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Music behind bars: exploring the role of music as a tool for rehabilitation and empowerment of offenders at Mthatha Medium Correctional Centre.

Twani, Zoliswa

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ABSTRACT

My interest in conducting this empirical research exploring music as a tool for rehabilitation and empowerment of prison offenders was sparked by my observation in 2002 of the problematic use of music at Mthatha Medium Correctional Centre (MMCC). Music activities were simply a microcosm of music activities outside prison, and despite the existence of the National Offenders Choir Competitions (NOCC) since 1997, neither offenders nor Department of Correctional Services (DCS) Officials seemed to regard participation in such activities as music education, let alone rehabilitative or empowering. In 2007 I conducted a one-year Participatory Action Research project of four cycles or stages, in the prison, intended to work towards developing and improving musical, self-reflexive, and other life skills. I then used Michel Foucault's notion of 'panopticism' (1978) and Paulo Freire's theory of 'conscientização' (1970) to intepret the music styles, practices, and performances developed during the project and their impact on those involved.

Two central questions underpinning this study are, 'To what extent do music activities subvert the watchfulness of the prison system and environment?' and 'How does music encourage offenders to transcend their prisoner status and reinvent their lives as musicians 'behind bars', better able to reintegrate into society as rehabilitated citizens?' Through narrative enquiry and thematic content analysis I examine how the participants' critical consciousness about music and about themselves was raised and the way in which the praxis (reflection and action) method had changed their lives. In the light of the results from this approach and context, I devised a set of recommendations for a music education curriculum for implementation in South African prisons,

suggesting that it be implemented using a dialogical life long learning (DLLL) theoretical approach.

Keywords: prison, ‘panopticon’ or ‘panopticism’, conscientização, reintegration, rehabilitation, participatory action research, narrative enquiry, thematic content analysis, praxis, and dialogical life long learning theory.