THE SUBJECTIVITY OF MUSICAL LEARNING:
UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION IN
INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC INSTRUCTION

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Faculty of Education and Arts, University of Newcastle, New South Wales, January 2010
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ABSTRACT

Learning a musical instrument in childhood invites a future that holds lifelong pleasure and companionship, yet although thousands of children take up an instrument annually, many abandon their lessons after only a short period. Research on retention and attrition in instrumental music education has found that continuing participation is associated with a constellation of factors, but there is little research exploring how the learning experience itself might influence young people’s decisions to continue their music lessons. This thesis investigates the subjective perspective of learning and how this impacts upon individuals’ participation in formal instrumental music lessons during childhood and youth.

The study employed a mixed-methods design with quantitative and qualitative methods as complementary strategies. Study participants varied in their age, amount of experience, depth of involvement in musical learning and accomplishment. In the quantitative stage, a descriptive-comparative approach examined individual, social and contextual dimensions of the music learning experience of primary and secondary students in an Australian context (n=376), as well as relationships between these dimensions and continuing participation in formal instrumental music instruction. In the qualitative stage, an interpretive-descriptive approach was used to analyse semi-structured interviews undertaken with primary school children, tertiary students and adults in the community (n=66).

Affinity for music, representing the subjective meaning of music to the individual, was identified as the connection between individuals and music, and was a necessary condition for sustaining participation in musical learning. Affinity for music developed where learning was musically meaningful and where emotionally charged appraisals of learning made by the musical self were predominantly stable and positive. Musically meaningful learning occurred to the degree that individuals were able to make sense of the music through fluency and facility. The making of musical meaning was also influenced by the degree of correspondence between the musical repertoire, the individual and their socio-cultural environment. Patterns of learning associated with a range of technical and musical outcomes also emerged; these consisted of clusters of beliefs about music and learning, expressions of volition, and practice strategies.

An explanatory theory of participation in music learning developed from the research suggests that the subjective experience of music learning influences the likelihood of continued participation. The major pedagogical implication of the study is that educators will be in a better position to foster musical meaning and affinity if they target students’ practice approaches while closely appraising the social context of student learning.