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## **Music education and emotional engagement**

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### **Introduction**

Within the context of an increased questioning of the meaning and value of music education, the evidence of a link between the sensitivity to artistic and the sensitivity to other types of beauty, moral beauty in particular, is of interest, as such a link allows for the assumption that fostering the sensitivity to aesthetic beauty within the scope of music or art education may have an impact on the sensitivity to non-aesthetic beauty. However, this assumption pre-supposes that music education actually fosters the sensitivity to aesthetic beauty – which has not been empirically confirmed yet.

The present study is based on the recognition that all models of the sensitivity to beauty and goodness highlight the importance of emotional engagement for beauty and goodness to be experienced. This, in turn, raises the question whether or not music lessons (i.e. school music lessons) elicit such emotional involvement. The main aim therefore is to investigate whether or not pupils experience emotional involvement, and how they describe it. Furthermore, it will be of interest what conditions and factors seem to facilitate emotional involvement (or engagement) within the scope of formal music education.

### **Emotional involvement and music education**

Whereas a number of studies have examined why music is important to adolescents (e.g., North, Hargreaves, & O'Neill, 2000; Reed, Kubey, & Coletti, 1989; Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2002;) and showed that among other effects music fulfills their emotional needs (North, Hargreaves, & O'Neill, 2000), little is known on emotional experience and emotional engagement in the context of formal art education, as well as conditions and factors that might facilitate such experience or involvement.

A study by Campbell et al. (2007) investigated the significance of music and music education to middle and high school adolescents. The participating adolescents were heavily invested in the emotional benefits of music; they considered it as a means of self-expression, emotional release and control, and as an acceptable way to vent their feelings or to cope with

the challenges of adolescence. Asked about important factors for music classes, they mentioned the teacher's love for music, passion, and competence; furthermore, the instruments offered. However, in most cases, they reported on experiences of boredom, lack of challenge and lack of interest. Bakker (2005) could show that there exists a positive relationship between music teachers' flow (absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation) and the experience of flow among their students.

### **Research question and objectives**

In the face of this lack of empirical data on pupils emotional engagement during school music classes, the present research aimed at investigating (a) whether or not pupils experience emotional involvement during school music lessons, (b) how they describe it (i.e., which emotions are mentioned), and (c) which factors seem to elicit or facilitate such involvement. Two studies were set up to answer these questions, the first qualitative, the second quantitative.

### **Study I**

*Data collections and participants.* Instead of interviewing them, adolescents aged 12 to 18 and living in Lausanne were invited to take part in an essay-writing contest on the theme of music lessons. The idea behind this approach was that the description by participants of what is relevant to them in music lessons would thus not be gleaned from research questions created by adults, but rather capture the complex reality of adolescents' experiences with music in formal educational contexts<sup>1</sup>. To ensure that as many young people as possible would be aware of the contest, all members of the Société Vaudoise des Maîtres de Musique (SVMM) were contacted by email on this subject and encouraged to share information with their students. Furthermore, flyers and posters were sent to the city and canton leisure centers. Forty-three participants (26 girls, 17 boys) prepared a contribution during their leisure time and submitted it together with basic socio-demographic indications (i.e. age, sex, and grade). A jury consisting of professional musicians and music teachers, as well as journalists evaluated the texts and decided on the winners. Sponsors offered prizes (e.g. concert and cinema tickets, vouchers for books).

*Data analysis and results.* All essays were content analyzed with HyperResearch taking a directed approach. Initial coding categories were derived from the research questions, namely: (a) which activities, situations, musical contents, persons, or relationships do adolescents describe in their texts; (b) which of these activities, situations, musical contents, persons, or

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<sup>1</sup> The instruction given was to write a text of 1000-3000 characters (including spaces) on at least two of the following aspects: Music classes: courses like any other? How can music classes make you enthusiastic? Music lessons: homework or pleasure? What do you think, what do you feel during music lessons? How would an ideal music course be? Goosebumps during music class, does it happen to you? Is making music like playing sports?

relationships are experienced as relevant and why; (c) by what feelings or emotions are these activities, situations, musical contents, persons, or relationships accompanied? Any text passage that did not fit within one of the initial coding categories was assigned a new code, thus extending and refining the coding scheme. Participants addressed seven main topics in their texts: the importance of classmates and teachers, the aspects they like best or do not like about music classes, emotions and feelings linked with music classes, the meaning of music in their lives, and general thoughts on school music classes. By far the majority of the writing contest participants described music classes as moments of enjoyment, joy, fun, or pleasure, sometimes accompanied by feelings of relaxation or well-being; only a few adolescents reported on boredom or stress. Experiences of social flow (Walker, 2010), the overall good atmosphere in class and teachers' endeavors to share their passion for music with students seemed to play a more important role for subjective emotional experience, whether positive or negative, than the musical pieces or styles studied in class. The data did not support the idea that music lessons might favor the experience of self-transcendent emotions (i.e. awe, elevation, admiration): none of these emotions or of the typically associated bodily changes or reactions (e.g. shivers, goose bumps, lump in the throat) appeared in adolescents' texts.

## **Study II**

*Data collection and participants.* The principals of three secondary schools or gymnasiums of the cantons of Vaud, Valais and Geneva were contacted to ask them first for permission to administer a questionnaire to some of their students, and then for the contact details of music teachers working at 60% or more in their institution. These teachers were contacted by email to present the project and ask them if they would agree to organize the completion of the questionnaires in all the classes they would meet during the last week before the summer holidays. Five teachers showed interest and were provided with all documents and information needed.

A sample of  $N = 237$  adolescents (133 girls, 104 boys) aged 12 to 18 ( $M = 13.93$ ) filled in a questionnaire created on the basis of existing measurement instruments and the writing contest submissions. The first section concerned socio-demographics (i.e. age, sex, school grade), extra-curricular musical activities (i.e. taking music lessons, playing one or several instruments, improvising), and everyday music listening (i.e. favorite music styles, hours of music listening a day, music listening while doing homework). The second section addressed psychological functions of music in adolescence (i.e. different areas of psychological goals or functions that are central to adolescent development and mental health and can be supported by musical activity) as described in Laiho (2004), construction and strengthening of identity,

emotional regulation, management of interpersonal relationships, and agency (i.e. feeling of control, competency, achievement, and self-esteem). This section consisted of nine items on 5-point rating scales (from *I strongly disagree* to *I totally agree*) derived either from the Music Use Questionnaire (MUSE; Chin & Rickard, 2012), or from the writing contest submissions. The third section concerned adolescents' subjective well-being at school. It comprised eight items on 5-point rating scales (from *I strongly disagree* to *I totally agree*) that referred to three of the six scales of the Student Well-being Questionnaire (SWBQ; Hascher, 2007), namely positive attitudes towards school, positive academic self-concept, and enjoyment in school. The fourth section, finally, covered the main ideas expressed by the writing contest participants with regard to school music classes. It comprised 14 items on 5-point rating scales (from *I strongly disagree* to *I totally agree*) that took the exact wordings of the young authors. Students filled in the paper-pencil survey as part of a music lesson.

*Data analysis and Results.* A Varimax rotated principal component analyses was carried out for each section of the questionnaire, except for the first section that concerned socio-demographic indications. In a next step, mean scores, standard deviations skewness and kurtosis were computed for all resulting subscales. It appeared from these descriptive statistics that adolescents seem to engage deeply in music they listened or play out of school (e.g. music evokes strong emotions in them, changes their mood, allows them to express their feelings, or helps them to overcome difficult moments in life), whereas the musical activities and the music pieces or styles approached at school seem to elicit considerably less emotional engagement. Nonetheless, the atmosphere of school music classes and the music teachers were highly valued and rated positively. In a final step, all subscales were correlated with each other and with demographics. Young women seemed to feel (and to describe themselves) as more involved in music, and more engaged in music classes than young man. Adolescents' emotional involvement during school music classes correlated highly significantly with the importance of music to them outside school, as well as with the fact that they played (or not) an instrument – a finding that makes sense, but for which empirical evidence was lacking so far (at least to our knowledge).

## **Discussion**

The main objective of the present research was to investigate whether or not pupils report on emotional involvement during school music classes, and how they describe it. A further objective of the study was to explore conditions and factors that seem to facilitate emotional involvement within the scope of formal music education. Two studies were undertaken to answer these questions: the first one, qualitative, to explore students' experience and capture

the way they describe it, the second one, quantitative, to check if the views thus expressed are consistent with the ones of a larger and more representative sample of adolescents.

By far the majority of the writing contest participants describe music classes as moments of enjoyment, joy, fun, or pleasure, sometimes accompanied by feelings of relaxation or well-being; only a few adolescents report on boredom or stress. Experiences of social flow (Walker, 2010), the overall good atmosphere in class and teachers' endeavors to share their passion for music with students seem to play a more important role for subjective emotional experience, whether positive or negative, than the musical pieces or styles studied in class. The data do not support the idea that music lessons might favor the experience of self-transcendent emotions (i.e. awe, elevation, admiration) and could thus foster the sensitivity to beauty and goodness: none of these emotions or of the typically associated bodily changes or reactions (e.g. shivers, goose bumps, lump in the throat) appear in adolescents' texts.

The questionnaire, in turn, confirms the fact that most adolescents rate their music teacher and the atmosphere in music classes positively. Not surprisingly and in line with the literature, it evidences the important role music has in adolescents' lives, particularly with regard to emotion and mood regulation. Furthermore, data show that involvement in music strongly correlates with engagement in music lessons, a finding that makes sense but for which empirical evidence was lacking so far (at least to our knowledge). Data also show that there is a statistically highly significant link between extra-scholar music activities and emotional engagement in music lessons, respectively experiencing music lessons as a special school subject.

The present research gives valuable first insight into the conditions and factors that elicit and foster emotional involvement in the context of formal music education, and into the way that adolescents describe such involvement. Additionally, it allowed for the development and initial validation of a short questionnaire that captures adolescents' relation to music, well-being at school and experience of school music lessons, thus opening the door to further studies on this relatively new, but important field of research.

At a time when music education in schools is being questioned, it is not enough to argue that music education and musical practice foster the intelligence, academic achievement and social development of children and adolescents. The more intrinsic value of music education and musical practice for the individual (e.g., their link with positive characteristics and positive emotions), as well as the conditions and factors necessary for them to contribute to the positive development of young human beings (e.g. positive institutions) should be addressed as well – on the basis of sound scientific knowledge that is currently lacking.

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