



Multimodal Narratives of Adolescents' Music-Wellbeing Literacy Capabilities in a Music-Focused Secondary School

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Abstract

Meaningful and practical wellbeing strategies are needed to support young people living healthy lives. Wellbeing literacy is a positive psychology capability model for how people communicate about and for their wellbeing experiences, providing a framework for individuals to intentionally comprehend and create wellbeing languages to sustain and improve their own and others' wellbeing. Contemporary views of literacy consider music a multimodal symbolic language and music is gaining recognition for its wellbeing benefits. This applied interdisciplinary study brings together theory and practices from positive psychology, education, and music to advance our understanding of the multimodality of wellbeing languages. A case study was conducted with students attending an Australian music-focussed secondary school to examine adolescent music-wellbeing literacy capabilities and experiences. The school primarily serves disengaged youth, and music, particularly songwriting, is used to re-engage students and support them towards positive educational and life outcomes. Three Year 11 students, Aurora, Ellie, and Rowan (aged 16), participated in individual share and tell narrative interviews incorporating creative arts-based methods. Multimodal narratives co-constructed with youth are presented, incorporating text, drawings, and original music. Findings reveal that adolescents used music for wellbeing, and music was also an act of wellbeing. Musical activities representing music-wellbeing literacy capabilities emerging from adolescent stories are identified and resulting music-wellbeing experiences are reported. Examples are provided of how adolescents can be supported by intentionally incorporating music-wellbeing literacy capabilities in and beyond the music classroom. Further research is needed to understand music-wellbeing literacy in diverse cultural contexts and its interaction with other literacies.

Keywords Wellbeing · Wellbeing literacy · Multimodal wellbeing literacy · Music · Songwriting · Adolescence

Understanding meaningful and practical strategies to benefit adolescent wellbeing has become a priority for researchers and practitioners alike to support young people living healthy lives. Wellbeing literacy is a positive psychology process and outcome for how people communicate for and about wellbeing experiences. It is a capability framework that involves people's ability to intentionally use their knowledge and skills to understand and create languages to sustain and improve their own and others' wellbeing (Oades et al., 2022). Contemporary views on literacy acknowledge the multimodality of languages and the unique affordances of different modes, enabling people to communicate in personalised and meaningful ways (Lemon et al., 2025; Barton, 2019). This interdisciplinary applied study brings together theory and practices from positive psychology, education, and music to explore and advance our understanding of the multimodality of wellbeing literacy.

Music is gaining rapid recognition for its ability to support and shape wellbeing and healthy living (Dingle et al., 2021; Granot et al., 2021). There is substantial evidence that adolescents listen to music in their daily lives for a range of wellbeing benefits, though research examining how adolescents use music participation and learning for wellbeing outcomes is only emerging (Goopy & MacArthur, 2026a). In this study, music is positioned as a multimodal symbolic language of wellbeing. This article presents multimodal narratives, comprising text, drawings, and original music, revealing the music-wellbeing literacy capabilities and experiences of three adolescents attending an Australian music-focussed secondary school. Examples of activities are suggested for integrating music-wellbeing literacy capabilities into existing school music curricula and pedagogies to grow young people's music-wellbeing literacy.

1 Background

1.1 Wellbeing Literacy

This study adopts a positive psychology perspective of wellbeing which is broadly defined as “feeling good and functioning effectively” (Huppert & So, 2013, p. 838), and also known as flourishing (Seligman, 2011). In response to the global mental health crisis, scholars and policymakers have called for flourishing to become a core aim of education (Duraiappah et al., 2022). A recalibrated vision of music education is to support young people's “musical flourishing”, which involves joyful, meaningful, and ethical ways of living well in, through, and with music for the betterment of oneself and others (Goopy, 2025).

Wellbeing literacy has emerged within positive psychology as an educational process and outcome to achieve flourishing (Oades et al., 2022). Broadly speaking, wellbeing literacy is how people communicate about and for wellbeing (Oades et al., 2022, 2025) and is defined as “the capability of comprehending and composing wellbeing languages, across various contexts, that may be intentionally used to maintain or improve the wellbeing of oneself, others or the world” (Oades et al., 2021, p. 722). This definition adopts a contemporary understanding of literacy beyond reading and writing, where language is recognised as multimodal symbolic systems that encom-

pass a broad range of communicative activities, including listening, viewing, speaking, and creating across multiple modalities. “Communication” has previously been positioned as an overarching social function of music, acknowledging that music has enormous potential to contribute to individual and, additionally, community wellbeing (MacDonald, 2021). Such an approach is in alignment with the substantial research on arts and literacies, where people make meaning of their lives and the world using the arts (Barton, 2019).

Wellbeing literacy was conceptualised as a language-use capability based on what people can be and do rather than outcomes alone (Sen, 1993). It promotes freedom for a person to choose what wellbeing means to them and choice in how they use wellbeing knowledge and language. Wellbeing is not only a construct, but also an experience, where language can provide insight into these experiences (Oades et al., 2021). Capabilities can both be a wellbeing experience and lead to a wellbeing experience. The five interconnected components of wellbeing literacy address the what, how, who, when, where, and why of the concept (Oades et al., 2022). (1) *Vocabulary and knowledge* (what) is the basic language to communicate about wellbeing. (2) *Comprehension of multimodal text* (how) is understanding language about and for wellbeing. (3) *Composition of multimodal text* (how) is creating language about and for wellbeing. (4) *Context awareness and adaptability* (who, when, where) is being able to recognise that language differs by audience, setting, and situation. (5) *Intentionality for wellbeing* (why) is the habit of mindful and purposeful use of language to maintain or improve the wellbeing of self or others.

1.2 Adolescents’ Uses of Music as a Wellbeing Language

In this study, adolescents’ uses of music are viewed as a “language” to reveal insights into their wellbeing experiences. This approach expands the concept of wellbeing literacy and seeks to further understand the complex and multifaceted ways in which people’s wellbeing is enacted (Lemon et al., 2025). Seminal ideas on human uses of music were proposed by Merriam (1964), where “use” refers to the context and the function or purpose in which music is engaged. Since that time, numerous sets of uses and functions have been offered (e.g., Clayton, 2016; Laiho, 2004; Lonsdale & North, 2011; MacDonald, 2021), and recent research has drawn attention to the correlation between uses of music, age, and life goals (North & Hird, 2020). For example, Goopy (2024) provided a set of uses of music that shaped and supported the identity work of adolescents who had substantial music education and experience: individual (autotelic experience, self-expression and self-concept, self-regulation, and music and musician models), social (feeling valued by others and making a valuable contribution) and for the first time, developing proficiency in the discipline of music (music learning, listening to diverse new music, sound experimentation and music creation, and musical expertise independence).

A growing body of literature has found that adolescents’ uses of music play a critical role in supporting their wellbeing (Beckmann, 2013; Laiho, 2004; Lonsdale & North, 2011; Saarikallio et al., 2020). Music is recognised to be a developmental and protective factor during adolescence (Miranda, 2013; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2024). Papinczak et al. (2015) reported that young people listening to music supported their

wellbeing in four ways: relationship building, modifying emotions, modifying cognitions, and emotional immersion. Dingle et al. (2019) found that young people use music for emotional immersion to practice and process negative emotions, particularly sadness and anger. In addition to listening, adolescents use music-making as a conscious strategy to manage stress, called musical coping (Miranda, 2019). In related work, ter Bogt et al. (2017) found that a majority of young people use music listening as a means of consolation to cope with sorrow and stress. Factors such as socio-economic status (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2024) and context (McFerran, 2016) are influential in music's wellbeing outcomes during adolescence. For example, McFerran et al. (2018) found that increasing vulnerable adolescents' insight and intentional use of music showed evidence of reduced psychological distress. It is also acknowledged that music can be perceived differently by individuals given their state of mind (McFerran, 2016), including negatively (Hallam et al., 2017; MacDonald, 2021; Miranda et al., 2012; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2024).

1.3 Music-Wellbeing Literacy Capabilities

In growing the conceptualisation of wellbeing literacy, I propose that we consider the intersection of wellbeing literacy with other literacies, in this case, music. Music literacy in this study draws upon the same five literacy principles that shape the conceptualisation of wellbeing literacy (Keefe & Copeland, 2011). Music literacy is not limited to reading Western music notation, but rather to any act involving music (Riddle, 2014), also referred to as “musicking” (Small, 1998). Music-wellbeing literacy is the combined literacies of music and wellbeing literacies, where musicking is positioned as a wellbeing language. Table 1 presents the wellbeing literacy components and adapted wellbeing literacy capabilities (Oades et al., 2022) to produce music-specific capabilities. The words “making” and “responding” have been intentionally used as they are internationally understood in arts education (Abbs, 1987). “Responding” refers to the thoughts and/or actions that follow understanding, and

Table 1 Music-wellbeing literacy capabilities adapted from Oades et al. (2022)

		Wellbeing literacy component	Music-wellbeing literacy capability
What	1	Vocabulary and knowledge about wellbeing	I have music knowledge and skills that I can use, and that other people understand, to help myself and/or others, feel good, and function well.
How	2	Comprehension of multimodal text related to wellbeing	I can understand and respond to music to feel good, function well, and contribute to others' wellbeing.
How	3	Composition of multimodal text related to wellbeing	I can make music about things that make me happy and that promote happiness in others.
Who, when and where	4	Context awareness and adaptability	I know that responding to and making music can be different in different places, with different people and different circumstances.
Why	5	Intentionality for wellbeing	I can purposefully use music (by making and responding) for, as, and about my own wellbeing and that of others.

“making” refers to doing music in its broadest sense, such as performing, improvising, and creating music.

This study was conducted at a music-focused school serving youth who were previously disengaged from their education, and music was used to re-engage adolescents and help them complete their schooling. Much of the research to date with young people has focused on listening to music, however, this study is significant in that it investigated adolescents with substantial backgrounds and motivation in learning and making music. The following research questions guided this study: What are the music-wellbeing literacy capabilities of adolescents at a music-focused secondary school? What are the music-wellbeing literacy experiences of these students? How can music-wellbeing literacy be integrated into school education in and beyond the music classroom?

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study is part of a larger project that investigated how music and music education support the wellbeing of young people experiencing challenging life circumstances (Goopy, 2025, 2026b). Presented in this article are three multimodal narratives of adolescents who attended an Australian music-focussed secondary school. The school was selected because it meaningfully departs from conventional practice and constitutes an intrinsic case, selected for its inherent particularity and the intensity of its distinctive features, whilst simultaneously holding instrumental value in illuminating processes that remain concealed in more normative settings (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 2005).

It is appropriate that the multimodality of wellbeing literacy is investigated using multimodal interviews and presented using multimodal narratives. The integration of creative arts-based methods and presentation with text narratives allows the phenomena to be questioned from new perspectives (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Leavy, 2020), and privileges subjectivity and the researcher’s and readers’ interpretations (Riessman, 2003). An interpretivist research paradigm was adopted, aligning with the view that individuals should have the freedom to choose how they express and communicate their experiences of wellbeing (Oades et al., 2021; Sen, 1993). Creative arts-based methods are recognised for their age-appropriateness and use in researching “with” young people rather than being researched “on” (Angell et al., 2015). They also position young people as knowledgeable contributors to theory and practice (Barrett, 2017).

Multimodal narratives push beyond traditional monomodal research texts and combine multiple possibilities of meaning-making (Balaman, 2018). The presented narratives represent an approach to considering young people’s perspectives and experiences that is respectful, responsible, rigorous, and resilient (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, 2012). The approach sought to exemplify stories and art that resonated and questioned taken-for-granted discourse, rather than generalising (Barone, 2000; Barrett & Stauffer, 2009). The research design of this study directly addresses calls in

positive psychology to expand qualitative inquiry (Hefferon et al., 2017). The Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee provided ethical clearance for this study (2022-04027-GOOPY).

2.2 Research Setting

This study was conducted at a small Year 11–12 independent music-focused school in an Australian capital city. The school described itself as a blending of a school and community youth setting. Many of its 90 students had previously disengaged with mainstream or what they call “normal” schooling and have experienced challenges such as mental illness, trauma, and marginalisation. The school is, for many, their last chance to complete their education. Despite being a fee-paying school, approximately 25% of the student body was on scholarship. Given student backgrounds, it is desired that staff have a background in social work and trauma-informed practice. The school defies the rigid structure of traditional schooling, with no bells, uniforms, or homework. Classes start late at 10 am and run until 4 pm, and students do not have to be on campus when they do not have a class.

The school intentionally uses music across all aspects of school life as the hook to re-engage adolescents in their high school education. Although it is a music and arts-focused school, it is non-selective and accepts all students who wish to attend. A comprehensive music education with a focus on the contemporary music industry, particularly songwriting, is offered, including state curriculum courses, vocational certificates, individual instrumental and vocal tuition, and staff and student-led co-curricular music activities. It is expected that students will use the on-site professional recording studio and numerous dedicated spaces for creative and collaborative music generation. In addition, every subject at the school approaches its curriculum through a music industry lens. For example, students in Maths will complete a tour budget and in English, students will write a position paper on digital streaming and copyright. The school promotes connecting music beyond the classroom and is actively involved in the local music scene and music industry. School performances are hosted in the city’s celebrated live music venues, providing students with real-world music experiences. These conditions create a “music asylum” for young people; a safe communal space where music is used in everyday wellbeing (DeNora, 2014).

2.3 Multimodal Share and Tell Interviews

Data were generated through one-on-one 30-minute multimodal share and tell interviews with three Year 11 students (aged 16 years). Adolescents provided written and verbal consent to participate in the research, and written consent from a parent or guardian was required. The data presented in this article are adolescent responses to the interview focus question, “How does music help you?” The question was provided in advance for students to consider, and they were asked to bring a music example to the interview, preferably their own original music. In the first phase of the share and tell task, students were presented with an A4 page with the question and provided with approximately 5–10 min to draw their response. Students were then

asked to interpret their drawing for the researcher, and asked follow-up questions such as “Why is this important to you,” and “Can you provide an example of this?”. The drawing process was reflective, allowing participants time to construct thoughtful, considered responses (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). Draw and tell tasks are typically uncommon with adolescents (Goodwin et al., 2023), though used by the author in recent publications (Goopy, 2023, 2024, 2026b). In the second phase, students were asked to provide a musical example. The researcher and participant listened to the example and then discussed its meaning and relevance to their drawing. Students used their own smartphones to share music on music streaming services or voice memos. This project is the first known to implement a multimodal share and tell task that combines drawing and music, particularly original songs created by adolescents.

2.4 Analysis

The analysis of data in this article uses a two-stage narrative analytic approach (Polkinghorne, 1995): narrative analysis and the analysis and discussion of narratives. Firstly, exemplar multimodal narratives by the three adolescent participants are presented. The narratives draw upon the data generated from the share and tell task and restoried interview transcripts to create a coherent whole. The accompanying drawing and original music provide elaboration of the text narrative. In sharing the perspectives and artistic output of these young people in this article, a balanced and respectful approach to de-identification was taken, with participants identified using pseudonyms. Young people are acknowledged as legitimate musicians and recognised for their artistic output and as co-constructors of meaning with their original music being attributed to their pseudonymised artist names.

Secondly, the narratives are analysed and discussed using paradigmatic analysis to uncover common themes and conceptual manifestations that emerge across the stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). The discussion is framed by the research questions, exploring adolescents’ music-wellbeing literacy capabilities and experiences surfacing in the data. Examples of possible activities to incorporate music-wellbeing literacy capabilities into existing school music activities are proposed.

3 Multimodal Narratives

3.1 Aurora: “I Communicate Through Music”

Aurora uses music to communicate her wellbeing experiences. She says, “I communicate through music. I don’t think I could cope without music because I wasn’t taught how to communicate growing up. I can’t effectively communicate sometimes. I genuinely just don’t talk about anything. I don’t talk about my feelings, but when I listen to music, it helps me process them, because that’s the only way that I’m able to sit down and figure everything out. If I said it, nobody would listen to me, but when I actually put it in a song, people want to listen to that.”

Aurora’s drawing represents being “in the zone” (see Fig. 1). She explains, “I feel like when I perform, I feel like I’m on drugs, but it’s better than drugs, it’s the most



Fig. 1 Aurora uses music to communicate her wellbeing and experience flow

thrilling thing, it's just insane. It's like I'm on so many things at once, but I'm not.... Music is a drug because it's addictive. It's like you always want more and more and more and more, and do better, and better, and better.... I don't think I could ever fall out of love with music.... I have struggled a lot in other things. I genuinely can't sit down and do something that I don't like. Some people would call me lazy for that, but genuinely, I can't. Even for maths, sometimes I can't do an assignment and it's due the next day, and I have to find a way to like it. But with music, I just like everything about it, so I just want to do it."

Aurora is passionate about songwriting and has received national recognition. She says, "Once I write a song, I want to make it better". She explains further with some examples saying, "I want this instrumental, and I want it to connect. I want these two things to complement each other. I want this entire thing to be an entire concept, so when someone listens to it, they can understand what's going on in my mind and be able to emotionally connect to that." As an example, Aurora shares one of her original songs called *Sprout* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cma5VNwRN-c>), under her artist name, Ixaras. "The song is about being in relationship with someone that is not mentally well, and then you're kind of having to parent them in a way, and then losing yourself in the process of that."

3.2 Ellie: "Music is Always There for Me"

In explaining her drawing (Fig. 2), Ellie says, "These are me. Through each mood, I'm listening to music. When I'm sad, when I'm happy, or when I'm angry, or just in



Fig. 2 Music provides company to Ellie as she improves her wellbeing using music

a funky mood, it's just saying, 'Music is always there for me.' I always see music like a person because it does have that comforting presence like it's with you even when you're alone. If you're listening to music, you feel less alone, especially if it's a bad situation, you can relate to people through it. It's just through anything, no matter what I'm feeling, music can be there for me, and it can relate to me."

I ask Ellie if she can speak to an example of when she has relied upon music. She says, "I turn to music 24/7. Like this morning, I was walking to the train station and I was just so tired, and I was just like, 'I have no energy.' I put on some music with a bit of a beat and then I was a bit more into walking, and I was like, 'Okay, I've got this, I can get the rest of the way.' And when I'm cleaning, I need a bit of a pump up, I have to play the right cleaning playlist. The same with running. I can only run 500 meters without music, but when I have music, I can run for a few kilometres. It helps keep you going, and you zone into that."

In addition to zoning in, music helps Ellie zone out. "I think sometimes you need music to get out of your own head as well. You can stop thinking a bit when you're listening to music. If you're a bit sad and you just need to zone out, you just put on your headphones and you listen to that music, and you just enter your own bubble. I was at a party not long ago, and near the very end I just went completely flat, and I couldn't handle the noise of people. I just put in my earphones and played some music that put me in my own zone and then that was fine because I needed something to just help calm me down."

I direct our conversation to the original music that Ellie has released. She says writing music can help her process her emotions. "Sometimes I write a song, and all

these feelings come out. I'll write a line, and then I'll reread the line, and I'm like, 'Damn, that's how I was feeling. That perfectly explains how I was feeling, but I didn't even realise I felt that way.' I think that's because you don't always sit back and think about your feelings with how fast life moves. Sometimes, you can't; it's just all messy up there, and it's jumbled. Sometimes, writing songs can help you organise your thoughts more. But songwriting can be like a double-edged sword sometimes as well because while it helps process what I'm thinking, sometimes, it will also bring me back to that moment and bring me more inside my head. When I'm writing songs, it's usually an emotional process for me. If I'm writing a sad song, it can make me sadder for that time. You get really in your head about that thing, and it consumes you."

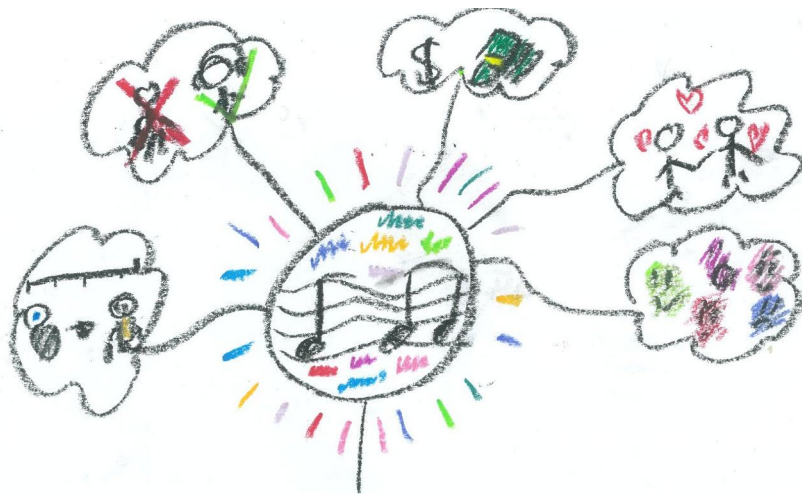
Ellie uses songwriting to give voice to her emotions. "Growing up, I didn't always feel like I had a voice or control over a lot of stuff. I think writing in a way that I can convey what I'm feeling in my story helps people listen to songs a lot easier than just a rant. When you can deliver something in a poetic and pleasing way to the ear, people can listen better to it, and it can hit differently. I've written songs about people before and then shown them, and then they've cried. But if I just told them what I was feeling, it wouldn't have that same deeper effect I feel." They responded, "'I'm sorry, I didn't know you felt like that, but we can work on that now.' It was from negative things, but it's like the start of something new and the start of change." As an example, Ellie shares an original song she wrote called *Hurt or Heal* under her artist name, L.i.E. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzcOeqfgP4Y>). The song speaks of a fragile relationship where the other person was a "heartbreaker" and a "heart mender". Playing this song to the person helped start a conversation towards a healthier relationship.

Thinking of her audience members, Ellie says, "Most of the songs that I wrote, I hope people can relate to that if they need to. I know how important it is to find relatability in people's situations. When you feel alone in something, it can be quite daunting, feeling like no one's ever been through what you've been through and wanting to make the right choices. It's even feeling justified in what you're feeling because hearing yourself in someone else's music you know it's fine."

The school is important in helping Ellie develop more skills to release her music. She says that she has over 50 songs in her catalogue but has only released five. "That's why I'm here, to learn more production myself because it's pretty expensive and I'd really like all those songs produced. If I can do it myself, I can put them out for people."

3.3 Rowan: "Music Helps Me Grow"

Proud of his creation, Rowan's presents his drawing (Fig. 3) and says, "It's how music stems from me as a person and how it helps me in all different parts of life. This is the centre, and this is a colourful head because music comes in all shapes and forms. These are eyes, but they're also quavers." Referring to the outside bubbles, he says, "These are all of the things that music helps me with." Beginning with the first bubble on the left, he explains, "That's a baby and it's an arrow sign to an old



How does music help you?

Fig. 3 Rowan uses music in various ways to improve his wellbeing

person with a walking stick underneath a timeline. It means music helps me grow and it helps me evolve, but also, it will be with me whole life.”

Rowan says the second bubble is “talking about careers. This is a person with a briefcase who is a businessperson and this is a person with headphones. I don’t think I can go to work for 40 hours in an office job. I don’t want to waste life on something I don’t want to do, which is being stuck in a job where I have no creative output to it and it’s being told what to do.” He believes with roles such as a producer, “you have creative freedom. Even if artists come in and say, ‘This is what I want out of my track,’ you still have that creative freedom to add your own things and express yourself in art form. I love it when you see producers on other people’s songs, and before you even know that they produced the track, you hear it and go, ‘This sounds like someone’s beat’. You look at it, and then it is because they have this style, and it shines through.”

Reflecting on recent weeks, Rowan says, “I’d say I found my style a bit more. Before, I was making a bunch of things, all different styles, and I didn’t know what direction I wanted to present myself as a solo artist. But I think I’ve found what I want to do and how that can transition into other things. I had this single, which I had released, and it recently got a bit more traction. It’s called *BUMBLEBEE*” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kK60e0jcLCE>) and released under his artist name, noyse!. Explaining his original hip-song song, Rowan says, “Bumble is to move or act in an awkward or confused manner. And bees are like a straightforward thing in the way that they are yellow and black. So, it’s kind of my two sides about how I’m a different person. I have my own style, and I do art.”

Related to having a career in music, he moves to the third bubble, “This is money. It’s the least thing I think about, but I still think about it. I want to make money off my music. I want to do a bunch of different things like film, art, and a lot of things. I want to own a record label with my group, so it’s not like I’m being told what to do. If I think about where I would be at my pinnacle of happiness, I want to be the jack-of-all-trades in the arts industry. These are all things that I love, so I want to experience them. I want my resume to be, ‘Worked on various films. Released three albums solo. Did work with other people. Widely known producer...’”.

Referring to the fourth bubble, he says, “This is relationships. There are a lot of love hearts, but they can be friends. I’m just saying love, in general, with relationships. I find music as a good way to start conversations and make friends. I’ve made so many friends and relationships out of music and sharing love for music. Even when I wasn’t at this school, that’s how I truly connect with people.”

Rowan says music also helps him experience and process with his emotions. Pointing to the last bubble, he says, “Then this is a bunch of faces. That’s happy, angry, sad, a raised eyebrow emotion, and this is shocked.” He provides an example. “If the past two weeks have been really busy and stressful, I listen to a song about just relaxing that will hit me really hard. And I would listen to that song religiously for those four days or even the next two weeks. Then, if I have albums that really resonate with me, even if I don’t listen to any songs off that album any more, I still regard it as one of my highest-ranked albums because, at the time, that album was so perfect for me to listen to. I’d say emotions tie very much into mental health. I think being able to fully experience an emotion is important to stay healthy. I think it’s common for boys and men not to show that they are sad and unable to fully experience sadness. That results in a bunch of sad-looking men that just look grumpy all the time. I feel like being able to experience sadness helps you get in a better place. I think music and this school community have helped me be able to experience emotions and properly tune into that and better myself just as a person.”

4 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Music-Wellbeing Literacy Capabilities

The findings from this study confirm the proposed music-wellbeing literacy capabilities framework. Adolescent musicians in this study used music to communicate about and for their wellbeing experiences. Their stories and drawings, and particularly their original songs, demonstrate music-specific multimodal wellbeing literacy capabilities. The musical activities that these adolescents used to process and communicate their wellbeing were wide-ranging, including listening, music-making, learning, sharing, conversing, and reflecting individually and with others. Songwriting was an activity that combined all these music knowledges and skills. These adolescents intentionally responded to and made music along a passive-to-active continuum. Examples of active music listening challenge assumptions that listening to music is only a passive activity. Students used music knowledge and skills (Capability 1) to comprehend (Capability 2) and create music (Capability 3) across various contexts

Table 2 Adolescent music-wellbeing literacy capabilities and examples

	Music-wellbeing literacy capability	Examples from adolescent multimodal narratives
1	I have music knowledge and skills that I can use, and that other people understand, to help myself and/or others, feel good, and function well.	• Play guitar to be “in the zone” (flow) (Aurora) • Listen to music to be “in the zone” and “zone out” (Ellie) • Learning music knowledge and skills provides purpose (Ellie, Rowan), “helps me grow” (Rowan), and shapes my identity (Rowan) • Music is a resource and activity to connect with others (Aurora, Ellie, Rowan)
2	I can understand and respond to music to feel good, function well, and contribute to others’ wellbeing.	• Listen to music to process emotions (Aurora, Ellie, Rowan) • Share original music with audiences for them to relate (Aurora, Ellie) • Share original music to share identity (Rowan)
3	I can make music about things that make me happy and that promote happiness in others.	• Writing a song to process feelings and emotions (Aurora, Ellie) • Writing a song to communicate feelings (Aurora, Ellie) • Create a song for others to relate to (Aurora, Ellie)
4	I know that responding to and making music can be different in different places, with different people and different circumstances.	• Writing songs to communicate with family at home (Aurora) • Listen to different music for different emotions (Ellie)
5	I can purposefully use music (by making and responding) for, as, and about my own wellbeing and that of others.	• Use of music for and as wellbeing is intentional (Aurora, Ellie, Rowan)

and circumstances (Capability 4), intentionally sustaining and improving their own and others’ wellbeing (Capability 5). These capabilities can be identified in isolation but interact and work in an interconnected manner. Table 2 presents examples of adolescent music-wellbeing literacy capabilities from student narratives.

These findings expand our understanding of multimodal wellbeing literacy and offer a new perspective on how adolescents with substantial music education and experience intentionally respond to and make music to support everyday living. Previously, music uses have been presented *for* wellbeing (e.g., Papinczak et al., 2015), whereas this study also offers uses of music *as* wellbeing, or a form of wellbeing literacy. Adolescent musicians were more than consumers of a resource, their listening and music-making were acts and ways of experiencing wellbeing. This finding affirms and elaborates on emerging literature that considers wellbeing literacy to be multimodal, multifaceted, and multilayered (Lemon et al., 2025; Oades et al., 2022).

4.2 Music-Wellbeing Experiences

Music-wellbeing literacy capabilities were both a wellbeing experience and/or resulted in a wellbeing experience. There were five salient music-wellbeing experiences that emerged from adolescents’ narratives: flow, emotion management, connection, identity work, and learning. These five uses of music reflect the interconnected nature of the music-wellbeing literacy capabilities. In this learning context, particular music activities correlated more strongly for specific uses. For example, making

music and flow, listening and emotion management and companionship, songwriting and connection, and music career planning for identity work. Learning about, for, in, through, and with music assisted all of these uses.

4.2.1 Flow

The most salient descriptions of how adolescents in this setting use music were to get “in the zone” (Aurora, Ellie) and to “zone out” (Ellie), or what is also known as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow in positive psychology refers to an optimal state of consciousness felt when people are intensely absorbed in an enjoyable activity. Ellie gave numerous examples of listening to music to “zone in” and “zone out,” escape the moment, and “enter your own bubble.” Aurora described music as “addicting” and compared performing her music to “like I’m on drugs, but it’s better than drugs”. She said, “It’s the most thrilling thing” and “I just like everything about it” and went as far to say that other activities in her life do not have the same effect. The relationship between flow, music, and wellbeing is increasingly being recognised with adults (e.g., Groarke & Hogan, 2016; Habe et al., 2021; Koehler et al., 2023), however, this is the first known study to list flow as a significant use of music for and as adolescent musicians’ wellbeing. Further research is warranted to understand adolescent flow and music-wellbeing literacy.

4.2.2 Emotion Management

In this study, adolescents used music for and as emotion management, including modification, immersion, and processing. Aurora described how performing and creating music helped her “cope.” Ellie and Rowan provided examples of how they use music to regulate their emotions, including increasing positive feelings and motivation. For example, Ellie said listening to music “helps you keep going.” Songwriting was a significant means for emotion immersion and to “process emotions”, “help you organise your thoughts” (Ellie), and “figure everything out” (Aurora). Ellie recognised this process as a “double-edged sword,” which could also involve reliving stressful moments. However, Rowan reminded us that “being able to experience sadness helps you get in a better place”. He specifically mentioned the challenges boys and men can have to express their emotions and said, “Being able to fully experience an emotion is important to stay healthy”. Adolescents’ use of music for managing emotions is well documented (e.g., Dingle et al., 2019; Miranda, 2019; Papinczak et al., 2015; ter Bogt et al., 2017), and this study confirms that this use remains an important form of wellbeing literacy for adolescent musicians. Making and learning music is also emerging as an act of self-care (Goopy, 2025; Quigley & Smith, 2021), and further research is needed to understand this form of music-wellbeing literacy.

4.2.3 Connection

Adolescent musicians used music to connect with others. The word “connection” describes the bond and understanding of these relationships with music. These relationships were not only with other people in their lives but also with music itself, not

necessarily just the artist. All three students spoke to music being used for companionship. Ellie said, “music is always there for me” and “with you even when you’re alone.” She went further to say, “I always see music like a person because it does have that comforting presence”. Rowan’s first bubble depicted how “music will be with me my whole life”. Aurora’s appreciation for music was so much that she said, “I don’t think I could ever fall out of love with music”. These findings support previous literature that found music consolation is more than only for solace (e.g., ter Bogt et al., 2017); and it suggested that music can also be a companion for adolescents.

These adolescent musicians used a multitude of music activities to connect with others. For example, music allowed adolescents to “relate to people through” music and “justify” their feelings and “make the right choices” (Ellie). Rowan described “sharing love for music” to “start conversations and make friends” as “how I truly connect with people.” Songwriting provided a significant process and resource for each of these adolescents to communicate and connect with others. Aurora and Ellie spoke about difficulties communicating, particularly in relationships, and how music provided a way for them to have their voice heard. Aurora felt “no one would listen to me,” but through song, “people want to listen.” Ellie agreed, saying, “people listen to songs a lot easier than just a rant”. Through songwriting, Ellie can sing “my story” in a “poetic and pleasing way” which “can hit differently.” The impact was “the start of something new and the start of change” (Ellie).

“Relationship building” with other people has been previously reported in the literature as a use of music by adolescents for wellbeing (Papinczak et al., 2015), and this study adds to knowledge by revealing that adolescents have relationships with music itself, or companionship. Existing research has identified songwriting as a musical activity that supports identity and promotes wellbeing (e.g., Baker et al., 2018; Baker & MacDonald, 2017), and this study highlights its role in connection.

4.2.4 Identity Work

Adolescents in this music-focused school used music as a process and resource in their identity work. Identities are the past, present, and future self-stories we tell ourselves and others and the stories others tell about us (Breakwell, 2023). The term ‘identity work’ acknowledges that identity construction is an ongoing process of self-reflection and interaction with others, and a positive sense of who one is and is perceived by others is important to an individual’s wellbeing (Goopy, 2024; MacDonald & Saarikallio, 2024). Success and recognition in music contributed to Aurora’s positive sense of self. Ellie uses music to help make the “right choices” in life. Rowan specifically spoke about finding his “style” in music, how “I found what I want to do.”

An imagined positive and achievable future career in music was a salient motivating goal for these adolescents’ identity work. All three aspired to pursue careers as music artists and songwriters. Rowan explicitly said he wants to be a “creative” and “make money off my music.” The need for schools to provide education and planning for achievable and sustainable music careers has previously been suggested (Goopy, 2023). This study adds to the conversation by advocating that for those adolescents who desire a future in and with music, it is essential for their wellbeing that it is a

positive imagined future. Recent research is drawing attention to the impact of identity threat for music professionals and teachers and the need for resilience strategies (Forbes et al., 2025). There is a need for a greater understanding of how schools and teachers can support adolescents in navigating the realities of pursuing music careers and imagining healthy musical identities (MacDonald & Saarikallio, 2024).

4.2.5 Learning

These adolescents used music to learn music and life knowledge and skills. Music was a process for growth, development, and measuring achievement. The first use of music that Rowan identified was “music helps me grow and it helps me evolve.” Aurora said, she wants to learn “more” and to do “better” in music. Referring to learning music at school, Ellie said, “that’s why I’m here,” and a desire to learn how to produce songs “myself”. Accomplishment and competency are recognised as important components of wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Seligman, 2011) and literature dedicated to examining learning in, through, and with music to support wellbeing is only emerging (Goopy & MacArthur, 2026a). In addition to listening to and making music, this study proposes that the act of learning music, that is growing and developing music knowledge and skills, is an essential component of music-wellbeing literacy and requires further investigation.

4.3 Integrating Music-Wellbeing Literacy Capabilities in School

The featured narratives of student music-wellbeing literacy capabilities provide a compelling case for music as an effective multimodal wellbeing language. The growth and development of these capabilities should not be left to chance, but rather by design. This article argues that student wellbeing can be more effectively promoted in schools by intentionally integrating music-wellbeing literacy capabilities into music experiences, both in and beyond the music classroom. Music curricula and pedagogies worldwide typically focus on developing music-specific knowledge, skills, and understanding, though often without meaningful application beyond academic study (Kratus, 2019; Quigley & Smith, 2021; Regelski, 2022). There is a need for school education to better support young people by intentionally developing their music-wellbeing literacy capabilities in pursuit of life-long and life-wide musical flourishing (Goopy & MacArthur, 2026a). Of course, such intent often occurs in schools as the “hidden curriculum”, whereas I advocate for these intents to be purposeful and visible for the benefit of all students. Similar proposals have been made by Schmid (2024), who called for wellbeing objectives to be included in music education. Rather than additional isolated wellbeing activities in the classroom, I propose intentionally integrating music-wellbeing literacy capabilities into existing opportunities. Drawing upon the student narratives and school featured in this study, Table 3 provides possible example activities suitable for school education that correspond to the five music-wellbeing literacy capabilities previously described in Table 1. This integration of music-wellbeing literacy capabilities does not diminish the rigour of the discipline; however, it amplifies and deepens the practical meaning of music education in supporting adolescents beyond school and for life.

Table 3 Examples of possible school music education activities integrating music-wellbeing literacy capabilities

	Music-wellbeing literacy capabilities	Examples of possible school music education activities
1	I have music knowledge and skills that I can use, and that other people understand, to help myself and/or others, feel good, and function well.	• Students learn breathing techniques through sustained note exercises on wind instruments, performing them at the start of performances to ground audience members. • A class creates a shared vocabulary for describing how different musical elements (tempo, dynamics, timbre) affect their emotions, then uses these terms to curate playlists for specific moods. • Students develop technical skills in songwriting structure (verse-chorus-bridge) to create songs that express and regulate their feelings about challenging situations.
2	I can understand and respond to music to feel good, function well, and contribute to others' wellbeing.	• Students practise active listening to identify musical features that regulate their emotions, then create playlists they can use in situations beyond the music classroom, such as for exercise, study, relaxing, enjoyment, and creating positive social environments. • Students engage in movement-based responses to music of varying tempos and styles, reflecting afterwards on how their bodies and minds respond differently to help classmates choose music for emotional regulation. • Students analyse relationships between lyrics and musical elements that they later use as templates to manipulate musical elements in songs they create to express personal meaning.
3	I can make music about things that make me happy and that promote happiness in others.	• Students study and perform music that portrays overcoming struggle and is uplifting, and use this inspiration to move forward in their own lives. • Students form music ensembles with like-minded classmates and choose to perform repertoire together that is of common interest. • Students create, record and release music that allows them to process and express their feelings positively.
4	I know that responding to and making music can be different in different places, with different people and different circumstances.	• A class explores how their personal music preferences for relaxation differ from others, investigating factors like personality, culture, past experiences, and current circumstances that influence these variations. • Students experiment with performing the same piece in various school spaces (auditorium, library, outdoor courtyard), reflecting on how environmental context shapes both their experience and the music's wellbeing impact. • Students interview family members about how music use changes during different life circumstances (grief, celebration, daily routines), generating an understanding, appreciation, and strategies for personalised music use in family life.
5	I can purposefully use music (by making and responding) for, as, and about my own wellbeing and that of others.	• Students design and implement personalised "music-wellbeing toolkits" containing self-created playlists, simple instruments, and song lyrics to use intentionally during different emotional states. • A music class establishes a "wellbeing music request" system where students can commission peers to create or curate music for specific purposes (calming before presentations, energising for sports, connecting with friends and family). • A class develops a peer support initiative where trained student musicians offer short improvisational music sessions to help classmates process difficult emotions or transitions.

5 Conclusion

The adolescent multimodal narratives in this study reveal that music can be a deeply meaningful and engaging multimodal wellbeing language. This case provides both intrinsic and instrumental value to the field, offering lessons for what could be possible in school education and spotlighting areas that require further inquiry. Not only can music provide beneficial experiences for wellbeing, but music also offers distinctive wellbeing literacy capabilities. The examined setting provides insight into how adolescents can intentionally understand and create music to maintain and grow their own and others' wellbeing. Adolescents in this study drew upon their music-wellbeing literacy capabilities to create wellbeing experiences: flow, emotion management, connection, identity work, and learning. These findings advance our understanding of multimodal wellbeing literacy using music, and how music can be used for and as wellbeing.

The study's findings emphasise the potential of schools to promote music-wellbeing literacy, and how music engagement and learning in schools can grow music-wellbeing literacy capabilities and create wellbeing experiences. Findings from this study suggest that teenagers may benefit from being empowered as music makers and learners, not only listeners, to realise the full potential of music-wellbeing. Songwriting emerged as a significantly influential music activity for and as wellbeing, and further research is needed to understand how learning to create songs might be leveraged to amplify music's wellbeing benefits. The provided example music-wellbeing activities aim to inspire and empower teachers to create locally contextualised learning experiences for their students.

There is a need to consider context when examining music-wellbeing literacy, and it is acknowledged that this study was limited to three adolescents in a specific music-focussed educational setting. Much more research is needed across diverse contexts, age levels and population groups. Emerging research on the harm and marginalisation that can be caused by music education, particularly in schools, is also acknowledged (e.g., Quigley & Smith, 2021), and further studies are needed to understand how learning music can be a place for healing, drawing upon culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices. Further research is also needed to understand how schools can promote wellbeing experiences using music. Future research is warranted to understand how music-wellbeing literacy intersects with other literacies, as well as how other discipline-specific wellbeing literacies can engage and support youth.

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Data Availability The datasets generated and analysed in this study are not publicly available because the ethics approval for this project did not permit the sharing of collected data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the author.

Declarations

Competing interests The author declared no competing interests.

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