

AN INVESTIGATION OF MUSICAL ABILITY BELIEFS AND SELF-PERCEPTIONS
AMONG FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS IN THE U.S.A.

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If a teacher believes everyone is musical, do their students come to adopt this belief and view themselves as musical? Prevalent among many Western cultures is the belief in musical ability as an innate talent or “gift,” which can have negative effects for those who feel they are not musically talented—often as a result of perceived judgement from a music teacher. However, this belief is not universal, as evidenced by ethnomusicological studies of cultures that instead believe in universal musicality—that all people can become competent music makers. The current study aimed to explore ability beliefs and self-perceptions among elementary students whose teacher holds a belief in universal musicality rather than innate, selective talent.

Review of Literature

Students’ beliefs about abilities—including their own—have long been considered an important topic related to academic motivation, and numerous theories of motivation incorporate some aspect of ability beliefs and/or self-perceptions (Austin, Renwick, & McPherson, 2006). Existing research in the field of music education indicates that students’ musical ability beliefs and self-perceptions are positively correlated with their interest and/or participation in music (Austin, 1990; Austin & Vispoel, 2000; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Wigfield et al., 1997). Unfortunately, children’s musical self-concepts tend to become more negative as they get older (Eccles et al., 1993; McPherson & O’Neill, 2010; Shouldice, 2014; Simpkins, Vest, Dawes, & Neuman, 2010; Wigfield et al., 1997; Wigfield & Harold, 1992).

One specific belief that may affect a student's musical self-concept is that of musical ability as a "natural talent" or "gift" (Howe, Davidson, & Sloboda, 1998). A participant in a study by Abril (2007) described this belief, saying, "the ability to make music is something that comes to you when you are really young ... you just have it or you don't" (p. 8). This conception of innate and selective musical talent—present at birth among some but not others—is prevalent among the general population in many Western cultures and tends to strengthen with age (Abril, 2007; Asmus, 1986; Austin & Vispoel, 1998; Davis, 1994; Evans, Bickel, & Pendarvis, 2000; Hallam & Prince, 2003; Hallam & Shaw, 2002; Howe & Sloboda, 1991; Legette, 1998; Randles, 2011; Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Shouldice, 2014; Wayman, 2004).

A belief in innate, selective musical talent can have profound effects on a person's musical self-concept, particularly for those who believe they are not talented. Several researchers have documented the negative effects of talent beliefs among such individuals (Abril, 2007; Burnard, 2003; Elmgren, 2019; Ruddock, 2012; Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Whidden, 2010). Judgements from family members and/or teachers can be powerful influences on one's ability self-perceptions, and participants in numerous studies have recalled experiences in which a music teacher communicated to them that they were not musical (Abril, 2007; Burnard, 2003; Elmgren, 2019; Ruddock, 2012; Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Swain & Bodkin-Allen, 2014; Welch, 2005; Whidden, 2010). Sometimes these judgements were expressed explicitly, such as a music teacher telling a student they were tone-deaf or asking them not to sing, but just as often judgements were implicit, such as a music teacher not choosing a student for singing opportunities or denying them entry into an ensemble. Whether the judgement was implicit or explicit, the end result was the same: these persons' musical self-concepts were destroyed, and they chose to cease music-making for the rest of their lives.

Teacher beliefs—including beliefs about students’ abilities to learn—have been an important focus of study in the field of education because they have an inevitable impact on teachers’ actions in the classroom and on the learning experiences of their students (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Raths, 2001; Thompson, 2007; Vartuli, 2005). This is particularly true during the early school years, which “are an important formative period when children’s beliefs about their intellectual abilities are based on academic expectations and ability evaluations conveyed by their teachers” (Vartuli, 2005, p. 77). Many music teachers believe that musical ability requires innate talent and attribute a student’s musical success or failure to the presence or absence of talent (Biasutti, 2010; Brändström, 1999; Clelland, 2006; Elmgren, 2019; Evans et al., 2000; Hewitt, 2006; Jaap & Patrick, 2015; Legette, 2002, 2012; Shouldice, 2009; Thompson, 2000). For example, one music teacher in Shouldice’s (2009) study expressed the belief that “some people *can’t* be ... ‘a musician’ because they might not have that talent” (p. 133), while another stated, “To be truly musical I think is a gift” (p. 148). Since many music teachers believe in the concept of innate, selective musical talent, it is likely they convey this belief to students through their words and actions in the classroom.

While the conception of musical ability as an innate and selective talent is common among many Western cultures, ethnomusicologists have studied numerous cultures in which this belief does not exist (Blacking, 1967; Feld, 1984; Koops, 2010; Mapana, 2011; Marshall, 1982; Messenger, 1958; Russell, 1997; Turino, 1989). In these cultures, there is a belief in universal human musicality. All human beings are considered to be musical and capable of becoming competent music makers, and children are brought up to do so through the process of enculturation, in which adults guide and encourage all children to become active participants in the musical culture.

Given the contrast between the negative effects of innate talent beliefs in many Western cultures and the positive effects of universal human musicality in other cultures, I wondered how the belief in universal human musicality might manifest in a teacher's classroom. To explore this, I conducted an ethnographic case study (Shouldice, 2019) of Deena Ridge (pseudonym), one elementary music teacher in the Midwestern U.S. who believes that all students have musical potential, in order to investigate the ways in which this belief related to her actions in the classroom and interactions with students. I discovered that Deena emphasized the importance of practice and effort, normalized the varying speeds at which students learn, established a safe and supportive learning environment, communicated a persistent belief that each student can and will succeed, and worked to help students develop musical independence and "feel like musicians" so that they would feel empowered and motivated to make music.

Although Deena made it a priority to help students develop positive musical ability self-perceptions, it is not clear the extent to which this was actually achieved in her students since I did not examine their experiences or beliefs. If previous research findings suggest the belief in innate talent can be damaging to a student's musical self-concept, might a teacher's belief in universal musicality transfer to their students and result in more positive ability self-perceptions? Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore the musical ability beliefs and self-perceptions among eight of Deena's fourth-grade students. Specific guiding questions included the following:

1. What is the nature of these students' beliefs about musical ability?
2. What is the nature of these students' musical ability self-perceptions?
3. What relationships exist between students' musical ability beliefs, musical self-concepts, and/or their experiences both inside and outside of school music class?

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