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Musical aptitude and multiple intelligences among Chinese gifted students in Hong Kong: Do self-perceptions predict abilities?

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Abstract

The relationships between perceived multiple intelligences and musical aptitude were examined in 298 Chinese gifted students in Hong Kong. Self-perceived musical intelligence consistently emerged as the significant predictor of global musical aptitude, and its components of tonal imagery, rhythm imagery, and musical sensitivity, suggesting that self-perceptions did reflect actual abilities. However, there were also subtle differences in the prediction, as greater predictability was observed for tonal imagery. Implications of the findings for identification of musical talent in the school setting are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been growing concerns and interests in the identification and development of students' diverse talents in Hong Kong schools ([Education Department, 2000](#)). The

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movement has been largely propelled by the increasing acceptance of a broadened conception of giftedness based on Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences (MI).

Specifically, Gardner (1999) proposes that each individual has specific strengths and weaknesses and can be conceptualized to have multiple abilities or intelligences that can be affected by culture, biology, and other factors. In reframing his MI theory, he defines intelligence as a biopsychological potential to process information in certain ways, and each intelligence allows the individual to solve problems and fashion products that are of value within a cultural context. To date, Gardner (1999) has postulated eight intelligences and is considering other candidate intelligences. The eight intelligences are verbal-linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist. Based on the evidence gathered from extensive studies with prodigies, gifted individuals, brain-damaged patients, savants, normal children and adults, experts in different fields, and people from different cultures, Gardner (1983) maintains that each of the multiple intelligences is relatively independent, and together they typically work in harmony. Since the publication of MI theory, different education practitioners have applied it in teaching and learning, in assessment and evaluation, and in identification of students with different talents (Armstrong, 1994; Fasko, 2001).

Among the eight intelligences, musical intelligence is the earliest to emerge (Scott & Moffett, 1977). Bamberger (1995), for example, in her studies of musical learning of musically talented students, has shown that the musical mind does not function in a linguistic or logical-mathematical way, and musically talented students are more adept in shifting between different representations of a musical task (performing, reading a score, listening). Nonetheless, the evidence for the independence of musical intelligence is compelling, considering the studies on musical savants who, despite their generally low IQ, have musical accomplishments resembling those of musical prodigies (Miller, 1999). Musical savants at an early age are often able to replicate tunes after a single hearing. They sing in tune, and have an exceptional tonal memory. In a similar vein, the recognition of perfect pitch in the special population of autistic individuals has been suggested as a possible indication of musical ability (Winner, 1996). However, Gardner (1983) also contends that musical intelligence could extend beyond purely aural sensory capacities as assessed in traditionally musical aptitude measures, citing that rhythmic organization could exist apart from the auditory realization and allow deaf persons an entry point to musical experiences.

Indeed, the assessment of musical aptitude for the identification of musical talent generally takes aural discrimination as the core element for objective assessment. This traditional practice dates back to the late 1800s to the work by Helmholtz, Wundt, and Galton (Haroutounian, 2002). Seashore (1938) describes musical talent as a hierarchy of attributes that include tonal, dynamic, temporal, and qualitative, and he is best known for his musical aptitude tests. The Seashore test battery has subtests that provide an objective measurement of aural discrimination within each area of these sensory capacities, assessing analytical skills that include the ability to make fine differentiations between tones of different pitches, length, and loudness and musical structures.

The Seashore test battery has also stimulated the development of a variety of musical aptitude tests, all variations of Seashore's basic standards of measurement. Particularly noteworthy is Gordon's (1986) series of test batteries for measuring musical aptitude from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Gordon (1986, 1995) bases his measurement of musical aptitude on the concept of imagery or "audiation", which refers to the ability to comprehend music or derive musical meaning for which the sound is not physically present (as in recall), is no longer physically present

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