Case Study draft – Youth Voice Thursday sessions (care-experienced young people)

**Introduction:**

Tracks’ Thursday sessions at Red Tape focus on supporting young people who struggle with mainstream school to develop functional skills, build relationships and increase self-confidence through musical activities.

Music mentors work one-to-one with young people to create fun and exciting music sessions that raise aspirations and broaden horizons. The team of mentors are experienced in working with young people who have suffered trauma. Lead mentors also work directly with schools and care teams to advocate for young people at educational and care review meetings.

This case study aims to represent young people’s voices and their experiences at Red Tape Thursday sessions. The case study is part of a wider PhD research study exploring youth voice in music education. Evaluation methods for this case study include interviews with three young people and session observations which took place between April and June 2024. To preserve anonymity, no names have been used and young people are referred to by the moniker YP(1).

The themes explored in this case study are:

1. Spaces where young people’s experiences are valued
2. Music for remembering the past
3. Navigating emotions through music
4. Expressing emotions through music
5. Imagining new possibilities

The themes will be used to demonstrate how the mentors use music to support the young people to achieve the core aims of the Thursday sessions, which are building relationships, increasing self-confidence and developing functional skills.

**Theme 1: Spaces where young people’s experiences are valued**

The sessions take place at Red Tape Central where there are multiple recording studios, a variety of instruments, and spaces to just relax. There is time and place for the young people to just jam on the instruments with their mentors. The mentors work hard to maintain a calm and welcoming space for the young people. In doing so, the mentors model positive interpersonal skills that foster secure, trusting relationships.

Instances recorded in the fieldnotes detail how mentors consistently showed interest in the young people’s experiences, both their musical experiences and their day-to-day lives. Light-hearted banter helped the young people feel at ease with the mentors. The mentors’ clear enjoyment in the music sessions further affirmed the young people, boosting their self-confidence.

At times the atmosphere could be strained, for example when young people displayed challenging behaviours, however, mentors always remained professional and calm, steadily maintaining positive regard towards the young people. Behavioural expectations were clearly communicated by staff and boundaries were consistently maintained, creating a safe and secure environment for managing challenging behaviours. This provided the necessary foundations for building relationships of trust.

The interviews reinforced these fieldnote observations as the young people talked about their experiences at their Tracks sessions:

“But after my first day, I absolutely loved it…it feels like home because I can show who I am, I can put it all into the music. And I think that's what I really love about here, is I can be who I want to be, I can play what I want to play, I can experience new things” (interview with YP2).

Through developing relationships of trust, the mentors created safe spaces for the young people to explore their creativity. Within these safe spaces, music could become a space to remember the past, an avenue for navigating emotions and a tool imagining new possibilities.

**Theme 2: Music for remembering the past**

In reflecting on how favourite songs have impacted their self-perceptions, the young people talked about how music helped them to validate difficult feelings. This validation encouraged self-acceptance, leading to newfound self-confidence. Sometimes this came through music’s ability to provoke memories of people that made them feel loved and special. Particular songs or artists could bring back happy childhood memories linked to times when they first felt a creative freedom to explore their musical identity.

“[This band] Makes me like, it reminds me of when I was like five and I started listening to it. Cause I think I got it for Christmas…and I started listening to them in my room and for some reason I kept writing down the lyrics” (YP3)

These musical memories strengthen the young people’s current musical experiences. Taking pleasure in musical activities provides an important outlet for young people and a sense of continuity with their younger selves.

Memories of listening to music as a young child provided the groundwork for current interests: “I like music and I like doing music and it’s fun” (YP3). Research has shown that enjoyment in music is an important factor for continuing musical activity[[1]](#footnote-1) and that musical enjoyment enhances life satisfaction and well-being[[2]](#footnote-2). By encouraging the young people to engage with music, whether through listening to old favourites, searching out new artists, or writing their own songs, the mentors validated the young people’s experiences and interests which in turn strengthened the young people’s self-confidence.

**Theme 3: Navigating emotions through music**

During the interviews, the young people talked about ways in which music could help them regulate their emotions and their mood. Playing their instrument and listening to favourite songs helped the young people to better process their emotions and helped them to control mood changes. For example, one young person described how playing the drums made them feel “feel alive and calm because the sound goes through me” (YP1). Listening to favourite music had a similar calming effect on their mood. For instance, when asked to think of a song that could represent how their week had been, this young person replied that their week had been “hectic” and explained how music had helped them to cope:

“My mood’s been all around the place… [music] makes me feel like, like happy and stuff because the beat is hitting me and lyrics and stuff and the type of music makes me more calm and stuff” (YP1)

However, they were very clear that not all music had a calming effect, some music could make them feel overwhelmed, for example, if the beat was too fast or constantly increasing in speed, particularly if this was coupled with heavy distortion in the vocals. Awareness of the different effects music had on their mood demonstrates a clear understanding of music’s potential emotional impact. Music’s use as a tool for regulating mood has been explored extensively in music psychology research[[3]](#footnote-3) and the young people interviewed demonstrated high levels of skill in their use of music.

Purposeful use of music to regulate mood and emotions can help young people to deal with stressful situations with greater success. For mentors, understanding how music might affect young people’s moods can help them to plan music sessions that will capitalise on these affects to create calm but stimulating learning environments.

**Theme 4: Expressing emotions through music**

In addition to recognising that music can induce emotions, the young people demonstrated a growing understanding of how music can be crafted to achieve these effects in the listener. In discussing a favourite song, called “Haunted”, one young person talked about their interpretation of the song’s underlying meaning and how the lyrics and music work together to reveal these potential meanings:

“She's [the singer/songwriter] is trying to show that is she is timid, she is scared of something, but she can't show it to anyone, she feels that the only way she can show it is through her songs, her beat, her lyrics” (YP2)

To achieve this sense of fear, the song contrasts a slower, sparser musical texture in the verses with a faster, driving beat in the chorus:

“It’s the beat, when she's like, before she started repeating haunted, it was very chill back…but as soon as she got into haunted it got really more in depth…. it’s like when you think about a horror film, it's perfectly calm until it gets to the scary bits and the beat gets higher and higher and higher” (YP2)

The young people demonstrated an ability to apply this musical knowledge when asked how songs could be changed to induce a different emotion. For instance, in thinking about reimagining a diss track where the music and the lyrics are intended to portray a threatening stance towards an imagined antagonist, a young person explained how replacing the electronic beat with a guitar and slow drums would drastically reduce the driving, angry tension within the original song.

Mentors were keen to help the young people to build on these skills through listening to their favourite music with musical intention, for example, paying attention to a piano part in order to learn to play the melody. Lyrics also provide learning opportunities, and the mentors encouraged the young people to listen out for specific writing techniques, such as changes in perspective, that provide more nuanced understandings of what a song might be about. Fieldnote observations confirmed that young people were learning to apply these skills and techniques to their own songwriting.

Through writing their own songs, young people can learn important educational skills, including language skills and creative problem-solving skills. Young people frequently used techniques such as word maps and spider diagrams to help them develop themes for their songs. Learning how to fit music and lyrics together to convey particular meanings to the listeners requires the young people to experiment and develop their problem-solving skills to successfully achieve the musical results they want. With support, young people can then learn to apply these skills to other educational contexts.

**Theme 5: Imagining new possibilities**

Throughout the interviews, young people clearly expressed how important music was to them for personal development. When discussing music that made them feel most like themselves, the young people used descriptors such as “confidence songs” (YP3), songs that helped them to explore feelings of empowerment. The young people referenced ways lyricists turned scenarios of disempowerment into moments of empowerment. Songs were perceived as a safe space to playout feelings of anger and disempowerment by re-imaging themselves with the power to control their own narrative. While this was sometimes stated quite bluntly, such as writing a song about “taking what I want” (YP1), there were also more nuanced explanations of how they would approach empowerment in songwriting:

“Most songs are about how man’s powerful in this world. I would make it like the woman’s one of the most powerful people…songs about girls are always like timid, the damsel in distress but I don’t see it like that. Most women have gone through a lot of stuff, and they deserve the power that they hold inside, they don't have to hide it and like they’re precious, they need to be treated right” (YP2)

Expressing a desire for power and control, particularly for girls, can run counter to societal expectations and gender norms[[4]](#endnote-1). Music and songwriting can provide a socially acceptable space to explore these themes and an opportunity to imagine a self-determined life. Through writing their own songs and learning the music skills they are interested in, young people can experience self-determination within their music sessions. Feeling ownership and pride in their musical learning can help to improve self-confidence and increase educational interest and engagement.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Within the supportive learning spaces at the Tracks sessions, young people can develop their social skills and learn healthier coping mechanisms to deal with frustrations and setbacks. Moving from one-to-one sessions to small groups provides opportunities to practice these skills in different social situations. Performing their songs in supportive and welcoming spaces helps to increase confidence and self-esteem.

The Tracks music sessions help young people learn to manage demanding social situations while remaining in control of their emotional and behavioural responses. The young people experience a In these ways, young people can discover “the power they hold inside” in the knowledge that they are precious.

1. Godwin, L. (2015) ‘Why Enjoyment? An Exploration of Experiential Outcome in a Community-based Fiddle Group’, *Australian Journal of Music Education,* 2, pp. 36-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Morinville, A. et al (2013) ‘Music Listening Motivation is Associated with Global Happiness in Canadian Late Adolescents’, *American Psychological Association,* 7(4), pp. 384-390. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Tia Denora’s seminal work on music in everyday life (reference here) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, Bruckmüller, S., Hegarty, P. and Abele, A. E. (2012) ‘Framing Gender Differences: Linguistic Normativity Affects Perceptions of Power and Gender Stereotypes’, *European Journal of Social Psychology,*  42, pp. 210-218. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)