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Retention in Instrumental Programs in Lower Secondary School: the Student Perspective

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Retention in instrumental programs in lower secondary school: the student perspective.

Abstract

The National Review of School Music (2005) listed retention in elective instrumental music programs as a key area to be addressed. For example, around 10,000 students commence learning an instrument each year in Western Australia, but only around 3% annually complete the examinable post compulsory music course which contains a large instrumental component. Research from other subject areas suggests that the largest drop-out from any elective program occurs in the first year of secondary school.

This paper reports on a study into the impact of the instrument lesson upon the motivation of Year 8 students to continue their elective instrument studies beyond the first year in secondary school. The study examined the values and competence beliefs of 48 instrumental students across seven secondary schools in Perth. It was based upon the belief that students have a well developed understanding of their motivation for being involved in an instrumental music program, and strong beliefs about learning an instrument.

The study found that while Year 8 student values for playing an instrument appeared relatively stable, competence beliefs were fragile. Students in their first year of secondary school were effectively 'in transition'. Playing an instrument was generally described as fun and personally important, but most students indicated a need for a high level of encouragement from their instrument teacher. The study concludes that interpersonal relationship and attendant instructional practices in the instrument lesson are unique, and there are strong pedagogical implications for teaching students of this age.

Introduction

The National Review of School Music (2005) identified retention in elective instrumental music programs as an area requiring attention. In Western Australia, despite high levels of instrumental service provision across all sectors, only 3% of the total state cohort annually completes the examinable post-compulsory music course which has a large instrumental performance component (Curriculum Council, 2008). This paper examines whether the low participation rates evidenced in post compulsory music are the result of issues which stem from the early years of secondary school. Research in other subject areas indicates a large drop-out from elective programs occurs following the transition into secondary school.

Specifically, this paper reports on a study into the values and competence beliefs of 48 Year 8 students learning instruments in their first year of secondary school in Western Australia. Given that the instrument lesson is the central point of interaction in an instrument program, the study also examined how student values and beliefs for playing are shaped by the instrument lesson (StGeorge, 2004).

Setting the scene – Learning a musical instrument at school in Western Australia

In Western Australia, instrument lessons within the government sector are coordinated by the School of Instrumental Music (SIM), a division of the Department of Education. SIM is a large centralised delivery service which employs over 130 qualified instrumental teachers. SIM provides free 30 minute group lessons (up to five students per group) once per week by specialist teachers, and students are selected to participate in the instrumental program via a standardised music aptitude test. String players commence lessons from Year 3, while wind, brass, percussion and guitar students commence lessons in Year 6. Therefore, students within the SIM system have generally been learning for a minimum of two years when they enter secondary school (Year 8). Participation in the SIM program is elective – while students are encouraged to remain in the program throughout their entire school journey, participation is essentially voluntary.

In the private and Catholic systems, lessons tend to be delivered on a one-on-one basis or small group basis by instrumental tutors who often lack formal teaching qualifications. In these systems, students usually pay for their lessons, and participation is not subject to compulsory music aptitude testing, although some schools do undertake testing. Learning an instrument is also elective in these systems.

Retention in Western Australia

While only 3% of the total state cohort elect to undertake examinable post-compulsory music each year, further analysis of SIM's retention figures reveal:

- Only 23% of Year 8 students remain in the SIM program by Year 12, indicating that three out of four students have dropped out of the program, while
- Only 18% of Year 6 students remain in the SIM program by Year 12, indicating that four out of five have dropped out of the program.

While representative of only one sector, SIM's figures confirm a large drop-out rate from Year 8 – 12 within the government program, and that the large drop-out commences from Year 8, the first year of secondary school (SIM, 2010).

First Year, secondary school

Little research has been undertaken in music education as to the impact of the transition from primary to secondary school on the motivation of students to continue learning an instrument. However, research from other subject areas suggests that enrolments in elective programs can decline by as much as 25% per year from the first year of secondary school (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005; Harter, 1990; Eccles & Midgeley, 1989; Bandura, 1994). Reasons cited for declining participation rates include:

- Disrupted social networks upon entry to secondary school,
- Less personal school environments in secondary school,
- The greater use of ability streaming / competitive practices in secondary school, and
- Inappropriate instructional practices for emerging adolescent needs.

The upheaval caused by the transition to secondary school, combined with the emotional uncertainty of adolescence can result in avoidance behaviours, as students seek to disengage from elective areas of schooling which do not meet their emotional needs. Therefore, the drop-out rate from instrumental programs in Western Australia may reflect issues associated with the transition into secondary school, including the instrument lesson itself and teachers' attendant instructional practices. While acknowledging other factors such as peer pressure, students changing to lessons with private tutors and pressures relating to classroom subject selection, this study chose to focus upon the impact of the lesson itself, as the factors above tend to come into play in the later school years (Lowe 2008).

Research considerations

This project asked the following research question: What are Year 8 student beliefs about playing an instrument, and how does the instrument lesson impact those beliefs?

The study was guided by the need to construct an understanding of the motives of Year 8 students for learning an instrument. Given the quasi-phenomenological nature of the research, it was important to engage with the student voice, to speak

with students rather than *for* students (Fielding, 2004). Accordingly, a focus group interview methodology was employed.

Expectancy-value theory was employed as the theoretical foundation for the study. Expectancy-value theory was developed by Eccles (1983) specifically to explain adolescent motivation for mathematics, and has since been widely used in other subject areas, including instrumental music (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005; De Backer & Nelson, 1999; Wigfield, O'Neill & Eccles, 1999; O'Neill, 1996). Importantly in the context of this study, the values components of the theory have been found to be an accurate predictor of student future enrolment decisions (Eccles, 2005).

Within this theory and research context, values may be paraphrased as 'why should I engage with this musical activity', while competence may be paraphrased as 'what do I think about my abilities to succeed in this musical activity'. The values construct is further differentiated into three components: importance value, intrinsic value and extrinsic value. Importance value is closely linked with notions of identity, including the relevance and challenge of activities to the individual, while intrinsic value relates to the inherent enjoyment gained from undertaking activities and extrinsic value relates to how well activities conform to current and future goals. The values components are mediated by the cost of involvement, including the amount of time and effort required for engagement.

Method

For this study, seven focus groups were convened from seven different secondary schools. The schools represented a mixture of government, catholic and private schools, selected via a random stratified process from across the Perth metropolitan area. A total of 48 Year 8 students took part in the focus groups. All focus group members played an instrument, and learned their instrument through the school instrument program. Each group contained roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. Focus group interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted approximately one hour each. Data was recorded and professionally transcribed, and was initially grouped under three headings:

- Motivation for playing an instrument
- Positive influence of the instrument lesson
- Negative influence of the instrument lesson

From there, data was compared against the expectancy-value constructs. While acknowledging the unique nature of the research setting and the value of including

quotes to add realism to the report, space constraints allow only the main findings to be reported in this paper.

Main findings

Motivation for learning an instrument

Eighteen different reasons for learning an instrument were coded. Of these, the majority revolved around importance and enjoyment values. The majority of students described playing an instrument as fun, challenging, important for stress relief, and a valuable tool for self-expression. While some students described extrinsic reasons such as the joy of taking music exams or getting out of class, it became clear that, for the students in this study, playing an instrument was becoming important for their developing notions of self, and was fun and enjoyable. Further, students were able to articulate the reasons why they played an instrument. In this sense, the values associated with playing appeared to be relatively stable.

Positive impact of the instrument lesson

Based upon student responses, five emergent themes were coded relating to the positive aspects of the instrument lesson. These included:

- The provision of a supportive and non-threatening learning environment
- Rapport with and respect from the instrument teacher
- Professional teacher attributes i.e. encouragement and patience to build student competence beliefs
- Professional musician attributes relating to the instrument teacher's playing ability
- The instrument teacher's learning activity selection, relating to repertoire choice and ensemble playing

Of the above, over half the students spoke of the difference between the instrument lesson and regular school classes. The instrument lesson was described as being an intimate environment which allowed a close personal relationship with the teacher. Students enjoyed the unique level of intimacy afforded by the small class size, especially when the instrument teacher was enthusiastic and encouraging. The instrument teacher was described as a powerful figure in the relationship.

Encouragement was described by three-quarters of participants as being the key teaching component of the supportive learning environment. All students described the need to feel competent, and indicated the central role of the instrument teacher in providing positive feedback. In addition, virtually all students indicated a strong desire not to be singled out in lessons. Students drew inspiration from hearing their

instrument teachers demonstrate on their instruments, and indicated the value of teacher modelling in terms of learning how a piece should be played, how the instrument should sound, as a practical application of verbal instructions and for time management. Finally, students spoke positively of a regular turnover of repertoire, and of the enjoyment of small ensemble playing in lessons.

Negative impact of the instrument lesson

Based upon student responses, four emergent themes were coded relating to the negative aspects of the instrumental lesson. These were:

- A dislike of technical work,
- Comparative teaching practices in group lessons leading to perceptions of loss of prestige and feelings of incompetence,
- Repetition of teaching strategies and lack of repertoire turnover, and
- Lack of encouragement and rapport between the instrument teacher and students.

The dislike of technical work was perhaps not unexpected, but students spoke particularly of a dislocation between technical work and repertoire. They universally described a failure to see the point of technical work, namely scales, particularly when asked to play the same ones every week. That Year 8 students were particularly aware of their social standing within the group as well of their musical standing became evident in an almost universal fear of being embarrassed or made to feel musically incompetent in front of others in group lessons. Students were quick to affirm teaching pedagogies such as small ensemble learning to cater for a variety of differing playing standards. These student-suggested pedagogies were aimed at reducing the potential for perceived ability comparisons between students, and reducing the potential for competition in group lessons.

Repetition was described in terms of lack of variety in teaching practices, as well as lack of repertoire turnover. More importantly, three quarters of student participants described potential problems associated with a lack of rapport with their instrument teachers. Lack of rapport included a general lack of enthusiasm, lack of a personal interest in students, and most importantly, a lack of encouragement of student efforts by teachers. Lack of encouragement was described as a major contributor to students dropping out, under the guise of 'boredom'. In this study, students appeared to use 'boredom' as an umbrella term which included:

- Lack of stimulation resulting from repetitive teaching practices
- A desire to protect musical-efficacy (belief in one's abilities to succeed in specific tasks)

Students cited the role of encouragement in building musical efficacy. When encouragement was lacking, students felt unsure of their abilities and often exhibited avoidance behaviours such as non attendance at lessons, rather than confront perceived feelings of failure.

Discussion

When viewed through the expectancy-value lens, student values for playing appeared relatively stable. Students described a strong enjoyment of playing, and while they described the specific motivational impact of repertoire and ensemble playing, for the most part, they appeared to play an instrument for the enjoyment of playing. Further, playing was becoming important to notions of self, such as mood management and self expression. Strong values for playing, as indicated in this study, should be indicative of strong motivation to continue learning an instrument beyond Year 8.

However, competence beliefs appeared much less stable and were very dependent upon external reinforcement from the instrument teacher. The emotional insecurity of adolescence may partly explain the need for high levels of instrument teacher reassurance. Given that playing an instrument is a highly skills based activity, students may require constant encouragement to confirm that they are 'on the right track'. A lack of positive reinforcement undermines feelings of competence, and thus expectancies that they will improve, by not confirming that they are 'on the right track', leading to a reduction in effort. Further, Wigfield (1994) reported an empirical link between competence and importance value; students are less likely to value as important activities they do not feel competent in. Therefore competence beliefs can impact the values associated with playing.

The fragility of Year 8 student competence beliefs are exacerbated in group lessons by a constant fear of appearing incompetent in front of others. Students were well aware of difference in playing standards within their groups, and noted that these were emphasized in competitive and comparative teaching situations. The dangers of competition are well known – students often attribute differences in standard to ability and not effort (Weiner, 1974; Asmus, 1994; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). While effort is controllable, ability is seen as a fixed attribute. Therefore, students who feel less competent than others can attribute the difference to lack of ability resulting in avoidance behaviours such as skipping lessons, to avoid confronting feelings of incompetence. Further, competence beliefs affect not just musical efficacy but prestige. The desire to protect social standing within the group by not appearing incompetent may be the result of students being placed in new and unfamiliar groups in Year 8.

The impact of dislocation and the emotional challenges of adolescence may contribute to the fragile competence beliefs and the fear of failure detected among participants in this study. The desire of Year 8 students for a non-threatening learning environment may be a reaction to the competitive practices of secondary school in general, while their desire for rapport with the instrument teacher may be reflective of a desire for close and personal reassurance from an adult in an increasingly impersonal school environment. Fear of embarrassment in the group setting may be reflective of the need to rebuild disrupted social networks.

Conclusion

The key finding of this study is that given the primacy participating students attached to the need to feel competent, competence beliefs may be just as important as values in determining lower secondary students' decisions to continue learning an instrument, at least in school based instrumental programs. Perceptions of levels of support from the instrument teacher in the context of the instrument lesson appear to be highly influential in student decisions to continue learning. Further, because students view their instrument teacher as professional musicians, they view their instrument teacher as the most appropriate person to emulate and provide meaningful encouragement. This finding represents a departure from previously reported expectancy-value finding that values are the best predictor of future enrolment decisions, and help to emphasise the uniqueness of the instrument lesson as a learning environment. Accordingly, it would be valuable to undertake further studies involving expectancy-value theory within instrumental lessons, to examine the role of competence in later years as a key motivational determinant.

The findings of this study have clear pedagogical implications for instrumental music teachers. The first year of secondary school is a time of emotional uncertainty and upheaval. Instrumental students desire a personalised, supportive learning environment where they are not singled out and are encouraged that they 'are on the right track'. Seen by students as the most appropriate person to provide meaningful feedback and positive encouragement, the instrument teacher is in a unique position to take affirmative action to reduce the drop-out rate from elective instrument programs in Western Australia, at least among Year 8 students. By consciously seeking to provide a supportive and encouraging learning environment, more Year 8 students may be encouraged to continue playing their instruments throughout their time in secondary school and beyond.

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