An Investigation of Musical Ability Beliefs and Self-Perceptions Among Fourth-Grade Students
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Purpose
To explore the musical ability beliefs and ability self-perceptions among eight fourth-grade students whose music teacher believes in universal human musicality, specifically:
1. Their beliefs about musical ability?
2. Their perceptions of their own abilities?
3. Relationships between their musical ability beliefs, ability self-perceptions, and experiences both inside and outside of school music class?

Why?
• Belief in musical ability as an innate talent or “gift” is prevalent in many Western cultures, even among music teachers.
• This belief can have negative effects for those who feel they are not talented—often as a result of perceived judgement from a music teacher.
• In contrast, there are many cultures that believe in universal musicality—that all persons can (and will) become competent music makers.
• I previously studied one music teacher’s belief in universal human musicality and the ways in which this belief related to her teaching practice and classroom culture, which included her communication of a persistent belief that each student can and will succeed and the goal to help students develop musical independence and “feel like musicians.”
• To what extent do students pick up on this belief in universal musicality? Do they feel like musicians?

Method
Ethnographic Case Study
• Data Collection = 12 weeks
• Class Observation
  • Twice-weekly
  • Began on their second music class of 4th grade
• One-on-One Interviews
  • Semi-structured
  • Five with each student
  • Two with teacher
• Student Journals

Participants
• Eight students from one fourth grade class, selected using maximum variation sampling:
  • Current apparent ability/skill level?
  • Level of observed confidence/engagement in music class?
  • Previous time at school/with teacher?

Findings
Tension Between Ability Attribution Beliefs: Effort or “Gift”?
• While all students expressed the belief that anyone can be good at music if they try, about half of them at some point expressed or at least pondered the belief that musical ability is innate—inside some people at birth and not in others.

Fluidity and Malleability of Students’ Musical Self-Concepts
• Students’ musical self-concepts tended to be unstable and fluctuated frequently throughout the 12-week period, some day-to-day or even moment-to-moment.
• Students’ musical self-concepts seemed to be malleable and easily influenced by a variety of factors, including:
  • Comparison with others
  • Judgement from others
  • Task outcome
• The influence of these factors on students’ musical self-concepts and the amount of effort students put forth in future musical tasks seemed to fluctuate in a cyclical manner—either positive or negative.

Beliefs about the Nature of Musical Participation
• Though all students were reasonably competent at music, not all felt they were good at music. This seemed to relate to the level of skill/mastery they perceived was required for musical participation, focusing on perfection and being “the best.”
• This, along with the fact that most planned to stop making music after finishing school, suggests that they see music-making in the real world as something only done by professional musicians—Unless you are good enough to be a performer, the only other option one has for musical participation in daily life is as a listener.

Implications
How might we as music educators...
• Help students understand and believe that musical potential exists in ALL individuals rather than a select few?
• Contribute to the consistent development of positive musical self-concepts in our students?
• Encourage everyday musical engagement for all via acknowledgement of what Blacking (1971) called “average musical ability?”