

# **“It’s like being the hero of your own story”: Perceptions of musical skill development for the beginner cellist**

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## **Background**

When children commence learning a musical instrument, they are introduced to a diverse range of skills from the cognitive, expressive and psychomotor domains. Children’s capacity to adopt and integrate these musical skills can directly affect their progress and influence ongoing interest. However, as many of these skills are unfamiliar to the beginner musician, their development requires specialised support, deliberate attention and focussed practice. The outcomes of these learning processes can also be a critical to children’s future musical engagement.

Children’s lived experience of musical instrument skill acquisition is rarely examined in music education research; therefore, the current paper adopts a novel case study approach to investigate how children perceive and manage musical skill development. Intrapersonal factors and interpersonal relationships including those with the teacher, who is the principal researcher, are also examined.

## **Aims**

1. To investigate seven-year-old children’s lived experience of cello skill development within the first 18-months of tuition.
2. To investigate how children’s musical skill development is affected by intrapersonal factors and interpersonal relationships.
3. To investigate how the experience and perceptions of skill development in early learning influences children’s longer-term musical engagement.

## **Method**

Through a longitudinal Action Research methodology, 14 seven-year-old children’s lived experiences of learning the cello were tracked across the first 18-months of tuition. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of interviews with the children and their parents were integrated with the teacher-researcher’s recorded observations from work with the children.

## **Results**

During the early stages of learning, children prioritised the development of skills in one of the three learning domains and this was attributed to initial competencies and affinities at the beginner level. As tuition progressed, teaching and learning challenges included ensuring that all skill sets developed according to the children’s individual, differentiated needs. Central to this developmental process was how the children’s intrapersonal factors interacted with their interpersonal relationships to shape their learning behaviour at home and in the instrumental music studio.

Regardless of skill level or ability, all of the children measured their process in musical skill development through critical evaluation of their sound production. The children’s sophisticated perception of sound included discerning nuanced difference in quality of tone, intonation, volume, fluency and timbre. Production of an ideal sound that integrated these qualities was described as an aspirational goal in practice and performance.

Sound was perceived also by the children as a powerful conduit for self-expression and musical communication. In this context, musical skill development fulfilled children’s creative needs and satisfied their desire to be seen and hear by others as capable musicians. This result generated growth in the children’s sense of agency and autonomy.

When the complex process of skill attainment, sound production and musical expression was achieved successfully, students experienced transformed representations of their internal selves that positively impacted their emotional states. These transformative experiences were linked to a close affinity with their cello and this was evidenced by the children’s use of language devices such as metaphor, simile, analogy and imaginative narrative to describe how skill development strengthened their bond with the instrument. Further, some children ascribed anthropomorphic traits to their instruments, defining them as a person or ally and assigning names and gender pronouns.

Investigation of students’ learning over time indicated that children who experienced beneficial interpersonal growth and productive interpersonal relationships through musical skill development maintained active longer-term musical engagement. These children described imagining themselves in positive performance and learning environments in their projected musical futures.

Taken together, the findings from this investigation of children’s perceptions of musical skill development highlight how instrumental music learning can profoundly affect children’s inner worlds. The breadth and depth of the experience contributed to the children’s enjoyment in engagement and affected motivation to continue with their musical development.

## **Conclusions**

This research, conducted by the teacher as researcher, makes a unique contribution to the literature by identifying the importance of children's perception of sound in the process of cognitive, physical and emotional engagement with musical skill development. It identifies how this can have a transformative effect on a child's sense of self and influence their future musical engagement.

### **Implications**

Monitoring children's perception of sound production and its impact on musical expression in the development of skills in the three learning domains is integral to instrumental music teaching and fosters meaningful, ongoing engagement outcomes.

**Keywords:** music education, skill development, children, learning, cello.