Immersion, relevance and transferability: The motivational preferences of lower secondary students towards a newly created praxis-based class music program

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gather information on measures of motivation among year 7, 8 and 9 students enrolled in class music in a major Australian secondary school. The rationale for the study was to gain insights into why retention in the class music program had dramatically increased since the introduction of a new teaching program. A survey instrument was utilized to gather rating responses to questions on motivational preference, using Expectancy-value Theory as a theoretical framework. Results indicated high means for items associated with personal importance (identity) and the transferability of skills to other musical activities. Exploratory Factor Analysis confirmed correlations between the importance of tasks to students and the perceived usefulness of tasks. Implications for music teachers and the development of class music programs are discussed.

Key words: motivation, retention, student values and beliefs, lower secondary, class music

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Introduction

For music educators, inspiring and maintaining student motivation is of great importance, especially in secondary schools where music is frequently an elective subject. Recent studies involving music motivation in educational settings have dealt with a range of scenarios, including musical achievement (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010; Diaz, 2009; Schmidt, 2005), age and gender preferences (Schmidt, 2005; Schmidt, Zdzinski & Ballard, 2006; Green, 1997) and musical aptitude (Asmus & Harrison, 1990; Harrison, Asmus & Serpe, 1994). The most common context for these studies has been student motivation for learning musical instruments (McPherson, 1999; McPherson, Davidson & Faulkner, 2012; O'Neill, 2002; Hallam, 1998; Diaz, 2009) while a smaller number of studies have addressed student motivation for class music in secondary school (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010; Ng & Hartwig, 2011; Lowe, 2011; 2008; Rosevear, 2003). This study addresses the later, in particular the potential link between the taught curriculum and student motivation in an attempt to understand the possible reasons for a dramatic increase in student retention in class music in a major Australian secondary school.

Background

Much of the focus in motivational research studies has been on self-reported measures utilizing methodologies adapted from general educational theories, including Attribution Theory (Weiner, Nierenberg & Goldstein, 1976; Asmus, 1986), Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), Goal Orientation (Dweck, 1999) and Expectancy-value Theory (Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Eccles, 1983). Of these, Expectancy-value Theory has been popular among music education researchers (Tossavainen & Junonen, 2015; McPherson & O'Neill, 2010; Lowe, 2011; 2008). The theory posits that student values are determined by the nature of the tasks they undertake, and that values comprise three constructs: importance value, interest value and utility value. Importance value relates to identity; tasks are deemed important when they affirm aspects of self (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010), and Eccles draws broad links between personal importance (identity), and Dweck's (1999) mastery and ego goal orientations. Interest value includes interest in the subject itself and the enjoyment gained from undertaking the task (Tossavainen & Junonen, 2015), and is linked to intrinsic motivation. Utility value, also known as usefulness is determined by how tasks fit into an individual's future plans (both short and long term) and is linked to extrinsic value (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). All three values components are mediated by cost; cost refers to what has to be given up to undertake a task.

The other component of the theory (expectancies) maintains that motivation is affected by self-perceptions of competence and future success. These can defined as student beliefs about how well they can do in upcoming tasks currently or into the future, measured in terms of comparative estimates of present self-competence and future expectancies (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). A further mediating construct identified by McPherson and O'Neill (2010) is task difficulty. While Eccles and Wigfield (1995) report that they load on the same factor (competence), McPherson and O'Neill (2010) report them as different constructs; O'Neill (2005) states that a student may believe they are good at class music (competent) but affirm that the subject overall is difficult (task difficulty).

Importantly, results from Expectancy-value studies reveal values to be reliable indicators of future enrolment decisions (Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), while expectancies are reliable predictors of levels of persistence as well as student grades (Covington & Dray, 2002; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). Accordingly, Expectancy-value Theory was selected as the theoretical foundation for this study.

Rationale for this study

Retention in class music has been of on-going concern to music educators over a considerable period of time, especially in elective settings following the transition to secondary school (Ross, 1995; 1998; Sloboda, 2001; Handford & Watson, 2003; Ng & Hartwig, 2011; Lowe, 2011; Rosevear, 2003). Reasons cited for low enrolments include the perceived difficulty of the subject (O'Neill, 2002), the failure of class music to meet student needs and interests (Ross, 1995; McPherson & O'Neill, 2010; Ng & Hartwig, 2011) and the perceived unimportance of music education (Bray, 2000). While acknowledging the complexity of the motivation equation, issues relating to immediate student needs and interest along with perceptions of the degree of difficulty of the subject are informed by the nature of the teaching and learning program; in effect the tasks students are required to engage with in the classroom. While little formal research has been undertaken into the impact of specific curricula on student motivation in class music, in general terms, Teven and McCroskey (1997), Wigfield and Cambria (2010), Martin (2008) and Ng and Hartwig (2011) all acknowledge its potential to influence student motivation to continue in elective settings.

Four years ago, the research school in this study began redesigning its class music program. The music staff have developed a skills-based, practical program based around the tenant of 'sound before symbol', which emphasises perception, internalization through imitation and memorization to build long-term core musical skills. Repertoire is drawn largely from international folksongs and is hierarchical, with year 7 repertoire based around pentatonic melodies, year 8 around diatonic melodies and year 9 around chromatic melodies. The program aims to build a classroom culture of playing by ear and memory, through vocalisation and keyboards, and involves individualised fine-grained performance-based assessments of student achievement via a series of transparent, graded practical 'beep'-style tests which are pitched at the threshold of student practical musical skills. Since the introduction of the program in 2014, staff have noticed a spike in enrolments, with retention rates of over 70% across the three years of lower secondary school, leading to a 50% retention rate into Senior Secondary Music (Year 11) in 2017.

The purpose of this study was to measure student ratings of the revised class music program, using Expectancy-value constructs as a theoretical framework, as a way of gaining insights into the impact of the program on student decisions to remain in the program. The study utilized a survey instrument designed by McPherson and O'Neill (2010) which had been constructed previously to examine the motivation of 24,000 students towards class music across eight countries. This article addresses the following three research questions:

1. What are the motivational preferences across year 7, 8 and 9 students engaged in the class music program?
2. What are the motivational preferences within the three year groups engaged in the class music program?
3. What factors emerge, based upon the motivational preferences of students engaged in the class music program?

Method

Participants

The survey instrument was completed by 256 students across years 7, 8 and 9 in the research school, which is a major public secondary school in Perth, Western Australia. The students ranged in age from 10 – 14, and comprised 101 year 7 students (n = 101), 86 year 8 students (n = 86) and 69 year 9 (n = 69) students.

Data collection and instrument

The study was undertaken at the instigation of the music staff in the research school. After consultation, the four music teachers administered the survey to their individual classes over a two-week period in late April, 2016. Surveys were undertaken at the end of each individual class, and generally took between 5 and 10 minutes for students to complete.

The instrument comprised 17 items involving 5 point Likert scales. Students were asked to circle one of a range of statements written in the first person graded from no importance to very important. Seventeen items were consider sufficient, given the age of the students and time constraints upon delivery, with questions 1 – 3 examining importance value, 4 – 6 examining interest value, 7 – 11 examining utility value and cost, 12 – 15 examining competence and expectancies, and 16 – 17 examining task difficulty. Survey items were taken directly from the instrument developed by McPherson and O'Neill (2010); accordingly, piloting was not deemed necessary. McPherson and O'Neill (2010) report Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from a = .79 to a = .92. A sample questionnaire item is presented below:

1. For you, how important is it to learn about music?

Results

Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for all motivation variables appear in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all variables were high to very high (a = .83 to .90). In relation to the first research question, results for all year groups indicated relatively high means for the three importance value items (M = 4.22, M = 4.29, M = 4.49) as well as the utility item relating to transferability to other musical activities (M = 4.21). The reported means reflected an order from highest to lowest of importance value, interest value, utility value (with the exception of one item), and competence. The greatest variability, to be expected, occurred within the utility construct, as it included the most number of items incorporating the widest range of variables.

Research question two addressed Expectancy-value variables within each individual year group. Descriptive statistics for these categories are included in Tables 2, 3 and 4. In general terms, the year 7 cohort produced the highest mean scores across all items, the year 8 cohort produced the lowest, with year 9 in the middle. As for Table 1, importance value items remained very high across all three groups (year 7 – M =4.41, M = 4.37, M = 4.57, year 8 – M = 4.00, M = 4.20, M = 4.38, year 9 – M = 4.23, M = 4.29, M = 4.49). Intrinsic items also rated highly in year 7 (M = 4.15, M = 4.01, M = 4.25), but declined in year 8 before rebounding in year 9 (M = 4.03, M = 3.93, M = 4.12). Finally the utility value item relating to the transferability of skills to other musical activities remained high throughout (year 7 – M = 4.21, year 8 – M = 4.27, year 9 – M = 4.14).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for motivation variable among participants (n=256).

Motivation variable	M	SD	Sk
Learning about music	4.22	.757	-1.269
Being good at class music	4.29	.753	-1.366
Getting good grades	4.49	.697	-1.777
Like learning class music	3.98	.905	- .665
Interest in class music	3.86	.948	- .775
Enjoyment in class music	4.05	.927	-. 883
Class music is useful	3.93	.912	- .620
Helps with other musical activities	4.21	.860	-1.092
Useful for getting a job	3.35	1.208	- .340
Useful in daily life	3.38	1.099	- .500
Amount of effort	3.95	.873	- .899
Good at class music	3.57	.832	- .094
Do well this year	3.70	.835	- .160
Compared to rest of class	3.48	.970	- .282
Comparative expectations	3.51	.772	- .349
Difficulty of class music	3.49	.872	- .387
Difficulty compared to other subjects	3.70	1.043	- .467

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for motivation variable among year 7 students (n=101).

Motivation variable	M	SD	Sk
Learning about music	4.41	.764	-1.804
Being good at class music	4.37	.771	-1.542
Getting good grades	4.57	.653	-2.146
Like learning class music	4.15	.888	- .823
Interest in class music	4.01	.995	- .766
Enjoyment in class music	4.25	.921	-1.221
Class music is useful	4.04	.948	- .727
Helps with other musical activities	4.21	.941	-1.237
Useful for getting a job	3.51	1.222	- .539
Useful in daily life	3.56	1.053	- .672
Amount of effort	4.13	.902	-1.010
Good at class music	3.73	.871	- .190
Do well this year	3.93	.828	- .409
Compared to rest of class	3.72	.907	- .485
Comparative expectations	3.63	.809	- .272
Difficulty of class music	3.79	.791	- .597
Difficulty compared to other subjects	4.02	.959	- .804

To address the third question, the differentiated Expectancy-value variables were subjected to factor analysis using varimax rotation, and the results are presented in Table 5. While the subject to variable ratio was moderately low, the researchers were keen to examine whether factors grouped together as previously reported. Three factors were obtained with variances equalling 44.03%, 13.21% and 7.10% respectively, and low level sampling adequacy was determined by a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin coefficiency of .91 and a Bartlett's test (p = 0005).

Expectancy-value items relating to competence, expectancies and task difficulty were clearly defined by Factor 1 (all items > .72), while interestingly Factor 2 was defined by both importance and utility value items. However, these were not as clearly defined (> .58). Factor 3 included intrinsic items (> .81), as well as cost and the ego orientation of obtaining good grades. However, both cost and ego were not well defined (> .45). While competence / expectancies and task difficulty loaded as one factor and intrinsic value as another, the loading of importance and usefulness together as a factor was somewhat surprising, suggesting that the personal importance attached to tasks (identity and mastery) may be tied to the perceived usefulness of the task to long term goals.

Discussion

Findings reported in this study are preliminary and provide a snap-shot of current student motivational ratings towards the revised class music program. Across all year groups, importance items rate more highly than interest

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for motivation variable among year 8 students (n=86).

Motivation variable	M	SD	Sk
Learning about music	4.00	.736	-1.271
Being good at class music	4.20	.087	-1.334
Getting good grades	4.38	.088	-1.757
Like learning class music	3.74	.101	-.699
Interest in class music	3.83	.948	-.775
Enjoyment in class music	3.78	.987	-.742
Class music is useful	3.85	.914	-.638
Helps with other musical activities	4.27	.789	-.959
Useful for getting a job	3.31	1.220	-.271
Useful in daily life	3.28	1.155	-.381
Amount of effort	3.78	.925	-1.000
Good at class music	3.50	.837	-.308
Do well this year	3.56	.820	-.060
Compared to rest of class	3.42	.951	-.181
Comparative expectations	3.45	.746	-.272
Difficulty of class music	3.31	.885	-.249
Difficulty compared to other subjects	4.02	.959	-.804

Table 4: Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for motivation variable among year 9 students (n=69).

Motivation variable	M	SD	Sk
Learning about music	4.23	.710	-1.032
Being good at class music	4.29	.078	-1.366
Getting good grades	4.49	.070	-.653
Like learning class music	4.03	.101	-.363
Interest in class music	3.93	.734	-.575
Enjoyment in class music	4.12	.777	-.400
Class music is useful	3.88	.850	-.514
Helps with other musical activities	4.14	.827	-.921
Useful for getting a job	3.16	1.158	-.204
Useful in daily life	3.22	1.069	-.451
Amount of effort	3.90	.710	-.613
Good at class music	3.43	.737	-.232
Do well this year	3.54	.797	-.032
Compared to rest of class	3.20	1.008	-.069
Comparative expectations	3.41	.734	-.812
Difficulty of class music	3.28	.856	-.279
Difficulty compared to other subjects	3.57	.962	-.038

and utility value components. Eccles (2005) defines importance as being closely linked with identity. Tasks which affirm a good fit between the learning environment and the needs of the individual build students' sense of self. While links have been made between aspects of importance value and the work of Deci and Ryan (1985) into competence as affirming a sense of self, no direct connections emerge in this study. Rather, a stronger potential link is noted with Dweck's (1999) research into goal orientations. This may be partly the result of questionnaire wording. However, Eccles (2005) categorically states that importance value is enhanced when tasks challenge students but are achievable, and are perceived as relevant.

In relation to the class music program central to this study, high ratings for importance value items indicates that students may be finding tasks challenging yet achievable, and relevant to their developing sense of the role of music in their lives. Given the nature of the questionnaire wording, high ratings for the first question implies a high identity orientation, question two implies a high mastery orientation, and the third implies an equally high ego orientation. High ratings for all three orientations suggests that tasks in the research school may well be activating students' personal valuing of the class music, as well as activating their competitive desire for high grades. While competition is not generally considered desirable, it may also be unavoidable to a degree in larger lower school classes. Importantly, high performance orientations associated with the desire for high grades would not appear to detract from reported high identity or mastery orientations.

Table 5: Factor analysis of motivation variables with varimax rotation

Factor loading by variable	F1	F2	F3
Learning about music	.338	.610	.337
Being good at class music	.227	.559	.332
Getting good grades	.165	.427	.451
Like learning class music	.242	.288	.812
Interest in class music	.073	.224	.866
Enjoyment in class music	.227	.230	.854
Class music is useful	.154	.740	.178
Helps with other musical activities	-.024	.586	.273
Useful for getting a job	.182	.741	.071
Useful in daily life	.225	.767	.174
Amount of effort	.324	.506	.510
Good at class music	.822	.226	.145
Do well this year	.756	.268	.235
Compared to rest of class	.856	.162	.109
Comparative expectations	.774	.255	.129
Difficulty of class music	.805	.074	.109
Difficulty compared to other subjects	.723	.079	.155

In addition, the utility variable of transferability of skills / knowledge to other musical activities rates highly. This may also relate to notions of relevance, a potential aspect of personal importance, but as Eccles (2005) notes, more study is needed into this potential link. However, this finding is particularly encouraging given often reported claims that class music does not meet student needs or interests (McPherson & O'Neill, 2002). It would appear that students in the research school see the relevance of the tasks they are undertaking in building musical skills relevant to their lives, and understand the transferability of these skills to other musical domains. While interest value items rate highly, it was somewhat unexpected to find the highest ratings occurring for importance value which may affirm that the class music program is tapping into the long recognised centrality of music to issues of identity in the lives of young people heightened during adolescence (Hargreaves & North, 1996; Zillman & Bhatia, 1989).

In relation to the second research question, findings reveal a decline across motivational measures from year 7 to year 8 but a ratings

rebound in year 9. While this may be merely indicative of naturally occurring differences between the year groups (lower motivational preferences in the year 8 cohort coincide with higher ratings for task difficulty), the fact that motivational preferences do not continue to decline into year 9 is unexpected when compared against previously reported studies indicating sharp declines in motivational preference ratings across lower secondary school in all subjects (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005; Downs, 2003). Of further interest in this study is that motivational preferences remain consistent from year 7 across into year 9, with importance value items continuing to return the highest motivational preferences, closely followed by transferability to other musical activities. This finding also goes against much previous research, and adds weight to the argument that the nature of the taught curriculum has a powerful impact upon student motivational orientations. It also vindicates the decision of the music staff in the research school to introduce a practical, skills-based class music program based upon the premise of 'sound before symbol'.

In relation to the third question, factor analysis was undertaken to determine whether any higher-order constructs could be determined, given the high ratings for importance value and some utility value items. As expected, factor analysis largely confirms Expectancy-value constructs with interest value loading clearly as one factor, and competence items on another. While task difficulty and competence load strongly on the same factor (unlike McPherson & O'Neill's study), it does not mean that the two are not distinct. Rather, task difficulty may not a mitigating variable in this setting due to the nature of the tasks and the assessment program which tests students at the threshold of their skills. Mid-range ratings for both suggest that students are being optimally challenged and assessed within their ZPD. Thus, students perceive that they are reasonably good at their class music tasks, and the subject is moderately difficult for them at the level at which they are working. Of greater potential interest is the loading of importance items with select utility value items. In this study, a correlation was found between importance items, and longer-term goals relating to daily life and a job. This would indicate that importance and extrinsic variables may not be as diametrically opposite as thought. However, the researchers acknowledge that the cohort size is borderline in terms of subject-to-variables ratio, and further study is required to unpack this potential relationship.

Conclusion

Expectancy-value Theory offers one well-respected framework for exploring student motivational preferences, and in attempting to address the underlying reason for improved retention in the research school, produced some surprising responses. Student perceptions of the class music program appear to be impacting positively upon their motivational preferences, and resulting enrolment decisions. In particular, motivational preferences relating to identity, challenge, achievement and relevance, along with an understanding of the transferability of skills emerge as the primary motivation preferences in this setting, and may point the way to addressing issues relating to retention in class music programs in other settings. This finding may run contrary to instinctive teacher beliefs relating to intrinsic value whereby making the subject 'interesting and enjoyable' is seen as the principle approach to enhancing student motivation. In reality, developing tasks that build immersion in music, rather than fun, may be the defining finding of this preliminary study.

Further, designing class music programs that incorporate a graded fine-grained assessment program which optimally challenges the individual, may produce more realistic self-assessments of ability and task difficulty. This may in turn reduce the potential of ability and subject difficulty beliefs to operate as mitigating variables

for students electing whether to continue class music studies or not (although this is not a central Expectancy-value finding).

Overall, student motivation is a complex construct with no easy fix. As well as identifying importance value as a key motivational trigger in this study, findings also suggests that there is potential to investigate the links between the perceived importance of a subject to students, and the perceived usefulness of it. This study does acknowledge that motivation to continue is not based solely upon perceptions of the subject; that motivation operates within a broader social milieu. However, understanding students' desire for relevance and transferability helps illustrate the need to break down the isolation in which class music sometimes operates independent of other components within the school music program, notably the instrumental and ensemble programs, and tap into issues of identity associated with the importance of music in adolescence. Understanding how the taught curriculum impacts student motivational preferences may go some way to helping teachers address retention issues associated with the oft-discussed failure of class music to meet student needs and interests, and the perceived unimportance of music education to students.

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