Hong Kong Parents' Perceptions of Benefits of Music to Their Children

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Background: In Hong Kong, many parents encourage their children to take extra music lessons beyond normal school hours. This study investigates parents' perceptions of the benefits of music to children.

Aims: To investigate why many parents in Hong Kong encourage their children to take extra music lessons beyond normal school hours, and to examine their perceptions of the benefits of music education.

Sample: Questionnaires were sent to 97 parents of children attending weekend classes in 10 music centres.

Method: Surveys were conducted. The questionnaire consisting of 16 items was designed to elicit parents' perceptions about music

education. The parents responded to each item on a 6-point scale.

Results: Music education was perceived by the parents to be advantageous for promoting their children's music-specific interest, and in their mental, motor and academic development but their ratings for interest in music and cognitive and affective development were the highest among the variables.

Conclusion: The findings suggested that formal and informal music education programs should provide appropriate curriculum contents to maintain children's interest for lifelong engagement in musical activities.

Keywords: Music, Education, Child development

香港家長就音樂對子女益處的看法

背景: 很多香港家長鼓勵子女利用課餘時間參加額外的音樂課程。本文嘗試探討家長 究竟認為音樂可能為他們的子女帶來什麼益 處。

目的:探討家長為何會鼓勵子女利用課餘 時間參加額外的音樂課程,以及他們究竟認為 音樂可能為他們的子女帶來什麼益處。

調查對象: 本研究以問卷調查方式,於 十所不同的兒童音樂中心訪問了九十七位家 長。

調查方法: 本研究以問卷調查方式搜集

資料。問卷中共有十六項問題,以1-6 指標作 答。

調查結果: 結果顯示家長們認為主要的得益包括能令兒童對音樂產生興趣和促進兒童在心智、身體技能和學業等各方面的發展,而家長們認為發展子女對音樂的興趣與發展他們的心智不只同樣重要,而且比其他得益更為重要。

總結: 這結果顯示,無論是正規或非正規 的課程,音樂課程的內容須注重保持兒童對音樂 的興趣,令他們能終身投入音樂的活動中。

關鍵字:音樂、教育、兒童發展

In addition to formal music education in the school, many parents in Hong Kong are also keen to encourage their children to take extra music lessons beyond normal school hours. This has indirectly activated the commercial market of music education provision and brought about the existence of a large number of music centres in various districts of Hong Kong. The fact that the parents are willing to pay fees for their children to attend music classes and to spend their time taking their children to the classes inevitably implies their perception of the importance of music to their children's development. Whereas most research has focused on formal music education and its effects (e.g., Aleman, Nieuwenstein, Bocker, & de Haan, 2000; Andress, 1973; Archer, 1995; Cox 1966; De I'Etoile, 2001; Draper & Gayle, 1987; Green, 1990), few studies have investigated the perceptions of parents on the benefits of informal music education. The present study attempts to examine the perceptions of parents who bring their children to music classes beyond the school and to investigate what benefits they think music education would bring to their children. The findings may throw light on the aspects that music education should emphasize to suit the needs of the community.

Hong Kong Parents' Commitment

Educators and researchers have suggested that music education is beneficial for the development of children (Andress, 1973; Archer, 1995; De I'Etoile, 2001; Howe, Davidson, Moore, & Sloboda, 1995; Robb, 1999; Yoon, 2000). For over decades, children seemed to have had plenty of opportunities to develop musical skills and attitudes through both formal and informal music experiences. Today, music has remained to be part of the "arts education key learning area", one of the eight key learning areas of the current curriculum for both primary and secondary schools (Curriculum Development Council Committee on Arts Education, Hong Kong, 2003; Curriculum Development Council,

Hong Kong, 2001, 2002; Education Department, Hong Kong, 1983, 1987a, 1987b). A major direction of arts education in the Hong Kong curriculum is "to nurture students with the virtues of creativity, openness, flexibility and aesthetic sensitivity for learning to learn and life-long learning" (Curriculum Development Council, Hong Kong, 2001, p. 56). Nevertheless, how well the parents think the schools have taken this direction seriously in their music curriculum is unclear.

Although music does not seem to have been taken too seriously in Hong Kong schools and some schools do not even count scores in music towards students' overall achievement, the commitment of many parents to music education appears to be strong. One needs only count the number of music preschools in the city to feel the remarkable commitment of the parents. A rough estimate on the basis of addresses and telephone numbers found in the yellow pages of the telephone directory (www.yp.com.hk) indicates that no less than 200 large commercial music centres are currently operating in different areas of Hong Kong. Why do parents send their children to take music classes after school? The phenomenon may be puzzling.

Various Benefits From Music Instruction

Music education operates in a broad spectrum, including visual (seeing visual aids with the music), auditory (singing and listening), kinaesthetic (moving to music) elements, and also multimode presentations. Vocal and instrumental training are typical examples and they have been widely introduced to children in the school (see Curriculum Development Council Committee on Arts Education, Hong Kong, 2003). It is believed that music education not only benefits the child in aesthetic development, but can also enhance the development in generic skills (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001; Jensen & Loaker, 2001), that are essential for lifelong learning and future career advancement.

Numerous studies have been conducted across different age groups in order to explore the relationship between music education and human activities. For example, Cockerton, Moore and Norman (1997) showed that music enhanced the performance of undergraduate students. Hetland (2000) found that active instruction in music had a small but significant effect on the spatial skills for preschool and elementaryaged children. There was evidence that music may benefit an individual in various areas of personal development, such as mental, personal, academic and physical growth (Hetland, 2000; Cockerton, Moore, & Norman, 1997; Rio & Tenney, 2002; Spychiger, 2001).

Although the studies of Cockerton, Moore, and Norman (1997) and Hetland (2000) both showed positive effects of music education, it is not clear what the parents' purpose may be when they invest so much of their money and time to allow their children to have additional music training. In Hong Kong, like other places, no systematic research has been conducted to investigate the perceptions of parents toward their children's music education. The present study aims to use a survey method to systematically probe the responses of parents with children attending music classes outside school. By understanding the parents' perceived weighting of importance in the four aspects of music education focused in the present study interest in music, mental development (cognitive and affective), physical development, and academic performance—we will have a better understanding of the needs of the community for music education. The findings may throw light, at least partly, on the direction of music education programs in attracting potential clients.

Music-specific Interest

One of the most important benefits of music education is obviously an increase of the child's interest in music and musical activities. Today's education

emphasizes lifelong learning (e.g., Education Commission, Hong Kong, 2000, 2002). The promotion of lifelong learning in music should include not only relevant knowledge, attitudes and skills that prepare the learner to proceed to more advanced learning, but should also promote the learner's motivation so that the pursuit for advanced knowledge and skills will continue throughout the learner's life span (Costa-Giomi, 1999; McKeachie, 2000; Moorhead & Pond, 1978). Hence, the development of musical attitudes, musical understanding, and musical skills is crucial for the children's lifelong pursuit of the aesthetic features of music (Apfelstadt, 1986). It would not be surprising that the parents would perceive the interest and motivation of their children in music most essential as a result of providing their children with additional music education opportunities.

Cognitive and Affective Development

The effects of music on mental development are well documented in therapeutic research (e.g., Rio & Tenney, 2002; Robb, 1999). The research findings imply that music education has the ability to change an individual's beliefs and subsequent behaviours. Music is believed to have strong effects on cognitive development (e.g., Furnham & Bradley, 1997). Berlyne (1971) hypothesized that when we listen to music, we unconsciously take into account musical features such as its complexity, familiarity and novelty. He suggested that these variables affect our preferences for music by altering basic brain processes that control our general level of excitability or arousal. For the same reason, listening to music could enhance certain capabilities of the brain (Overy, 1998). These capabilities may range from perceptual sensitivity to analytical thinking and may include cognitive and affective domains.

In the cognitive domain, researchers have suggested associations between music and brain activities (e.g., Bernstorf, 2002; Hodges, 2000;

Weinberger, 2000). Music is believed to be related to basic cognitive and emotional systems of the brains (Weinberger, 2000), and may have positive effects on some cognitive activities, including learning in mathematics and reading (Bernstorf, 2002). Thus training in music not only enhances music learning, but can also enhance reading skills and acquisition of general knowledge (Calogero, 2002).

Through decades, numerous scientists have also shown that certain characteristics of creative behaviours are achieved through musical nurturance (Andress, 1973; Archer, 1995; Cleall, 1981; Doig, 1941; Howe, Davidson, Moore, & Sloboda, 1995; Schmidt, 1958). It would not be surprising that a good music program would enhance children's creativity (Krause, 1981). Perhaps it is also possible for such capabilities to transcend to other cognitive areas.

Furthermore, in the affective domain, there is a close connection between music and emotion and mood (Kreutz, Bongard, & Jussis, 2002; Lewis, Dember, Schefft, & Radenhausen, 1995; London, 2001-2002). Music can produce various emotional responses in different individuals and even different responses in the same person at different times (Weinberger, 1996). Apart from supporting the mood-inducing ability of music, Chastain, Seibert, and Ferraro (1995) also found that music tended to have the effect of focusing one's attention, so that the listeners were more likely to attend to words that matched the mood of the music. Furthermore, Rio and Tenney (2002) have also suggested that music can improve social interaction, increase self-expression and self-esteem, and decrease disruptive behaviour. It seems that music could have quite strong effects on the mental activities of the individual.

Motor Development

Andress (1973) suggested that music education can enhance children's motor development, language

growth and thought processes. Movement is a natural response to music. Thus music activities are often associated with motor activities such as dance and rhythmic movements. Children as young as six months old often show movement responses to music and often pause to listen attentively before starting to move (Moog, 1976). It has been found that young children's rhythms can be quite fast (Williams, 1985). It is amazing that even in such fast movements, very young children are able to keep time, or attain "beat competency" despite their limited physical maturation. There is evidence that music brings better coordination as well as rhythmic perception. In general, whereas the development of singing and rhythmic skills is dependent upon physical maturation and coordination, exposure to music education may enhance such development.

Indeed, researchers have found a close relationship between music activities and psychomotor competence (e.g., Burns, 1988; Meyer & Palmer, 2003; Phillips & Aitchison, 1997; Seitz, 1996; Turner, 1998; Vahed, 1982). Whereas some researchers found that psychomotor instruction may improve musical skills (Phillips & Aitchison, 1997; Turner, 1998), some other researchers also found that musical instructions may improve psychomotor skills (Seitz, 1996; Vahed, 1982). Hence, some researchers have suggested that musical experiences that are appropriate to children's psychomotor development should begin at an early stage (Burns, 1988).

Academic

Robb (1999) suggested that music is related to cognitive development and psychosocial development. A growing body of research has demonstrated the beneficial effects of music on various aspects of education performance (Yoon, 2000). According to Yoon (2000), music enhances the brain development of children such that they can perform better in certain academic tasks and life skills. Listening to music is also

believed to affect learning and recall in academic areas. Spychiger (2001) has found that children who took a curriculum that was designed to increase music instruction at the expense of language and mathematics became better at language and reading but no worse at mathematics than students who had spent more time on these subjects without the additional music instruction. Krebs (1978) suggested that music education could help the mentally handicapped child in learning academic subjects such as mathematics and reading. She suggested that music plays a role in memory retention, social skills and self-help skills. These skills would probably assist the child to excel in their academic endeavours.

Specifically, Douglas and Willatts (1994) studied the association between music and language learning. They showed that students who had received more musical training were capable of remembering significantly more words than those who did not. The findings are consistent with the idea that musical training is associated with cognitive abilities. Thus music may be an effective medium for the development of language and other academic areas.

The Present Study

The present study attempts to investigate the perceptions of parents in Hong Kong who send their children to music classes after school toward music education. The major research question is: What are the major reasons for sending their children to music classes? Through interviews with parents asking them to complete a survey questionnaire, we attempted to examine their beliefs in potential benefits of extra music training for their children. These beliefs are assumed to have derived from their value judgments of the musical activities.

Method

The Sample

This paper investigates parents' perceptions on the benefits of music to children. The sample came from 97 parents of children who were receiving some kind of music training such as learning the piano, strings, wind instruments, and choir. They were mostly of working class but were willing to spend their savings on their children for them to receive extra music education beyond that provided in the normal school hours. The amount they were willing to spend ranged from Hong Kong \$400 to above \$1,000 per month, which, for some of them, could be up to 10% of their monthly income. These parents who responded to our survey were mainly mothers (over 90%). They were randomly selected from 10 different music education centres. The response rate for the survey was over 70%.

The Instrument

The questionnaire consisting of 16 items was designed to elicit parents' perceptions about music education (see Appendix). The parents responded to each of the 16 statements (in Chinese, which was the respondents' mother tongue) on a 6-point scale (1 = absolutely disagree to 6 = absolutely agree) such that responses > 3 could be interpreted as agreeing with the statement. There were also items asking for demographic data.

The 16 items formed four scales. The four scales were:

Interest in music. Four items asked whether the parents considered that music was important in enhancing their children's interest in music.

Cognitive development: Three items focused on the issue of whether parents believed that music education can help their children to concentrate, remember things better, and become more creative. Affective development: Three items asked whether parents believed the children would be happier and find more fun through learning music.

Motor coordination. Three items asked whether parents believed that their children's body posture and coordination might be improved through music education.

Academic performance. Three items asked whether parents thought that the academic performance of their children could be aided through music education.

Procedure

The two-page survey was distributed to all available parents at 10 different music education centres in different districts of Hong Kong. The parents were approached randomly when they accompanied their children to the centres and they completed the survey before the music classes started. The parents were provided with pencils and encouraged to complete the survey on site although some of them chose to complete it at home and return it within 3 days. The analysis was conducted for surveys with reasonably complete data from 97 parents.

The Analysis

Preliminary analysis included an examination of the reliability of each scale. Principal components analysis tested the ability of the 16 items to form the five a priori scales (Nie, 1994; Norusis, 1994a, 1994b). When the five factors were established, we checked the correlations among them. We expected the correlations to be reasonably low indicating that they could be distinguished from one another. The analysis was conducted with the SPSS (Foster, 2001; Green, Salkind, & Akey, 2000) statistical tool.

When the scales were established, we examined (a) whether the parents believed that music instruction would be helpful for their children and (b) which of the five factors were comparatively more important in the parents' perceptions. We conducted a series of paired-samples t-tests comparing each pair of the five variables. Thus, there were a total of 10 paired-samples t-tests. We hypothesized that apart from a focus on their children's mental development, the parents would find their children's interest in music significantly more important than the other variables considered here.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

In preliminary analysis, we first established the five scales. Reliability analysis found that the scales were acceptable. The alphas for the scales were .78, .76, .66, .83 and .71 for Interest, Cognitive, Affective, Motor, and Academic, respectively (see Appendix). Principal components analysis yielded the five a priori factors explaining a total of 71.7% variance. The factor loadings were acceptable (all > .50).

After the factors were established, the items in each scale were then averaged to form a scale score. For example, the four items in the scale of Interest were averaged to form a score for the scale of Interest. Similar procedures were followed for the other scales. The correlations among the scores were then examined (Table 1). The correlations ranged from .07 to .76, indicating that the scales were reasonably correlated but were clearly distinguishable from one another.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among 4 Factors

	Interest	Cognitive	Affective	Motor	Academic
Mean	4.87	4.72	4.72	4.47	3.73
SD	0.95	0.93	0.87	1.06	1.09
Correlation					
Interest					
Cognitive	.31**				
Affective	.35**	.76**			
Motor	.07	.61**	.52**		
Academic	.24*	.54**	.56**	.47**	

Note: N = 97. * p < .05. ** p < .001. The parents responded to the items on a 6-point scale (1 = absolutely disagree to 6 = absolutely agree). The scores were coded such that higher scores reflected more favourable perceptions.

Benefits of Music Education in Five Aspects

The means and standard deviations of scores in the five factors studied in the present investigation are presented in Table 1. An inspection of the mean scores found that the parents perceived all five factors to be important. The scores for all the five factors were high (all means > 3.5 on a 6-point scale). These results indicated that the parents found music education important in promoting their children's interest in music and beneficial to their children's cognitive and affective development, motor coordination, and academic work. The results are not surprising, as the sample came from parents who sent their children to receive extra music instructions in addition to formal music education in the schools.

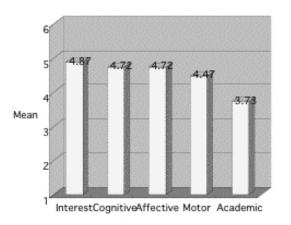
<u>Differential Importance of the Five Factors</u>

A series of paired-samples t-tests was conducted to examine which of the five factors were perceived to be more important in the perceptions of benefits for children to have music education when they were young.

Interest in music. The means and standard deviations of scores are presented in Table 1. The results showed that the mean score for interest in music (M =

4.87) did not differ significantly from the mean score for cognitive development (M = 4.72), t(96) = 1.35, or from the mean score for affective development (M = 4.72), t(96) = 1.44, ps > .05. However; the score for interest was significantly higher than that for motor coordination (M = 4.47), t(96) = 2.89, p < .05; and than that for academic work (M = 3.73), t(96) = 8.96, p < .001, indicating that the parents rated interest in music and cognitive and affective development the highest among other variables (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mean scale scores for 5 factors.



Cognitive development. The results showed that the mean scores for cognitive and affective development were similar (Ms = 4.72), t(96) = 0.00; but the mean score for cognitive development was significantly higher than the mean score for motor coordination (Ms = 4.47), t(96) = 2.78, p < .05, and than the mean score for academic work, (Ms = 3.73), t(96) = 9.98, p < .001. The results indicated that the parents found the benefits of music stronger in terms of cognitive development than in motor coordination and academic performance.

Affective development. The results for affective development was similar to the results for cognitive development. The mean score for affective development was significantly higher than the mean score for motor coordination (Ms = 4.47), t(96) = 2.59, p < .05, and than the mean score for academic work, (Ms = 3.73), t(96) = 10.40, p < .001. The results indicated that the parents found the benefits of music stronger in terms of affective development than in motor coordination and academic performance.

Motor coordination and academic performance. The t-test showed that the mean score of motor coordination (M = 4.47) were significantly higher than that of academic work (M = 3.73), t(96) = 6.63, indicating that the parents tended to perceive the benefits of music education on motor coordination to be stronger than any gain in their children's academic work.

As expected, the results showed that the parents perceived their children's interest in music as important as the cognitive and affective outcomes of music education (Figure 1). Also, whereas the parents of Hong Kong found all the variables examined in the present study important, they perceived cognitive and affective development as more important outcomes than motor coordination and academic performance, and the benefit on motor coordination was perceived to be more than on academic work.

Discussion

The present study found that the parents who sent their children to music classes beyond the regular music curriculum in Hong Kong schools had different perceptions and beliefs about the potential benefits of music education. In a very competitive place like Hong Kong with a very competitive schooling system (Tsang, 1992), it is not surprising for parents to emphasize the importance of their children's cognitive and affective development. Interestingly, however, the parents found their children's interest in music just as important, and perceived it as one of the most important benefits their children would gain from the extra music lessons. More interestingly, despite the competitiveness of the school system, academic outcomes were ranked lowest among all other factors.

In Hong Kong where the school system is highly competitive and often exam-oriented (Tsang, 1992), it is interesting to find so many parents who are so keen on the musical development of their children that they send their children to extra music classes on top of the music curriculum in the school. In the Hong Kong school system, music is often seen as a lower priority compared to more academic domains such as language and mathematics. The fact that many parents send their children to take extra music lessons outside school has partly reflected their perception of perhaps the inadequacy of formal music instruction within the school.

One might speculate that in the highly competitive school setting, the parents would be keen on providing their children with extra tuition on more academic work rather than on music. On the contrary, many parents in Hong Kong are willing to spend a substantial portion of their income for their children to receive more music instructions, even though music is already provided as one of the eight key learning areas in the school curriculum (Curriculum Development Council

Committee on Arts Education, Hong Kong, 2003). In the era emphasizing whole-person development and "life-wide" learning (Curriculum Development Council, Hong Kong, 2001, 2002), these parents may be making a wise choice.

We may also speculate that the major reason for the parents to encourage their children to receive music training is related to the potential benefits of music instruction on children's mental development, which would subsequently bring about positive gains in their academic achievement (e.g., Douglas & Willatts, 1994; Krebs, 1978; Spychiger, 2001; Yoon, 2000). Interestingly, although the parents did have very favourable ratings for both cognitive and affective development as important outcomes of music instruction, comparable to these major benefits was their children's interest in music, which has been found to be one of the most important outcomes in the parents' perceptions. This result implies that whereas the parents found music important in its own right, perhaps they also found that the current school system has not sufficiently addressed the needs of their children in their aesthetic development through music instruction.

Indeed, researchers have demonstrated positive benefits of music instruction in terms of children's mental development (e.g., Berlyne, 1971; Cleall, 1981; Doig, 1941; Furnham & Bradley, 1997; McKeachie, 2000; Schmidt, 1958). Nevertheless, while recognizing the benefits in terms of mental development in both cognitive and affective aspects, the parents seemed to be also devoted to their children's development of aesthetic attributes through music instruction. Thus their children's development in musical skills and knowledge was of great importance to them, compared to any other positive effects that may be less central to their expectations. More interestingly, the potential benefits of music instruction in terms of development in motor skills and academic outcomes seemed to be less essential, even though these two benefits did also have an important place in the parents' minds.

The present findings have important implications for both the developers of a formal music curriculum and those in the commercial field of music. For curriculum designers and practitioners of both the public and commercial sectors, the present findings imply that the music curriculum should focus on the aesthetic benefits of music instruction and the promotion of the motivation and self-perceptions of the learners. There has been ample evidence of the positive effects of motivation and self-concept on young people's learning behaviours and outcomes (e.g., Ames, 1992; Marsh &Yeung, 1997; McInerney, Yeung, & McInerney, 2001). The arousal and maintenance of children's interest in music is likely to promote a propensity for life-long learning and engagement in musical activities throughout the lifetime.

Researchers and curriculum designers should explore the reasons why the parents would find the arousal and maintenance of their children's interest more important compared to other factors and why it would be necessary to provide their children with additional music classes beyond the school curriculum to meet their expectations. Thus whereas the present findings have provided us with a better understanding of the perceptions of the parents towards music instructions, the findings have also called for more thorough investigations of the reasons behind these perceptions. Given the fact that many of the extra music classes are providing instructions on musical instruments, would it be that the parents found the formal curriculum in the school setting inadequate in providing the knowledge and practice of musical instruments? Was it because the parents found the amount of time for music in the formal school curriculum inadequate for the aesthetic development of their children in the relevant area? Further research should therefore attempt to collect qualitative data, for example through interviews, to investigate the reasons for the parents' willingness to invest their time and resources for their children to attend extra music classes, and why many of them have

chosen classes for musical instruments in particular.

The present study has served only as a preliminary investigation of parents' perceptions of the kinds of benefits that music could bring to their children. The factors explored here are by no means exhaustive. Future research should therefore also examine whether there are other possible reasons for the parents to encourage their children to learn more music. For example, due to the fact that good music performers are often welcome by elite schools in Hong Kong, do some parents provide extra music tuition to their children so as to help them get into these selective schools? In other words, could there be some instrumental or utilitarian reasons for at least some parents to allow their children to take extra music lessons? Could such expectations exist only in working class parents like those in the present sample? Hence, the limitations of the sample from only a limited range of age, location, and music activities and the limitations of the factors explored in the present investigation need to be addressed in further studies.

In sum, many parents in Hong Kong encourage their children to take extra music lessons beyond normal school hours. The present study has shown that they seem to value particularly their children's interest in music together with cognitive and affective development. Other potential benefits such as motor and academic development are perhaps secondary. Hence, formal and informal music education program providers should emphasize the benefits of music on promoting children's interest in music whereas growth in other areas would occur naturally as valuable educational outcomes.

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Appendix

Response Items and Alpha Reliabilities of Factors

Factors/Items Alpha
Interest in Music .78

- 1 To children, learning music is boring. @
- 2 Music education is not important for children. @
- 3 My child's interest in music was not enhanced through music education. @
- 4 Music education is no fun for children. @

Cognitive Development

- 5 Learning music makes children concentrate better.
- 6 Learning music improves children's memory and recall of facts.
- 7 Through music, children become more creative.

Affective Development

.66

.76

- 8 Learning music makes children live a happier life.
- 9 After learning music, a child becomes more cheerful.
- 10 Music education adds more fun to a child's daily life.

<u>Academic</u> .83

- 11 Music education improves my child's interest in other subjects (e.g., Chinese, English)
- 12 After taking music classes, children are more capable of managing their time in their study.

13 Through learning music, my child likes school subjects more.

Motor Coordination

.71

- 14 Music education increases a child's motor agility.
- 15 Music education (such as learning musical instruments) nurtures my child to develop a better body posture.
- 16 Music classes help children to build rhythmic movements more easily (e.g. dancing). Note: Items were coded such that higher scores reflected more favourable perceptions. Items were in a randomised order in the parent survey. @ These items were reverse coded.

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