

Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War

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TRANSCRIPT

Songwriting in music therapy for children - Karen Diamond

NIGEL OSBORNE: So, more strands of my life tying themselves in all kinds of beautiful knots today. It is my pleasure to introduce Karen Diamond, we go back quite a long way, and it's lovely to see you working in this area, Karen, and I'm looking forward to this very much.

KAREN DIAMOND: Thank you, Nigel. It's so funny to come somewhere where one of your former tutors from many years back is present, I'll not say how many years! It's lovely to meet you all and to have an opportunity to let you hear some of the voices of some of the children we have been working with in Northern Ireland. Despite 15 years having elapsed since the Good Friday Agreement or peace agreement, as it were, it was really surprising to us that children aged 4-11 were presenting with quite significant difficulties associated with the areas that they lived in, in Northern Ireland. But then when you think about it, their parents are the combatants, the ex-servicemen and women, people who are victims or survivors of the troubles. They are still living side-by-side in the community in Northern Ireland, and so adjusting to a peacetime or a post-conflict society is very difficult. The CODA music therapy service that we provided initially set out to work with adult victims and survivors, the physically injured and bereaved, but very quickly it became apparent that the children of those people were the more important ones. We needed to try and fix it for the next generation, rather than keeping the cycle going. So the CODA service, 'coda' being the musical term, about tying all the musical ends up before you moved on, felt like a logical title for us, in that it's trying to help them achieve catharsis and deal with unresolved issues before moving on.

The service is provided primarily in primary schools to 4-11 year-olds who live in interface areas in Belfast and in the northwest, Derry-Londonderry. During the summertime we work with the community programmes that are working with victims' groups, but again this work is with children. So as I say, it is a very limited age group who we work with but nonetheless a very important age group if we are going to achieve change. So what is an interface area? It is a single identity area. It is an area where bricks and mortar and steel separate communities. They will either be Protestant Unionist communities or Catholic Nationalist communities. They are very isolated. They saw some of the most horrific violence of the conflict that we had and as a result of that, you know, even to today, they still want to stay within those areas. That is a very modern housing development in one of those photographs. It was built four years ago. There's no wanting to move out of your area, there is a fear of what is outside of there; when you go to your GP, it is in your area. We even have the ridiculous situation where we have separate leisure centres for one community and the other, because people are scared to leave their area or to go somewhere where there may be a threat or they sense some threat. We even have a park, which has a peace wall down the middle of it, to divide and keep people safe. And, as you'll see, one of

the photographs is a gate; these gates tend to be open during the daytime, for people to maybe walk in and out of, but the road is physically closed, and these gates will be closed at any time whenever there's any sectarian tension in the area, so again, sometimes to get out of these areas, you have to drive miles around when you should have just been able to drive down a road.

Interface areas have created a difficulty as well. As you know, quite recently, even in December 2012, you see how in Northern Ireland things can still flare up and create an awful lot of community tension, and when we were working with the schools at that stage, the children were saying, "Oh, it's really scary out there", because for those children, their parents and grandparents were actually out rioting and protesting again and those children then are getting up the next day and coming to school, so it is still there, it doesn't take much unfortunately to set things off still. But it is important that we have this magical space, this really potent thing that we can use that is highly flexible, and allows children to express what is really, really difficult. If you're living in an area where there's third or fourth generation unemployment, the educational attainment is really low, engagement with education is really low, parents don't want to come into school, they don't want to hear sometimes about what is difficult, and it's very, very difficult to actually stimulate those children and their minds, but we have a marvelous, potent of doing this, through using music.

So rather than focus on any of the theoretical aspects – I will leave that to the venerable scientists, I am not one, today – I wanted to let you hear the voices of some of the children. What we found, when we were doing our work, was that improvisation, which is very much the central tenet of music therapy, is very natural, it occurs where people make music, it's very spontaneous. These children found it exceptionally difficult, in fact impossible, to improvise. There was this fear of letting go and it was the sluggish versus the ADHD. We had the sluggish, those who were absolutely reluctant to lift a beater, to get involved, or initiate playing, to the other ones who we couldn't get to stop sometimes. It was "play, play, play", music that actually blocked you out and you didn't have any way of engaging or interacting with them. So we found we needed to use very structured activities, now it starts, then it ends, this is what we're going to do. And then we found that we thought, well, we'll try some songwriting, but again, to start songwriting out of the blue was just very, very difficult, so we had to go to what was on their iPods and use that as the framework for actually what they could build their songs upon.

I'm going to let you hear two songs, which were written by a little girl called Grace. Grace is 11 years of age, living in an interface area. Grace had been moved around various family members and foster care for a period of time. Her father had attempted to kill her mother; he had been involved with the paramilitaries and was finding life of not being a top dog in his community very, very difficult to adjust to. So Daddy resorted to domestic violence. And mum unfortunately was the person who took the effect of that. Grace's dad had also tried to come into their house and abduct one of the sisters during the night and poor Grace and the rest of the family were in absolute emotional meltdown really. Grace didn't come to school most of the time. School were finding it hard to understand why, because things they thought had settled; mum had come home from hospital after her dad's attack, and things they thought had settled down, they couldn't understand why. They referred Grace to music therapy and the therapist very bravely built up a relationship with Grace, talking to her, "Would

you like to come and try this out?", and Grace then started to come to school on Mondays, but only on Mondays, the day music therapy occurred. In sessions, she said, "Can you sing in here?", and the therapist said, "Yes, you can, would you like to?", "no, it's all right". But gradually, over a period of time, Grace said one day, "can I write a song?" Yes, absolutely, you can write a song. So this is Grace's first song, 'I saw'.

[Music plays.]

I Saw - Lyrics

*I saw a bad man standing over my mum
My Mum is black and blue I don't know what to do
My Mum's only a human being and human beings make mistakes
Even you and me
The bruises are gone
So is the bad man
I found out the bad man was my dad*

Actually, the therapist said physically, Grace appeared as if she wanted to go to sleep after having composed that song and sung that song and I think again that's the getting it out there and the whole expression and the whole physical relaxation that that creates as well. Grace then, over the next few weeks, started to express more interest in writing more songs about herself and went on to the next week, or a few weeks later, to create 'Crying'.

[Music plays]

Crying – Lyrics

*Crying, angry so sad at leaving my family
Crying, when I have to move house.
I feel so scared of my Daddy
Cause he will come to my house and do something
Tell him to stay away cause he's dangerous, oh so dangerous.
He is very broken-hearted,
But I don't care, I'm breaking free
Crying Angry
There is nothing that we can do
But we trying to help you mum
We're breaking free*

I think you can even hear the difference in Grace's voice from the first session to that session. It was only a few weeks, but actually for the fact that once in her life she could tell the story and get it out there. The reason she didn't want to come to school, was because she thought if she stayed at home daddy couldn't come in and take mum or any of her sisters. Her role was there to stay there and raise the alarm as it were.

We have a lovely follow-up service with this where we actually meet the parents sometimes to let them know what is happening in sessions or if they have any

questions. Mum reported that Grace arrived home with the CD, ran into the room said, "listen", put it on, ran out of the room and left mum to sit and listen to the song. Mum had sat in tears and was really, really understandably very upset. But actually what happened was the trigger for mum understanding how the child was feeling, but also starting to look outside for some help for herself as well and to look at the whole family and getting some family therapy because that was so important to build this family again. So thanks to Grace, because she is an amazingly brave little girl.

For those living in interface areas and people continuing to live with the impact of trauma in any society I think we need as clinicians and as musicians and scientists to be very, very aware, but we need to deal very sensitively with what the issues are that the clients we are meeting as well present with. While addressing these issues at an early stage is really, really vitally important, we at the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust are very much minded that if these things aren't dealt with early they can go on to develop quite significant mental health problems as they age. We currently are running the Music and Mind study; it is a randomised controlled trial. Someone asked me was I using any psychological measurements for music therapy. We are actually in this, where the primary outcome is about increased education and secondary outcomes are around self-esteem and self-confidence. This was funded by Big Lottery; it was us, we won the lottery one day! Songwriting has really been an integral part of the intervention with these young people. It is that age when music starts to take on an importance and it is natural that is what you will use at that point.

The next song I want to let you hear about is a person we have worked with in the Music and Mind study. She also lives in an interface area and her mum died when she was nine years of age. Her mum died with something associated with an injury sustained as a result of the troubles. Even after all these years, people living with conditions, it can still have a negative impact. Paula was 15 years of age and had been presenting to the local child and adolescent mental health services because she had started to become very socially withdrawn, and had begun to self-harm and was very aggressive towards her dad, their whole relationship had actually broken down, and she was really low and was starting to be bullied at school. In the first four sessions the therapist said there was no trust or connection with Paula or no sense of how we were going to click and move this forward. However Paula announced to herself I think I would like to write a song. So she wrote a song, and she allowed the therapist to help in terms of offering the different musical themes she might use as her framework. She was also quite emotional during the sessions, as she explored the relationship she was having with her father. I will let you hear part of Paula's song. The song is 'My Emotional Song'.

[Music plays.]

My Emotional Song - Lyrics

*I get angry sometimes with my Dad
When he annoys me
He makes me want to crash and scream
But he has heart of gold.
When I feel upset I go to him
Cause I know he will comfort me*

*Cause he is the most loving Dad
You will ever meet.*

*Chorus - Sometimes I feel a little sacred inside
Sometimes I feel emotional
Sometimes I feel a little plain and dull
Don't they know I'm sensitive?*

*Getting bullied and feeling scared
Or when I think of Mum
Makes me want to cry and die
Makes me feel sad.
Makes me want to slice my wrists
To make everything go away
But instead I should make the most
Of what I've got instead.*

Chorus

*Sometimes I should think more positive
Like my music and friends
To make me look forward
Instead of looking back
I want to be an artist
Making lots of music
And maybe buy a new guitar*

Chorus

I think it is very noticeable when she sings the word "mum" her voice drops down and you can hear the pain and emotion in her song. It is a difficult process for the children and young people we are working with to engage in. I think when you look at her third verse "sometimes I should think more positive like my music and my friends to make me look forward instead of looking back, I want to be an artist making lots of music and maybe even buy a new guitar" that is the important thing about this, while we look back and deal with the awful things that have impacted, we also need to look forward, and we need as music therapists to enable the children to look forward and move forward. But you know, the children whose songs you heard live in homes where there is domestic violence, where there is drug and alcohol abuse, but you know that's not just Northern Ireland. That can be anywhere in the world and that doesn't even just have to be in a post-conflict society. That can be our society. Particularly as recession across the world hits and poverty increases these things are actually going to increase as well. So we need to be very aware that where there is stress and trauma that we actually provide a space.

As Leitch observed: "We will carry the past with us into the future, hurt and angry children without attention and respect grow up into embittered adults." We have a very flexible and creative medium here at our disposal, which, in Northern Ireland particularly, can stop the cycle continuing.

I don't want you to think "oh gosh they are so depressing in Northern Ireland"! When you see us on the TV you go "oh God, they're at it again!" Sometimes we are positive. Barack Obama visited us last week, prior to the G8 meeting, and he spoke to over 1,500 young people in one of our concert halls, and he said "ultimately peace is not just about politics, it's about attitudes...it is about a sense of empathy, it's about breaking down the divisions we create for ourselves in our minds that don't exist in any objective reality". I think that is a very powerful thing that we hold so much in our minds sometimes that actually really they are not the big bad demons we sometimes build things up to be.

The final song I would like to share with you was created during one of our summer programmes and was as we worked with a group of children and young people in Omagh, which in 1998 completely out of the blue, when we thought we were in a peace process, saw one of the largest single losses of life that Northern Ireland in one day had ever done. So, sadly 28 people and one unborn child died, and 220 people were physically injured. Now, it is a really small rural community where this occurred. So the impact was very, very strong. Again, when you think you are in a society which is safe that you can start going out shopping on a Saturday and you don't have to worry about where you park and what you do, this was quite a significant shock to our society again. However, Omagh is a very resilient community and they have done wonderful work. The Tara Centre has done wonderful work bringing children together across the community and engaging in various creative activities. Luckily they engaged in music and invited our therapist to come in and work with the children for a week. They created a song, and they were talking about what made them happy. They created this song, which I think shows, despite the very bleak things that happen in life, there are things which are shared by us all and there is always hope and there is happiness.

[Music plays.]

Happiness - Lyrics

Chorus

*Happiness, all we think about is happiness
You don't need to feel sad,
Just go have a good time,
We'll be partying all night long x2*

Verse One

*Shopping is what the girls want to do
Wrestling is what the boys want to do
Music is what we all like to play
So let's go out and party*

Chorus

Verse Two

*TV is what we all like to watch
The Simpsons is what we watch on TV
They are yellow and they are also funny*

So what does Homer say? Doh Doh Doh Doughnut!

Chorus

Verse Three

Family they always look after you

Friends they are there for you too

Me, I am very unique

They make me feel so happy, me me me me me

Chorus

So I hope the happiness vibe continues with yourselves through the rest of the day. Thank you very much and I hope you have enjoyed listening to the voices of the children.