, has a fair and just opportunity to reach their fullest potential and live a fulfilled life (Heard et al., 2023). To achieve such social outcomes requires addressing foundational/systemic causes of inequity, such as poverty and discrimination, and their consequences.

The synthesising goals of this article are echoed by Sloboda (2019) who notes there is limited understanding of the effectiveness of different cultural interventions and a need to explore meta-level constructs that can support investigations into the social impacts of music. Bringing together studies that explore social impacts challenges us to consider how music can support structural, systemic change and inform policy development and cross-sector collaboration in this area (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020). To take up this challenge, we used a systematic approach to conducting a critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) to answer the research question: *Can community music programs play a role in strengthening social equity?* A CIS approach was important given the disparate and cross-disciplinary nature of the literature and the broad and diverse ways in which both community music and social equity are explored.

Methodology

Drawing on principles of qualitative inquiry and systematic review methodology, CIS is designed to support integration of qualitative and quantitative data for the purposes of understanding a phenomenon (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). This approach was appropriate given we were interested in studies exploring outcomes that demonstrate how community music programs might contribute towards more equitable societies. Our approach is consistent with emerging best practice in conducting and reporting CIS reviews in the social sciences (Depraetere, et al., 2021).

Researcher Positionality

Like all research projects, literature reviews are influenced by the positionality of the research team, their disciplinary backgrounds, values and assumptions, and their goals for the project (Harrison, 2020; Pfurtscheller & Wiemers, 2022). Bartleet is a qualitative community music scholar, practitioner and educator with a first-generation migrant history and a long-standing interest in the arts and social justice having grown up in apartheid South Africa and worked alongside Australian First Nations' communities for 15 years. Heard is a non-Indigenous Australian qualitative health and equity researcher with interests in arts-based research methods.

Our strategy is consistent with best practice approaches and included interrater checking, data extraction that incorporated study limitations, and quality appraisal. We engaged with an international group of experts to further ensure we were asking relevant questions, identifying an appropriate sample of articles, and conducting the review with rigour. We acknowledge that our analysis is influenced by our qualitative research expertise, constructivist standpoint, and work as advocates for the arts. Choosing a CIS methodology allowed us to draw on our experience and knowledge in the areas of equity and music to support our analysis. Researcher disciplinary knowledge and interpretation is a critical aspect of the CIS methodology and our academic backgrounds and interest meant we were uniquely placed to conduct this research, with a comprehensive knowledge of community music literature

and practice, coupled with solid understanding of equity. While being advocates for the arts creates some bias in our judgements, it also supports criticality as we seek to challenge the field to become stronger and more rigorous.

Search Strategy

Our strategy began with a comprehensive search of five cross-disciplinary databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, CINAHL and JSTOR). Key terms 'music' and 'song' were searched with Boolean code AND key terms relating to social equity, see Table 1. Terms were chosen in consultation with a creative arts discipline librarian and after multiple trials to ascertain which key terms identified the most relevant articles. While we were interested in community music specifically, narrowing the search term in this way significantly limited the results; as noted earlier community music is a broad field and practice extends beyond 'interventionalist' approaches. Likewise, terminology around 'community music' varies greatly across the world, so it was important to ensure we did not miss a diversity of practices by limiting our searches to this term. Similarly, through trials and expert consultation, we understood that outcomes related to social equity were described in a range of ways across the literature. Given the diverse nature of our topic and CIS approach it was imperative that we also conducted hand searches of reference lists, key authors and journals, and expert consultation (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

Consistent with the CIS approach, we did not attempt to capture all relevant literature that reported equity-related outcomes of community music programs. Nor were we aiming to capture all literature exploring community music in particular contexts or with a specific group. Rather, our search strategy aimed to use a systematic approach to identifying potentially relevant outcomes-focused literature to "provide a sampling frame" to answer our research question (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006, p. 6). The search strategy and selection of included articles were necessarily iterative to create a final sample of articles that contributed to our development of an understanding about how community music may contribute to equity-related outcomes (Depraetere et al., 2021).

Literature Selection

Our search strategy identified a total of 5401 records, with 4020 removed during initial screening for duplicates and relevance. The title and abstracts of the remaining 1381 records were assessed to exclude articles focused on non-participatory

Table 1 Search terms

Music*	Equity, inequit*
Song	Equality, inequalit*
Songlin*	Disadvantag*
	Disparit*
	"Social justice"
	"Social impact"
	"Social change"

music (for example, audience reception research). In contrast, participatory music making does not make a distinction between an artist and the audience, "there are only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role" (Turino, 2008, p. 26; 2016) (for example, community choir rehearsals, youth hip hop workshops in community centres, or songwriting sessions in a refugee camp). These participants might then perform for an audience (as was the case in a number of the included studies), but we excluded articles where the primary focus of the research was not on active music making. We also excluded formal, curriculum-based music education and individual clinical music therapy as these are fields beyond the scope of community music, as well as other ineligible articles such as book reviews and editorials (1015 removed). These parameters were put in place for reasons of scope and focus on the research question. This process was conducted by one author using literature organisation program Covidence and reviewed by the other author. We then screened the full texts of these 366 records against the following inclusion criteria: (1) describing *outcomes* of a community music program; (2) full texts in English; and (3) reporting methods and primary data. We emphasise the word 'outcomes', in recognition that a large amount of research in the field of community music covers relevant topics and projects, but does not specifically report on outcomes per se. This resulted in the exclusion of 146 records. We then used an iterative, purposive sampling strategy to support our theoretical development (Depraetere et al., 2021). This process involved considering reported outcomes in relation to our understanding and definition of social equity (based on health and social justice literature, as described above). Two authors independently reviewed the 220 records over three rounds for inclusion focused on equity-related outcomes, using discussion to reach consensus on the final sample of 74 articles (these article are identified by an * in the reference list) (Fig. 1).

Data Extraction

We extracted data based on country, context of the program implementation, program details, program participants, study aims, methods, outcomes, limitations, and ethical approval. Data extraction was conducted by one author and checked by another author to ensure accuracy and consistency (a summary of this data is provided in the electronic supplementary material available via OSF: https://osf.io/mw8gn/files/osfstorage/6594c20d2a656075390bf133).

Quality Appraisal

To better understand the implications of the body of literature, we conducted a quality appraisal of all 74 included articles using The Joanna Briggs Institute toolkit (The Joanna Briggs Institute, 2017). Consistent with our CIS approach, our focus was not on judging individual articles against standards for inclusion or exclusion purposes, thus we do not comment on the quality rating of each included article. Rather the appraisal tool was used to support our "critical scrutiny" of the entire
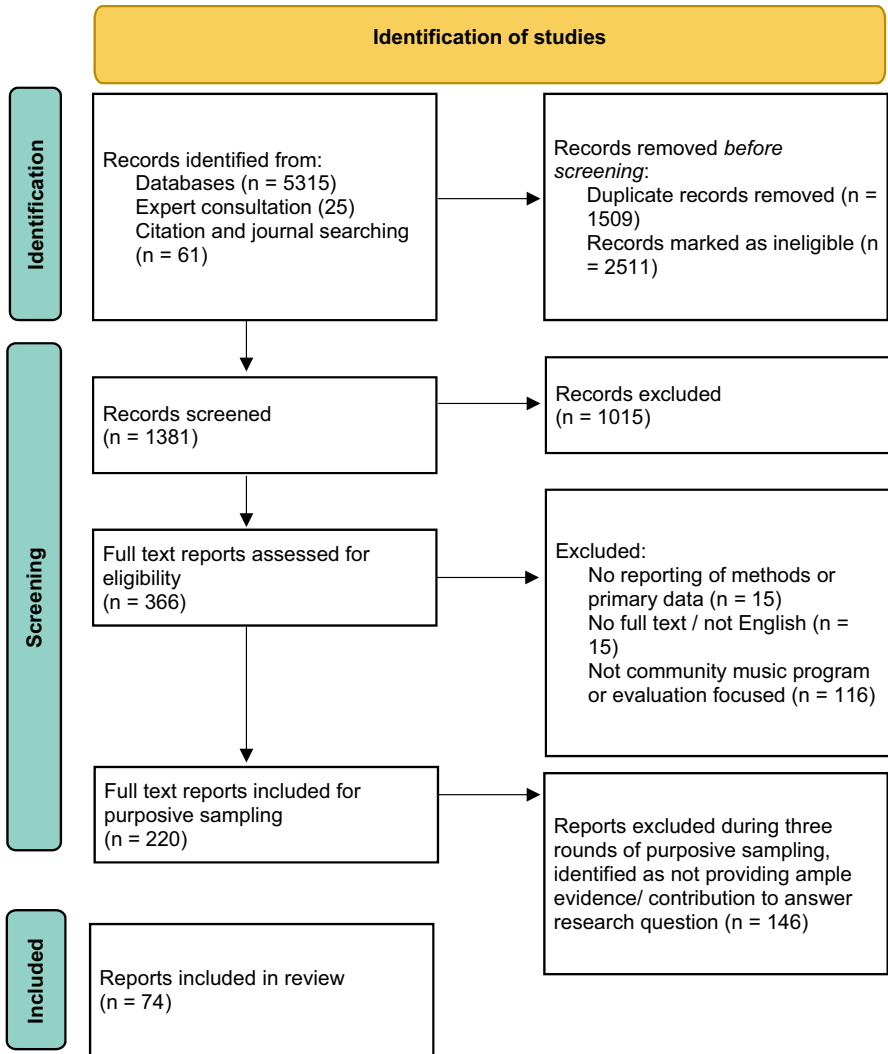
Fig. 1 Study selection flow chart

body of literature, which we comment on in the findings (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006, p. 13). Both author's independently conducted the quality appraisal check-list with 10% of the sample to ensure consistency; discrepancies were resolved by discussion. One author then completed the check-list with the rest of the sample.

Analysis

We drew on principles of constructivist grounded theory to guide our analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This included initial, inductive coding whereby one author read

each article in detail coding openly for outcomes reported in both first order constructs (primary data) and second order constructs (article author/s' interpretations). These initial codes were reviewed by and discussed with the second author to establish initial groupings of, and relationships between, codes. This resulted in a set of themes that organised data into three overarching categories outlined below. One author then conducted a second round of focused coding, re-reading each article and coding to themes under this set of overarching categories. We then reviewed the focused coding as a team to further refine categories and investigate the relationships between each category. These codes were then shared with a group of international experts to ensure their applicability to culturally diverse frames of understanding in the field.

Findings

Summary of Identified Body of Literature

The final sample of 74 articles reported on 66 separate programs in Afghanistan, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia (13), Canada (4), Columbia (2), East Timor, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Norway (3), Palestine, Slovenia, South Africa (2), The Gambia, Türkiye, UK (12), USA (16), and one program across Bosnia, Kosovo and the UK. Programs were conducted in a range of settings including aged care, community, arts / music organisations, housing organisations, disability support, healthcare, prisons, refugee/ asylum seeker detention, school / higher education, youth detention, and youth support. Most studies (47) were qualitative and drew on a range of methods and methodologies including case study, ethnography, practice-based and practice-led research (including song writing and lyric analysis and participatory film making), interviews, and focus groups. Twelve studies used mixed-methods and fifteen used quantitative methods. A detailed summary of each individual article is available in the electronic supplementary material via OSF: https://osf.io/mw8gn/files/osfstorage/6594c20d2a656075390bf133.

Limitations of Identified Body of Literature

Consistent with previous literature reviews exploring arts-based programs, the identified studies included small sample sizes with limited longitudinal insights. This is a necessary characteristic of explorations of arts programs and speaks to the importance of reviews such as this that bring together findings from multiple small-scale studies (Sloboda, 2019). Collectively, the studies included in our review involve up to 2000 participants, but study sizes range from 1 through to > 300. Notably, participants are diverse, including older people experiencing disadvantage, young people in detention, neurodiverse and neurotypical children, refugees and asylum seekers and others. We have included participant and study details throughout the findings section (additionally, the electronic supplementary material via OSF https://osf.io/mw8gn/files/osfstorage/6594c20d2a656075390bf133 provides details specific to individual studies). Many of the identified

articles were limited in the reporting of methodological processes making it difficult to judge quality and rigour of reported outcomes, supporting the call to improve evidence in arts-based research more broadly (Fancourt & Finn, 2020). During our quality appraisal process, we identified minimal in-depth reporting of researcher positionality. Without an understanding a research team's worldviews, values and motivations, and direct roles and involvement in a program, it is difficult to judge the rigour of a study (qualitative or quantitative) and contextualise reported outcomes.

These limitations notwithstanding, we identified a potential for community music programs to support equity-related outcomes in three key ways: by supporting immediate wellbeing of individuals experiencing disadvantage; by supporting people to develop skills and knowledge to create positive change within their communities; and by challenging social, structural foundations of inequity (see Fig. 2). The key outcomes reported in each individual article are provided in electronic supplementary material via OSF: https://osf.io/mw8gn/files/osfstorage/6594c20d2a656075390bf133.

Outcomes for Individuals Experiencing Disadvantage

Most of the identified studies reported positive outcomes for individual participants experiencing disadvantage including wellbeing and social connection, identity formation, self-acceptance and reimagined futures, and confidence and empowerment.
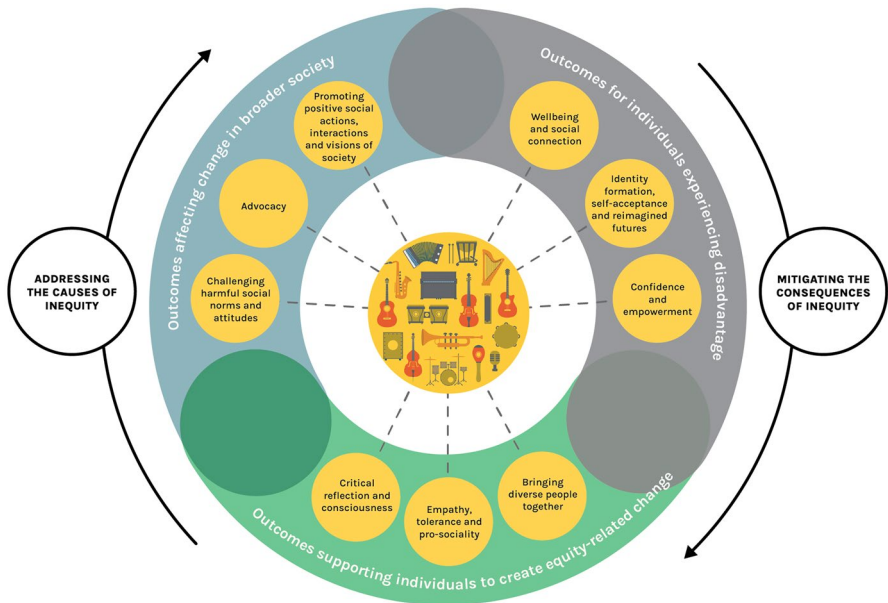

Fig. 2 Summary of findings

Wellbeing and Social Connection

The articles in our sample reported outcomes related to wellbeing including a positive way to spend time, opportunities to practice emotional regulation and positive shifts in mood, and improvements to general health and wellbeing. Participants in detention settings reported experiencing a sense of escape from hostile and challenging physical and social environments. For example, a qualitative study (that included an auto-ethnographic component) explored music-making among refugee women in Slovenia and found that "music enabled the creation of parallel and more manageable worlds within the highly controlled environment of the refugee centres" (Bartulović & Kozorog, 2017, p. 46). Some articles in our sample tested outcomes related to cognitive development including IQ, neuroplasticity, concentration and attention, regulation, language, and numeracy and literacy with mixed results. Transferable skill development, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, time management, persistence, and engagement with school, was also identified as a key outcome related to wellbeing across the articles (Barbaroux et al., 2019; Brown, et al., 2017; Brown, et al., 2018; Kraus et al., 2014; MacGlone et al., 2020; Osborne, et al., 2016; Williams & Berthelsen, 2019).

Articles further reported positive outcomes related to social connection including bonding relationships between family, peers and people with different social locations that provided emotional and practical support beyond a program (although this finding was not universal within or across programs), as well as bridging relationships that led to new opportunities. At times, the reported music programs appeared to play a role in developing and strengthening a sense of community beyond the boundaries of the program.

Identity Formation, Self-Acceptance and Reimagined Futures

Identify formation, self-acceptance and affirmation were identified as important outcomes for individual participants across our sample of articles. Participants across various studies indicated that the programs provided opportunities to critically self-reflect, question social stereotypes, and to develop new identities both musically and otherwise. This identity formation, as well as optimism and positive emotions discussed earlier, supported participants to reimagine their futures and possibilities for their lives with a sense of agency and hope. For example, a mixed-methods study involving 15 music programs conducted across eight youth justice settings in the UK reported:

> Where [the programs] were most successful, the activities seemed to increase young people's confidence as well as their knowledge and skills, in some cases offering real hope for a differently imagined future where creativity has a part. (Daykin et al., 2017a, 2017b, p. 955)

This notion of identity formation and affirmation is further demonstrated by a participant quote from a qualitative study exploring the implications of art-based groups that integrated participants with mental health concerns and non-clinical community members:

> Music allows me listen to myself, to my desires, to my needs, I know what is right for me. (Nitzan & Orkibi, 2021, p. 5)

These outcomes appeared to be linked to program design and pedagogical approaches that centred participants' self-expression, interests and decision-making. Other articles suggested that at times community music programs were important for people from disadvantaged groups to re-claim control of their identities. This was highlighted by the author of an ethnographic article exploring the outcomes of a choir established with people with learning disabilities in the UK:

> That a group of people defined as having learning disabilities were discussing the nuances of self-confidence and referring to positive aspects of self-presentation is highly significant. Their conversations illustrate the reductive nature of labelling and that, despite the challenges of exclusion and marginalisation identified earlier, their lives, like those of many others, can feature moments of personal growth, change and affirmation. (Hassan, 2017, p. 221)

Outcomes related to identity formation, self-acceptance and affirmation were closely associated with the development of confidence and empowerment.

Confidence and Empowerment

Many articles discussed outcomes related to building confidence and a sense of empowerment, which was commonly linked to public performances, the production of a recording, or other tangible creations. This is evidenced in a quote from a participant of a choir in a children's home with young people who had experienced trauma. The study included post-qualitative interviews with all 14 participants:

> People have told me I will get nowhere in life because of this and that. But now, I can tell them, look what I did! I can make the best of my future if I just go on and do my best. (van Rooyen & dos Santos, 2020, p. 90)

Overall, these outcomes for individuals may work to mitigate some of the consequences of social inequity by supporting the immediate wellbeing and social connections of people who experience disadvantage, and thus experience disproportionate poor health, wellbeing and other life outcomes. Further, in some cases the identified community music programs may have helped participants "feel more equal… thus enhancing their quality of life" (Cheung et al., 2019, p. 4420). However, many of these individual outcomes were reported with little attention to the foundational causes of inequity in the participants' lives. A smaller number of studies in our sample identified outcomes that supported participants to understand these foundational causes of inequity and enact positive change within their communities.

Outcomes Supporting Individuals to Create Equity-Related Change

Under this category, outcomes are related to empowering individual participants with the skills, knowledge and understandings to make positive changes with the potential for shifting social inequity within their communities.

Bringing Diverse People Together

Outcomes identified in our sample highlight the way community music programs brought people from diverse backgrounds, identities and beliefs (including people with different positions of power and privilege) together in ways that developed "unity" within the group based on equity and respect (Doxat-Pratt, 2021, p. 296; Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019, p. 1370; Tapson et al., 2018, p. 300; van Rooyen & dos Santos, 2020, p. 94). These positive experiences of working together with people from different backgrounds were attributed to the way music allowed participants to find commonality in their experiences. Articles described music as an "international language" (Sunderland et al., 2015, p. 12; Weston & Lenette, 2016, p. 126) that could connect people from different cultures and walks of life with the potential for "breaking down barriers, whereby benefiting society" (Tapson et al., 2018, p. 300). For example, participants reported feeling "equal" in a number of studies that brought people with mental illness and/or learning difficulties together with others (Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2020, p. 357; Mangaoang, 2021, p. 287; Nitzan & Orkibi, 2021, p. 8; Simpson, 2017, p. 362).

Cross-cultural learning was also identified with articles highlighting how music programs supported a "politics of inclusion" (Weston & Lenette, 2016, p. 125) and created awareness of and respect for cultural diversity among participants. One qualitative study based in Timor Leste described the potential for a community music program to influence improved relationships with foreigners beyond the program:

> The potential for improved relationships between Timorese and foreigners was a strong theme, both in terms of immediate relationships and also as part of a larger perspective on relationships with people from outside this isolated community … 'This is very good for us, especially for the young people … a positive change, as we can work together with … foreign people, and it can make us not racist'. (Dunphy, 2013, p. 133)

Bringing diverse people together and cross-cultural learning were associated with development of empathy, tolerance and pro-sociality, all of which have important implications for social equity.

Empathy, Tolerance and Pro-sociality

Some articles specifically discussed the building of empathy, tolerance and pro-sociality as outcomes of community music programs, often developed between participants as a result of the programs bringing diverse people together around a mutual experience and/or goal (Cao et al., 2021; Hesnan & Dolan, 2017; Nitzan & Orkibi, 2021; van Rooyen & dos Santos, 2020). One study attempting to measure empathy and pro-sociality failed to capture significant positive shifts; however, the situational task-based methodology raised questions about whether the approach was nuanced or contextual enough to capture change (Cespedes-Guevara & Dibben, 2021). In several articles, authors surmised that the development of empathy and tolerance could translate into participants' lives more broadly, inspiring them to enact more equitable interactions and relationships (Cook et al., 2019; Howell et al., 2019; Knotts &

Gregoria, 2011). To demonstrate, in post-program feedback, a student said of a choir performance by the Men's Gay Chorus of Los Angeles, "Honestly, I learned to be a little more accepting and less judgmental" (Knotts & Gregoria, 2011, p. 77).

Critical Reflection and Consciousness

Articles in our sample further drew attention to ways community music programs supported participants in the development of critical self-reflection and at times critical consciousness. This included the "development of a richer perspective about one's life…" (Ascenso, 2021, p. 8) and supporting participants to "critically think about their position in society" (Evans, 2019, p. 29). Articles identified several ways in which this reflective practice empowered some participants to see themselves as advocates and change makers "called to act" (Knotts & Gregoria, 2011, p. 24) and to "contribute to making [their worlds] more accepting and fairer place[s] to live" (Howell, 2021, p. 365). For example, in an ethnographic study of a program conducted with school students in Canada, the author writes:

> The graduates I spoke with 'discovered' things about themselves through the power of music, and also wanted to use the power of music to try and better the world. (Mantie, 2008, p. 479)

These outcomes related to empathy, tolerance, and critical consciousness may give participants the experiences, skills, knowledge and understandings needed to explore the foundational causes of inequity and move towards making change. The smallest number of articles in our sample discussed the ways community music initiatives strived to address these foundational causes of inequity.

Outcomes Affecting Change in Broader Society

Outcomes reported within our sample suggest that community music programs may have the potential to affect change by challenging harmful social norms, acting as advocacy tools, and promoting socially-just actions, interactions and new visions of equitable societies.

Challenging Harmful Social Norms and Attitudes

Some articles described the way community music programs worked to challenge entrenched social norms that cement inequity by providing a space to publicly perform non-traditional roles and act outside social expectations related to gender and cultural background. For example, a qualitative study that included elements of auto-ethnography described outcomes of a community music program that began as informal music-making in a refugee setting and developed into a touring band:

> Knowledge of Bosnian musical traditions [were] thus used to contradict conservative ideologies ... A part of their struggle was however also connected with gender roles. … [W]omen contributed not only to defending gender equality, but also to improving their own life (and the lives of their families and friends) and

enabled the creation of less-stereotypical images of [Bosnia and Herzegovinian] in Slovenia. (Bartulović & Kozorog, 2017, p. 48 and 50)

The challenging of gender stereotypes was also identified as outcomes of Gay and Lesbian Association (GALA) performances. For example, in a study that involved pre- and post-qualitative surveys ($N = 103$) and observation with the audience of a performance by the Men's Gay Chorus of Los Angeles, one student commented, "I learned not all gay men are feminine and flamboyant" (Knotts & Gregoria, 2011, p. 76). Other articles drawing on the experiences of people in gender diverse choirs highlighted goals of emphasising the harm caused by gender and sexuality discrimination. In a qualitative study using interviews, observation and document analysis to explore the role of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender choruses in addressing anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence, the author states:

[M]any singers I interviewed expressed the necessity of performing … to remind audiences that self-destruction and suicide are forms of homophobic violence that result from anti-gay sentiment. (Schattenkirk, 2014, p. 91)

Articles in our sample further discussed program goals and outcomes related to challenging negative stereotypes by promoting a "positive image" of people who are disadvantaged (Bird, 2017, p. 197). This was often achieved through aesthetically compelling public performances that showcased strengths and talents while challenging people's beliefs about the skills, contributions, and ways of being of these groups. This is exemplified in the below quote from a qualitative study that used surveys with audience members ($N = 67$) at two concerts, and focus groups with participants ($N = 4$), teachers ($N = 2$) and parents ($N = 5$) to explore the outcomes of an extra-curricular music education program including young people with "special needs" in Finland:

I was surprised how well the performers did. I was expecting more mistakes. [The concert] surpassed my expectations, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. … It is a rather new phenomenon that the students' skills are appreciated. Earlier, it was valued if a person with special needs had the courage to perform. There is an essential difference. (Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2020, p. 358)

However, as noted by Baker and Green (2018, p. 17) in their mixed-methods exploration of visually impaired musicians' self-identities in relation to community music participation, this approach was challenged as being counterproductive in some contexts:

In turn, community music groups linked to disabilities can lead to the development of negative perceptions in wider society. For these protagonists, 'If you are good enough, there are no barriers [to musical success]'. Indeed, the concept of a disabled community choir or a 'blind' orchestra is counterproductive.

Advocacy

Beyond challenging discrimination and harmful social norms, some programs acted as tools for advocacy to promote awareness and action in relation to key

issues faced by disadvantaged groups and aimed to draw attention to injustices resulting from national policy (Boeskov, 2020; Sunderland et al., 2016). This is demonstrated in the below quote from an ethnographic study exploring the significance of an instrumental music and dance program conducted for young people in a refugee camp in Palestine:

> For the Palestinian refugees, asserting their national identity through performances of Palestinian music and dance is a way of struggling against the dominating forces to which they are subjected, e.g. the State of Israel and the Lebanese government, which keep them in a marginal position, barred from entry into the land they consider their homeland and deprived of fundamental civil rights in Lebanon. (Boeskov, 2020, p. 14)

Another study using observation, interviews and focus groups with participants (numbers not reported) of a choir established with people with a disability in response to an incident of disability hate crime in Ireland found:

> [The public performance] embodied the notion that, above all, discrimination and marginalisation are collective issues that can be and need to be tackled by a community. (Hassan, 2017, p. 215)

Promoting Positive Social Actions, Interactions and Visions of Society

Some articles included anecdotal feedback about the positive impact of these efforts on shifting perceptions of audience members and encouraging action, for example "get[ting] involved with helping more people" (Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019, p. 1370) and being "moved to open acceptance of trans people" (MacLachlan, 2020, p. 202). A qualitative study (including interviews with 10 program performers and observation of performances) exploring the impact of two community music programs which aimed to encourage social change among high school students found that audiences had been inspired to contribute to creating a more equitable world in a range of ways:

> [A] spoken word artist and activist from Toronto, notes how the organisation's global tours have inspired numerous global youth to formulate their own youth-led initiatives or join other social collectives, which are dedicated to eradicating human misery. In fact, the artists' activism has spurred youth to start chapters of Amnesty International in their schools. (Porfilio & Gorlewski, 2012, p. 60)

Articles also discussed outcomes related to practicing, promoting and modelling positive social interactions between people and groups beyond the program. For example, a reflective article exploring three music programs in divided cities, surmises that ethnically mixed bands can support equity by role modelling collaboration and peace:

Ethnically mixed bands offer a way to experiment with a different kind of social life without needing to call attention to it, and a way to be 'normal' in an abnormal situation. (Howell et al., 2019, p. 340)

Other articles suggested the potential for cross-cultural, community music to support positive relationships and connections among local communities but also in relation to national and international politics:

[Afghanistan National Institute of Music's] international performances showcased Afghanistan's rich musical heritage, and communicated that 'there was more to Afghanistan than the violence reported on the news [and that] Afghans and their many friends in the international community together were bringing the country back to life'. (Howell, 2021, p. 369)

In detention contexts, community music programs have been seen to positively affect the social environments beyond the boundaries of the program by (in participants' words) "keep[ing] the violence down" thus making the prison "a more peaceful place" (Doxat-Pratt, 2021, p. 192 and 198). Programs have also supported positive relations between prisoners and staff, which often centre around power imbalance and hostility. An ethnographic study that included observation and interviews with 10 music facilitators in prisons across Norward noted:

[C]offee breaks offered a chance for the facilitators and members of the choir, and prison staff, to mingle over coffee and cake that had been freshly baked that day by one of the members of the choir. (Mangaoang, 2021, p. 281)

Several articles discussed the way community music programs may promote new visions for more equitable societies. This included young people reflecting on the misogyny and violence commonly portrayed in rap music and committing to writing "more positive" music (Evans, 2019, p. 27), and providing "visible manifestation of the changes" in relation to peace, gender equity, and social acceptance of diverse sexualities (Bartulović & Kozorog, 2017; Bird, 2017; Howell, 2021, p. 368). For example, one participant of a qualitative study exploring LGBTQI choirs in Aotearoa New Zealand stated that their participation in a choir contributed to "creating the type of world we want to live in" (Bird, 2017, p. 202). Four articles described how in some contexts this re-imagining was related to showcasing, preserving, re-invigorating and re-connecting with culture and history (Bartleet et al., 2018; Dunphy, 2013; Howell, 2021; Porfilio & Gorlewski, 2012). Several other articles described a related approach exploring the way community music programs could facilitate people from disadvantaged groups to become visible role models for their communities.

Discussion

In this article we have sought explore the potential for community music to strengthen social equity. To answer this question, we identified three overarching ways in which community music might work to address inequity. First, many of the

identified articles point to immediate positive outcomes for individuals who experience disadvantage in society. This is consistent with a wealth of literature demonstrating that participation in music may support health and wellbeing in a range of contexts, including when social inequities exist (Clift et al., 2008; Daykin et al., 2013; Daykin et al., 2017a, 2017b; Hallam & Himonides, 2022; Lenette & Sunderland, 2016; McCrary, et al., 2022; Moreno-Morales et al., 2020). Relatedly, we identified a range of reported outcomes with the potential to positively influence a person's quality of life and/or life trajectory including leadership and teamwork, social connection, confidence and empowerment and opportunity (Hill, et al., 2022; Hollander & Quinn, 2016). However, there is a lack of longitudinal understanding about the impact of these outcomes across a person's life. Without a focus on the structural causes of inequity, this work runs the risk of mitigating consequences but doing little to create transformative change. Further, it is important to consider if programs focused solely on providing immediate wellbeing outcomes for people who are disadvantaged distract attention from the root causes of inequity, i.e. power and privilege (Westerlund et al., 2021). Moreover, to achieve these aims, these programs need to be sustained over time in order to lead to more lasting changes, which is sometimes challenging given the precarious funding and policy climates for such community music work (Schippers, 2018). These are important considerations for researchers, community practitioners and artists using music, particularly those positioning their work in relation to social equity and social justice.

Findings from our second and third themes highlight a potential for community music to play a role in strengthening empathy, supporting people to understand world views different to their own, and developing critical consciousness and reflectivity which, for some participants, appeared to support empowerment to advocate for and enact positive change beyond the program. These findings demonstrate that in addition to supporting health, wellbeing and skill development for individuals, community music programs may have the potential to support people in recognising structural causes of inequity in their lives and society more broadly and empowering them to address these. Broader literature from social justice research, development, health, and education demonstrates the role of power in entrenched inequity, and there is emerging attention being paid to the role of reflexivity and critical consciousness in shifting power dynamics that lie at heart of social inequity (Heard, et al., 2020; Westerlund et al., 2021). In bringing this body of literature together, our review draws attention to the compelling potential for music to make societal social-justice oriented change, but it also highlights the constraints in current research and the remaining gaps in our understanding about *how* that change happens. As highlighted by the limitations of the identified articles, there remains an important gap in the literature about understanding how individual outcomes might flow upstream to these macro, structural levels.

Challenges for Future Research

This review has illumined a number of pertinent challenges that should be explored further if we are to better understand the role of community music in supporting

social equity. First, we need to better understand and contextualise the impact of (relatively) small programs on societal change. Any impact that community music programs may have is not achieved in isolation from a wider range of contextual factors affecting the participants' lives and the communities within which the programs are conducted; they are a piece of a complex puzzle (Balfour, 2009; Mantie, 2008). Understanding the impact of music and the arts on social equity will likely not be achieved using traditional intervention evaluations such as randomised control trials. Nor will we necessarily come to deeper contextual understandings of change through traditional approaches to pre- and post-program outcomes studies. Rather we need to develop approaches to studying community music *in action*, that account for music's situated, contextual, and relational nature (DeNora & Ansdell, 2014; Turino, 2016).

Our review highlights the disparate nature of the field of community music with contributions from disciplines including social justice research, community development, health, education, youth and child development, psychology and cultural studies. One of the central challenges to identifying studies for this review was the diverse language used to describe equity-related investigations and outcomes. It is important for cross-disciplinary researchers to develop a shared language that will support synthesis and allow for theoretical developments drawing on a body of research as a whole.

Finally, for this field of research to advance further, there needs to be a greater engagement with critical social theories that support understanding and translation into practice. This will bolster insights in the third category of our analysis and assist in addressing the structural causes of social inequity.

Limitations of This Review

With this review we have attempted to bring together a large and disparate body of research to explore the equity-related outcomes of community music programs conducted in a wide range of contexts. Due to the wide scope of our review, our approach was necessarily limited in several ways. We looked specifically at programs with aspirations to provide inclusive, locally-embedded, community-led opportunities for engagement in music. Of course, other modes of engaging with music (for example, listening to others perform) are also potentially impactful for a range of equity-related outcomes that we have only been able to briefly highlight in the third section of our findings (DeNora, 2000, 2013; Mantie, 2022; Silvia, 2019). Given our aim in this CIS, we specifically focused on outcomes studies, meaning that a large body of literature commonly cited within the field of community music is not included. We further recognise the limitations of our search terms given the broad scope of cross-disciplinary language used to investigate and describe concepts related to social equity and genres of music. Our goal was to bring together knowledge from a range of disciplines and perspectives to contribute to the dialogue about community music and equity. Consistent with our CIS approach, we did not aim to capture a complete sample of one particular topic or approach to music making. Finally, our review is limited to studies

published in English and thus does not capture a wealth of knowledge from particular international contexts.

Conclusions

This review highlights the potential for community music to play a key role in promoting social equity, and illuminates gaps in our understanding about *how* this work might affect broader change; these are important insights for the broader field of social justice research. We have provided a solid foundation for further conceptual and theoretical development within and beyond the fields of social justice research and community music. This review emphasises the need for a critical consideration of the kinds of outcomes that are possible through community music, and the extent to which these outcomes can flow upstream to impact larger social structures that lie at the heart of social inequity. We have also provided a foundation for more critically reflexive and rigorous research, anchored in practice on the ground, that could potentially lead to greater social and cultural benefits for participating communities. Such research could open up productive conversations about the role that music could play in bolstering collective, place-based efforts initiated by other fields and sectors seeking to address social inequity. Our hope is that this might promote further thought into how community musicians might collaborate with social and community development sectors in these efforts. This understanding would be fruitful when it comes to connecting this work with larger cross-sector efforts, and translating the creative and cultural benefits that community music could bring to addressing social justice issues in a wide range of complex contexts.

Declarations

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74 included studies are indicated with an *

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