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Instrumental learning with exams in mind: a case study investigating teacher, student and parent interactions before, during and after a music examination

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Teaching and learning dynamics in musical instrument tuition, especially in one-to-one teacher–student contexts, have not been studied in a truly systematic manner. The research described in this paper attempts to bring some insights to this area, for teachers and students were studied over a period of six months. More specifically, in the fourth month of the study, all the learners took a practical instrumental examination of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (either violin or piano, ranging from Grades 1 to 8). It thus became possible to explore how the teachers aided, developed and structured the students' preparation up to, during and after the examination, and also how the students worked and responded to the examinations within the context of their families. Furthermore, parents were observed and interviewed about their interactions with their children – the students – and the teachers. Looking at four teachers and eighteen students, the results revealed a number of complex and interconnected themes which both aided and hindered learning. The current paper highlights these.

Situating the current study

The existing literature on teaching and learning has tended to separate out particular factors as single elements that contribute to a learner's progress. In the current paper, however, every attempt is made to look simultaneously at as many of the factors that either assisted or prevented learning within the context of the current case-study approach. But which factors may contribute to successful learning in music?

Davidson, Howe and Sloboda (1997) demonstrate the key role of others and external events in stimulating instrumental learning: being offered music lessons by the school; parents supporting practice activities; the 'star' performer being seen as a role model (Nigel Kennedy or Vanessa Mae, for example). However, the researchers demonstrated that whilst external motivation may be a stimulus to learning, it does not sustain learning. Intrinsic (internal) motivation was found to be the key ingredient for longitudinal engagement and development. Davidson *et al*. showed that personal engagement, particularly an emotional/expressive response to the content of music, provided the critical intrinsic force. Studying a cross-section of young instrumentalists, they discovered that those who gave up music after six to twelve months of tuition had no personal sense of connection to what they were learning. Whereas those who went on to develop high-level skills found playing personally very satisfying. Sloboda (1990) studied the autobiographical memories of emotional responses to music and demonstrated that individuals with a life-long commitment to music were more likely to report strong emotional responses to musical content than those individuals who were not involved with music, or considered themselves 'unmusical'. For example, one young woman reminisced:

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> I was seven years old, and sitting in the morning assembly . . . The music was a clarinet duet, classical, probably by Mozart. I was astounded at the beauty of the sound. It was liquid, resonant, vibrant. It seemed to send tingles through me. I felt as if it was a significant moment. Listening to this music led me to achieve my ambition of learning to play the clarinet. (Sloboda, 1990: 37)

From the above, it appears that internal motivation is essential to learning and therefore the case studies should attempt to collect data relevant to this factor.

Additionally, since we are studying children during a period of examination in the current paper, it is vital to consider what an examination may offer as a source of motivation. Sloboda (1994) warns of the consequences of utilising exams simply for external motives, explaining that for creativity and effort to be sustained, internal motivation must be stimulated. In Sloboda's opinion, when used for intrinsic motives, such as a desire to progress in order to explore a more adventurous repertoire, the examination system has the potential to create the incentive to continue and develop learning. Starkly put, the examination should be undertaken for the learner's personal benefit and not for the satisfaction of any other individual.

But what does existing research tell us about how students respond to music examination contexts? Vispoel and Austin (1993) investigated how junior high school students accounted for their failures in tests of musical performance. Most commonly it was found that the students either attributed failure to insufficient effort or lack of ability. Those who regarded effort as important expected their subsequent performances to improve because they would either work more or with greater understanding, and so improve: their outlook was positive. Other students could see little point in persisting further as they believed they did not possess sufficient musical ability: their outlook was that failure was beyond their control. The researchers concluded that in terms of teaching and learning strategies, if effort were the focus, a constructive outcome could be attained from a failure with personal progress rather than absolute achievement being highlighted.

Dweck (1986) and Elliott and Dweck (1988) have classified the account of failure focusing on effort as coming typically from individuals who seek to increase their competence, to understand or master something new as a learning goal. There are also performance goals, where individuals seek to gain favourable judgements of their competence, and so avoid failure. Such performance goals can lead to an account of failure, which (in line with Vispoel and Austin) is linked to a lack of ability. So, in Dweck's terms, learning goals seem more favourable than performance goals, though obviously the two do have points of convergence.

The research examined so far suggests that individuals who display certain types of behaviour may be more likely to respond to the potential success and failure of examination situations more constructively than others, and perhaps be motivated differently towards their learning. Obviously, the student's attitude towards an examination is critically important. In the current investigation we shall be discussing this matter, along with how parents assist with preparation, execution and the post-examination period. (This is particularly pertinent here as the students ranged from nine to seventeen years of age, so were living within family environments.)

In many ways, however, it is the teacher's role that is the most critical. Intuitively, it is apparent that a teacher has to make all kinds of decisions about a student's needs. A well-researched literature supports the view that a child tends to attain the standard a teacher demands. Low expectations will lead to low performance and vice versa (Fontana, 1988). In light of these findings, it is apparent that a teacher may also be

able to direct a child's goals and desires with regard to an examination. So, in what ways may the teacher influence the examination process for the student?

Firstly, the teacher establishes whether an examination is appropriate and if so, the most suitable grade, examination period and repertoire suitable for the student. Secondly, the teacher has to encourage students and parents to utilise the examination system motivationally to positive ends (or tactfully delay an examination if students or parents are attempting to rush the process). Thirdly, the examination date is unknown at the time of the learner's application and so the teacher has to be versatile enough to tailor the preparation to the exact date, as soon as it is known. Fourthly, the teacher has to offer the learner support throughout the process. In the current study we shall explore how the teachers approached these various areas, and how the students and their families responded.

In light of previous research evidence it seems that motivations, adult interventions, and the style and characteristics of examinations themselves should all be examined concurrently in order to gain insights into children's progress through a learning period that includes an examination.

Note on the examination system

The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) offers the most popular instrumental examination graded system used in the U.K. and other regions worldwide. It is well known, in the U.K. at least, that many teachers often use these examinations as a means of externally assessing a student's instrumental achievement. The Board attracts approximately 350,000 candidates annually and argues that 'a similar standard of competence is expected on all instruments and in singing at each grade' (Harvey, 1994: 8). Thus, the exams offer a particular benchmark of achievement, and also a linear method of evaluation, with Grade 2 being significantly more demanding than Grade 1, and with this grading system continuing up to Grade 8. So popular and well known are the examinations, that music colleges and universities often expect a minimum requirement of Grade 8 from their entrants. The Board has stringent internal quality-control mechanisms with examiners undergoing regular in-service training.

In addition to motivating students in developing their instrumental skills, the examination system may also be regarded as a means of influencing the content of instrumental tuition. This can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, the system ensures that learners are introduced to a varied repertoire and specific technical tasks, such as sight-reading, scales and technical exercises. On the other hand, students can be constrained by the particular demands of the examination system. An archetype here would be of a child who could only play the examination pieces, scales and technical exercises and who, as a consequence, would be unable to engage in improvisation. At this juncture, it is important to recall that the ABRSM examinations are aimed at the acquisition of some musical skills, not all, a point The Board stresses. If teachers work from the examination syllabus alone, they are overlooking other aspects of musical experience for development.

McPherson (1995) has undertaken detailed research and identified five musical performance skills that fall into three distinct categories. Category 1: Re-creative visual forms of performance; the ability to perform a repertoire of rehearsed music, and the ability to sight-read without prior rehearsal. Category 2: Re-creative aural styles of performance; the ability to perform by memory (where music was initially learned from notation), and also to play by ear. Category 3: Creative musical

performance; the ability to improvise both in a stylistically conceived and a freely conceived idiom. Clearly, not every musician requires all these skills, and in the various musical cultures some of these skills are not part of music-making at all. However, these are all associated with performance, and all can be taught. McPherson and Davidson (research in preparation) are currently investigating the circumstances in which these skills emerge and are exploring methods that are best for teaching their development. Tentative findings suggest that without suitable input, some skills just cannot be learned thoroughly; for example, training young learners to draw on motor, visual and aural memory functions when attempting to learn a piece. Thus, again, the role of the teacher is stressed.

Although ABRSM examinations may not cover all performance skills (such as improvisation), the examinations can be a useful framework, especially if learning goals are pursued. From the explanation above, it is evident that it is how the teacher chooses to work with the examination that is vitally important, and this will be a central focus of the current study.

The investigation

In order to explore the issues discussed above, teachers' attitudes and approaches to the examination process as well as parents' and students' responses to the preparation, execution and post-examination period were collected in a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews. The questions examined: attitude towards learning, strategies for motivating practice and sustaining interest. Working with small-scale case studies, four teachers and their eighteen students were studied over a six-month period. Although the sample is not representative of the teacher/student/parent population at large, it none the less demonstrates, in case-study terms, how individuals think and work over a period of six months.

The teachers studied, two violinists (referred to as teachers A and B) and two pianists (teachers C and D), worked in and around a major city. They had a mean of twenty-one years of teaching experience, and all were actively engaged a variety of musical activities. They were recruited to this study in a random manner through personal contacts by discovering who was working on music examinations in the city over the period of study. The teachers were interviewed individually on two occasions for periods up to ninety minutes in their homes. The first interviews took place approximately six weeks before the exam period began and the second approximately four weeks afterwards. The eighteen examination candidates (ages – seven to seventeen years distribution of instruments, and sex were all matched according to grade level) were also interviewed (as was one or both parents) at similar times in relation to the timing of the examination. All students had individual lessons either at their teacher's home or in school.

Results

Teachers, students and parents were asked about many aspects of learning, and in particular the examination and their beliefs about the role of the examination. In the section which follows emergent issues and themes are discussed under sub-headings to encapsulate the period before, and the period during and after the examination.

Preparation

Entry to the examination – the family's view

Parents and students were virtually unanimous in citing the teachers as being the people who suggested taking an examination. Parents varied in their interpretations of the teacher's suggestion, but below are citations representative of the two major perceptions about the teacher and examinations. Both citations refer to a single teacher, but similar comments were made of all the teachers:

> I think he was told that he *was* doing a violin exam. I'm not sure there was an element of choice in it.

> We leave it [further music exams] up to X [Teacher]. He's her teacher, so he'll know what's best.

That is, the teacher was either perceived as being an authoritarian figure who dictated what happened, or as someone whose advice was authoritative. The students made far simpler responses, just stating that the teacher had asked them to take the examination.

Entry to the examination – the teacher's view

The teachers reported that their decisions to enter candidates for the examinations were always with the consent of the student and the parent. All four teachers stressed the importance of judging carefully the timing of an examination. They explained that the gaps between examinations were often, if not always, more important than the examinations themselves. All teachers saw the examinations as milestones in the student's musical development, the non-examination time acting as highly valuable periods of consolidation and offering opportunities for attempting a broader repertoire with a freer approach.

Despite the merits of the system for the teachers, all four reported a substantial level of unpredictability within the process of preparing the students for and taking a music examination:

> (Teacher B) X was one of those kids that make you wonder if you know anything about putting children in for exams. Basically, she didn't respond and improve since being put in for the exam in the way that I thought she would.

> (Teacher A) He failed. Everything was going well. If you were to draw it as a graph, he basically starts off . . . but it eases off the longer the time he repeats things. I entered him for the exam – fine, and I gave him a mock exam a month before. At that point, he'd switched off, so it must have happened about five or six weeks before the exam. . . . There was no sort of point that you could think: he is going to do within this range of ability and skill, he'd do either everything, or nothing, and it wasn't as if he knew what he was doing. It's a bit like Russian roulette, putting him in for exams. I wouldn't put him in for any other.

The responsibility, which these two teachers felt to ensure that the experience was a positive one for the students, is evident here. Realistically, young learners (and, for the most part, their parents) will view failure in an exam negatively in the short term however positive or diagnostic the comments may prove.

Clearly, the participating teachers felt the ABRSM system had positive effects, as

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they had entered candidates for the examinations. There was, however, some frustration reported in terms of preparing students so that they obtained marks that the teachers felt reflected their true potential.

> (Teacher C) They moved the goal posts in the grade exams, and I couldn't work out what they wanted. I tried three or four ways of putting students in on the same piece and they all came back with wonderful comments but low marks.
>
> (Teacher B) I would have predicted at least five or six marks more for each child. It's always hard to know whether you've got a particularly stiff-marking examiner, or whether their standards are higher, or whether the child's panicked once they got in there. . . . I've had students in the past that did not play as well as these kids did, but they've come out with merits.

All four teachers expressed concern that some of their colleagues 'taught to the test', i.e. covered examination repertoire alone. They stressed the importance of an examination representing something that candidates could take in their stride as a challenging, yet attainable, target.

> (Teacher A) I always have a strategy of what I'm going to do next. I don't just sort of see the exam as a hurdle – it is a hurdle, but a sort of retrospective one, as they should already have passed that point. So, I don't make a big thing out of it.

The dilemma of exactly how far to encourage a child to take music examinations was highlighted by Teacher C:

> I don't like pushing people into exams, because then you're going to kill what they like doing about music. . . . The trouble with the children is that you don't know which ones are going to turn into total 'I'm going into the music business' people or those who are not . . . so you've got to teach them all according to the proper syllabus, in case they turn round to you at fifteen and say 'I want to go to music college'. If you've got someone who doesn't do any work at all at ten, you don't know what to do.

Three of the teachers felt the importance of goals in music to be such that, as well as or instead of entering candidates for ABRSM examinations, they had or had formerly devised alternatives. Teachers A and B had devised their own internal examination systems and Teacher D used the ABRSM syllabuses independently of the examination room:

> (Teacher D) There are usually one or two who point-blank don't want to do exams, in which case, we have to find other goals for them. But even those that don't want to do exams, we'll use the system, as a sort of self-evaluating thing. Sometimes, they don't even do the exam, but they'll do all the Grade 6 scales and all the Grade 6 pieces, and aural and sight-reading. And then, at least, they know roughly where they are.

Teacher D's opinion that non-examination students need 'other goals' to 'know roughly where they are' reveals a commitment to motivate and structure the learning of her students. All four teachers were careful to stress that examinations can be very beneficial to all parties providing they are used appropriately. They were seen to give feedback, structure and a sense of achievement, assisting teachers in motivating, but not dictating to, students of all abilities.

Working towards the examination – the student's approach

Once it was known that they were entered for an examination, the students practised for much longer. Many pupils related feelings of being far more motivated to practice now that they knew the examination was approaching. Typical of the discussion around practice were the words of a boy, aged ten years and a girl, also ten, both studying with the same teacher.

> Yes, I definitely practised much harder. The week before, I was practising like an hour a day. I woke up early and did half an hour in the morning and half an hour later on . . . I wanted to practise more, and I *needed* to!
>
> When I'm practising, I think, I'll never pass the exam, and then I think, I just might.

Many also described this period as being difficult. As one twelve-year-old girl put it:

> I think you're probably quite relieved when the actual time comes, because then you go and do it, rather than endlessly anticipating it. It's the anticipating that's so awful.

The majority of the students anticipated the examination with anxiety. One participant likened the feeling of anticipation to a job interview, explaining that once the initial greeting had taken place, it was a relief as you were able to confront the anxiety and allow it to dissipate. Indeed, most felt that the anticipation was far worse than the actual situation.

Working towards the examination – the parents' approach

Parents corroborated the students' accounts that much more highly motivated practice was undertaken once the students were informed about the examinations. Parents used terms like 'it was more business-like', and 'it had urgency about it' to capture the fact that the practice was of a different motivation to usual practice. Parents were evidently engaged by the child's task, and were great sources of support. A parent of a nine-year-old girl is typical of the responses given and comments:

> Leading up to the examination there was far more her driving her practice than me, but having said that, there were periods where I could see she was getting a bit negative because she was getting nervous. She sort of felt 'I'm doing all this practice and is it going to get me anywhere?' We got over that though.

The mother's use of the term 'we' shows the high degree of commitment to and identification with her daughter. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases parents became an audience to practice. The age of the child was a governing factor here, however, with the children under the age of twelve typically having their practice supervised, and children over twelve having their parents listen from other rooms in the house.

The family's interactions prior to the examination

Whilst it was often the case that the parent 'sat in' during the practice, some children were quite inventive, actually trying to engage their parents with the task to be learned. As one father said of his son:

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> I did stay with him at the start. He always made me sit with him for a very long time, and he'd play games if I was sorting things out. He'd say 'pick a number', say, 2, 3, 16 – I'd pick a number and then he'd play the piece.

There was a collaborative effort to get the task done.

Teacher's preparation for the examination date

Typically, each of the three annual ABRSM examination periods spans four to five weeks, and teachers have little or no control over when their candidates' examinations occur during that interval. One way of working with this uncertainty is to 'put pieces on ice', i.e. learn repertoire well in advance of the examination period, practice other music and then add the finishing touches to the examination pieces close to the examination date. Teacher D used this method, claiming that she would not enter a candidate unless the scales and pieces were known, relating that she had occasionally confiscated music during the 'on ice' period, to ensure it was truly memorised.

Teacher C, on the other hand, was not an advocate of examination repertoire being 'put on ice', explaining that she felt it made performances stale. When one of her students' examination dates had to be brought forward, due to a family holiday, she commented:

> If I'd known in November that would happen, we'd have started working earlier. I would have been preparing for when I was preparing for and not three weeks earlier. It makes a lot of difference, especially with grade I.

Here, Teacher C states 'I would have been preparing for . . .' emphasising that she felt accountable for the examination preparation process.

Teacher's anticipatory stress

All four teachers made reference to the stress they felt about examinations, especially when they felt that they could not control a student's learning – for example, a child who was not working in a manner the teacher liked. All teachers reported feeling at some level accountable to both students and parents for the process leading up to and including the examination, and the result. With regard to the practice, this was a particularly difficult feeling for the teacher, as a student's work takes place unobserved and is, in this sense at least, beyond the teacher's control. The following examples explain:

> (Teacher D) We had some lessons about three to four weeks before the exam, where she had talked herself into such a frenzy that she couldn't even get through the pieces. She couldn't even play them to me, let alone anyone else. She was shaking a bit, in a complete panic, and I could tell that she was on the verge of tears. She came late one night and I know she was tired and I know it was silly to have a lesson; anyway, she couldn't remember the notes or anything. So, we had a big talk about what it was all about. I told her that it didn't matter a bit if she didn't get the exam and she's doing it for fun, and she's doing it, and nobody's making her do it, and nobody knows she's doing it. . . . I was just very worried about her pieces – I mean, the pieces are 90 marks.

> (Teacher C) When I wanted X to practice harder for this exam, that just wasn't an idea that went in. I think he took the exam as something that these grown-ups had sort of thrown at him.

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> (Teacher D) After having years, I'm not kidding, years of sleepless nights over getting kids' exam results, and worrying about having to phone them up to tell them that they've failed, I decided to take all the pressure off me. If I think someone's not going to pass their exam, I will withdraw them. I make that very clear to them and their parents and I have done it . . . even though that means that the parents lose the money. I do say that to the parents, and I *have* done it. It means I only ever have people who pass, a bit like your driving test. You wouldn't put yourself in for the driving test until you were pretty sure you'd pass.

Teacher's stress – coping strategies

Two teachers felt that a mock examination, two to four weeks before the examination was valuable preparation:

> (Teacher C) You have to be ready a fortnight before an exam. I find that all the practice they do in the last fortnight can be negative – you've got to account for that.

> (Teacher A) I take on the role of the nastiest examiner ever; the one that doesn't say a word, not even grunt, walk around the room, all those sorts of horrible things, and get them sort of quite worried about the whole thing, because then I can say 'It could never be as bad as this'. . . . They all know they've got a mock exam coming up. Mistakes appear in that exam. They've been there before, but you thought you'd ironed them out, but they re-occur. I reckon most of them go back about a month in the examination – if I can wipe out mistakes in the mock exam, it will improve their degree of playing.

As these comments show, the 'sense of theatre' (Teacher A) of the examination day is something which appears to benefit from rehearsal. In undergoing a mock examination, the student is afforded a consolidation period, an opportunity to explore the sense of the imminent performance in a safer environment and encounter potentially new issues, such as playing a grand piano, the amount of stamina that the examination will demand and the pressure of the whole situation. Students can then spend the forthcoming time perfecting the performance, rather than mastering the technique. Most importantly in this context, however, a mock examination represents an invaluable diagnostic opportunity for the teacher to evaluate the student's progress and predict the likely outcome of the examination. It helps the teacher to feel more at ease, and ensures the best approach is adopted, in terms both of coverage of the syllabus and of the teacher's behaviour towards the student (e.g. confidence building or encouragement to undertake extra practice).

Teacher's modification to lessons in anticipation of the examination

The participating teachers described various changes to the content of their instrumental lessons during the examination preparation period. Teacher B reorganised her entire term's timetable to accommodate more individual lesson time. Frustration was frequently voiced at the monotony of focusing on a limited amount of repertoire for a fixed, often lengthy, period. As a result, teachers adopted strategies to minimise boredom such as mixing up the running orders or playing the pieces at different tempi. Teacher C increased work on scales with all pupils, whereas Teacher D became more systematic in her approach to this part of the examination:

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> I make my students work on scales all the time. I've got this system of scale charts . . . by the time we get to the exam, theoretically, it's all done. . . . I think every lesson is like a little exam.

Teacher's advice beyond the lesson context

The role of the instrumental teacher was shown to encompass far more than simply teaching the repertoire for the examination and structuring the lesson time. From the sample surveyed, it was apparent that teachers tried to advise students as usefully as possible, so that optimum progress was made and students did not waste time or become disheartened. With the examination acting as an imminent goal, these teaching strategies were especially important:

> (Teacher D) I try not to rely on my ability to gauge their practice. I tell them what they have to do every week – and if they don't do that proportion, then they'll be off-schedule. . . . I know, I think, by now, what needs to be done, to get to where the 'peak' is on the day of the exam. If you go too far, too fast, or not fast enough, you've blown it one way or the other. I don't always get it right, but if I can see if I'm not getting it right, I know what to do to correct it. There are different types of practice that I'd get them to do if they've got there too soon, to pull the reins back. . . . I might even put pencil marks around sections . . . I'll write Saturday, Sunday. . . . I think a lot of teachers don't teach their students how to practice.

This teacher's view that a performance required a finite amount of practice could well assist in lessening last-minute panic, allowing students who have completed the amount to feel confident of performing to their full potential. In this sense, students rely on their teachers to judge the standard necessary for the performance and to communicate the proximity of this to them. As a result of experiencing such structured preparation, the teacher seemed to be preparing the students to become more able to pace themselves independently in the future.

Teacher working with the parents

All the teachers discussed the need to work in an appropriate manner with the parents which would stimulate a balance of parental support, ranging from accepting the teacher's advice about the appropriateness of the examination framework for their child, to supervising (and encouraging practice) and financing the examination. Teachers all believed that getting parents to work alongside the teaching facilitated the learning process for the student, and the examination process in particular.

The family's view of the teacher's preparation of the examination

Despite indicating that the teacher had imposed the examination on to the child (see first section of the results), all parents and students interviewed in this study were happy with the way in which the examination had been approached. They were also happy with the ideas about preparation: practice, mock examinations, the learning of new repertoire and additional instruction in aural training and sight-reading.

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Execution

The parent's view

All the parents saw the examination itself as a benchmark within a much larger learning process. In some cases, the exam was perceived as a motivator to continuing learning when the child might otherwise have given up the instrument. The majority of parents felt that music examinations were activities they would be happy for their children to continue doing:

> She's the kind of child who needs something to focus on. . . . It's been very good for her. I'd enter her for more [concerning a nine-year-old girl].

Some parents revealed a sense of having achieved something for themselves, even if it was 'value for money':

> I know I shouldn't put a price on it, but from a parent's point of view, it gives you something for the investment. She's got one exam under her belt now and that makes it worthwhile. (Mother of nine-year-old girl.)

There were parents who were unhappy, however. One noted that it was only upon entry to the examination room that her daughter had become aware of having any anxiety towards the situation and her playing. She felt that her daughter's sudden realisation – despite preparations made by both the teacher and the parents – that she was in a stressful situation, would have put her off doing future examinations. By contrast, however, another parent believed that the stress of the examination would help his son to prepare for many future situations including his forthcoming SATs at school. So, the music was seen as a good general examination experience. In fact, many parents felt that music was a special category of examination in which students were more vulnerable than elsewhere. As one commented:

> She's done ballet exams, but quite a lot of that time is spent in groups or pairs. . . . Apart from that, she's not done exams. And, of course, with music, as we all know, it sort of gets you nervous. You don't get away with it in the same way that you might with other things. . . . With a written exam you go in and you calm down after a few minutes of panic, and then you get on with it. In this case, you think: 'I've only got one chance. If I make a mess of it, that's it.'

With regard to the actual examination result, all but two parents were extremely happy that a pass had been obtained. The contented parents underplayed the relevance of whether the examination grade had been Pass, Merit or Distinction. As one commented of her nine-year-old daughter:

> At her age, to pass is the most important thing. She didn't really take the mark on board. I did more than she did . . . I don't think it would have mattered whether the mark had been 100 or 150: she hadn't any concept of anything other than a pass.

The two parents who were not satisfied were disappointed for their children, both of whom had regarded the marks obtained as severe failures, though in the case of one eleven-year-old girl, the mark of 100, the minimum pass, had been obtained:

> I don't really feel she has gained anything. With previous piano exams, they've given her a sense of achievement. With this one, I think it's stopped her wanting

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> to play the violin! I'm sorry really that she did it. She sets herself such high standards that, in her eyes, 100 is a fail. . . . I think this exam is the violin's death warrant!

The parent of a twelve-year-old boy commented:

> The exam's knocked his duck off. I would have preferred it if he'd been absolutely top ready for it. . . . He had a bad day. If he went again, he'd probably pass with flying colours! It's just on the day, isn't it? Anything can go wrong.

One parent had not told her nine-year-old son about the different levels of pass obtainable, rather she had said it was a pass/fail situation. She explained:

> He doesn't know what his mark is, because he actually only scraped through. We'd always played it was a pass/fail thing: not grades, or marks, or anything like that. We thought it might be counter-productive if he knew he could get a distinction, because his playing is erratic – sometimes he plays brilliantly, and others not. . . . I think the Gavotta, which is the piece he likes best – I think he actually failed that one. I didn't want to go through the marks with him for that reason. As far as he's concerned, he's done very well, but to have gone through and said, 'well, you failed this bit' . . . would have been devastating for him.

For every discussion or argument, there are many viewpoints that can be articulated. In the last case quoted above, the mother is obviously attempting to protect her son, and perhaps herself, from the consequences of realising the full implications of the marks. It could be argued that this is an unrealistic approach, but equally, it could be seen as a way of down-playing the whole purpose of the ABRSM benchmark: that you can pass, but you can also see whether you are average, good or excellent in your abilities to pass. Ultimately, it depends on how far parents wish to take the benchmark idea.

The student's view

Many students felt nervous about the examination, and many had described feelings of jitters in the room, though many said that the examiner had been friendly. Attributions of the anxiety were wide-ranging: from feelings of personal inadequacy, to desperation about getting into the room to show the examiner what they had been practising, to trepidation about the examiners themselves. A major concern, however, was damage to teachers' reputation and proving a disappointment to them. There was some concern about what parents would think, but the major emphasis was on the teachers. This view expressed by the students was enforced by the comments of only one teacher:

> (Teacher D) I've withdrawn candidates up to one day before they did their exam. I don't like doing it at all. If it comes up that I don't think they're ready, but they're desperate to do the exam, I say to them 'I'll give you all the help and support that I can – you enter yourself'. I don't want to get a lot of black marks against my name.

It may be that she was the only teacher to have felt this, but there is a ring of honesty to these words. Some parents also said that they had selected teachers for their children on the basis of their reputations, which were often the product of their

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successes with students at examination. Salaman (1994) acknowledges that this may indeed be the case.

Outside the moment-to-moment context of the examination, however, most students recognised other sources of motivation, as these beliefs demonstrate:

> [Examinations] put a lot more confidence in people, and they're fun – they're interesting. You feel important . . . (eleven-year-old girl)

> I think the exam tests how musical you are, and it tests your musical knowledge. . . . In school exams, if it's practical they're more sort of coursework things, and there's a lot less pressure. But there are similarities; all the revision is like the practice. It's maybe like a language oral: it all goes so quickly, you have to get out what you can. (sixteen-year-old girl)

> The only things exams are made for, in my case, is to make kids practice more . . . they test how good you are at practising, if you bother: how good you are. (nine-year-old boy)

About further music examinations, the vast majority of the students, even the one who failed, were positive about the idea. Two specific examples highlight different aspects of the positive outcome for the future:

> Most times I think 'I'm really glad that's over – I won't do any more', but then I think about how good they are. (sixteen-year-old girl)

Although this student had been extremely nervous about the exam, she still saw the benefit, and had the motivation to work towards another examination goal.

> I went to the music shop, and looked at the Grade 4 pieces. I thought: 'I'm never going to do these!' (eleven-year-old girl)

This girl was extremely self-motivated and committed about learning, and was very keen to pursue the next examination. Her experiences of the exam she had just taken had been very good.

The teacher's view

The participating teachers often described ways in which the examination acted as an external goal. Reasons such as 'she needed jumping on', or 'needing the examination system to make him work' were cited as examples of how the execution of the exam had helped: getting the student to rise to the challenge. However, in some cases, it was felt that the examination had shown a surprising side of the student, as Teacher B said: 'I discovered that underneath this happy little exterior is a child who's worried a lot'. So, there were benefits and deficits, of which all teachers were acutely aware.

On reading the mark-sheets, the four teachers told as many as half the participating students that, in their opinion, the examiner had been overly strict. It appears that this was done to boost the student's confidence immediately after the results were received. The impact was that the students experienced a diminished sense of responsibility for the result, i.e. something *beyond* the candidate's control. This could be criticised for perhaps initiating a learned helplessness response (i.e. a belief in the severity of the examiner dictating a pass–fail outcome). This would be in line with the findings of Dweck (1986) who showed that children attributing failure to circumstances beyond their control were at risk of becoming ensnared in a vicious circle of failure anticipation and reduced performance success. However, it is also obvious that

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teachers would naturally want to protect their students and themselves to some degree at least.

Teacher–family disparity

The data collected here show that there were 'thorny' issues raised between the teacher, child and parent. It was evident from speaking to the teachers after the examinations that, in some instances, the period immediately after the results had proved awkward in terms of the tripartite teacher-student-parent relationship.

> (Teacher C) I wouldn't be pleased with 104 – I wouldn't actually be pleased with any of my lot getting less than 110. He was dead chuffed with it, and mother was dead chuffed with it, so I didn't say anything!

The disparity between the teaching goals and the family goals are certainly important and highlight the sensitivity required by all parties, in order for there to be some consensus or feeling of satisfaction after the event. The underlying problem here was that the teacher believed in telling the students their grades whilst the family talked about the examination as a situation where one either passed or failed, and therefore aimed to boost the child's confidence by saying how wonderful it was that he had passed.

Generally, teachers had been sure that their candidates would be successful, explaining that they would not have entered them otherwise. Parents related feeling reasonably confident that their children would pass, this belief being substantiated for the most part by teacher's judgement in entering them for the examination. The vast majority of students also reported anticipating a pass, the origin of this belief again coming from the perceived judgement of the instrumental teacher. The reliance on the teacher's judgement seemed to be initiated by the teacher's primary suggestion that the examination should be taken.

Post-examination

Generally, far less practice was done after the examination than before it. Indeed, most students related doing little or no practice for a week or more afterwards, the terms 'break' or 'holiday from the instrument' were characteristically used. Typically, the musical activities during the fortnight after the examination consisted of non-examination instrument practice. It was a time in which 'fun' music was played. As two parents described, this period did not last for long, however:

> She had a break from practising after that, but she still played the piano. She dragged out lots of old music. Maybe she was going through their past successes! She hadn't got a new piece to play and I think she got to the stage where she was wanting to get her teeth into something else (speaking of seventeen-year-old girl).

> There was a sort of 'I'm not going to want to pick up the violin again for a while. I need a break from this', but not for long, really. Exactly a week after the exam, we went and bought a new book that the teacher had suggested and she was keen to get going on that (speaking of a ten-year-old girl).

Attitudes about practice after the exam were attributed to a variety of factors. For about one-third of the students, many felt that the exam had made them more relaxed about playing, and also more systematic:

> I'm more relaxed. Thinking about playing harder music doesn't seem as bad now. That would seem like a challenge. (Ten-year-old boy)
>
> I think he might be a little bit more methodological. . . . He'll go through several times until he gets it right, which he didn't do before. (parent of nine-year-old boy)
>
> It's a good few weeks since the exam now and she's still practising hard. I don't have to remind her to do it now – she's taken that responsibility on herself. That's good – I wanted that to happen. (parent of ten-year-old girl)

For the other two-thirds of the students, no differences in practising were reported.

General discussion

The foregoing data raise many important issues. It seems that this group of teachers generally uses examinations as the ABRSM conceived them: as benchmarks of achievement within a larger learning process. Generally they seem to provide critically important peaks within a cycle of learning which ranged from high-level quantities of regular practice running up to the examination, to periods of more relaxed, informal engagement with playing in the period afterwards. Although none of the teachers in the study taught to the syllabus alone, it is worth noting that they encouraged a cycle of varying periods of practice intensity as a method of learning. This was also something that they structured around the examination schedule.

For the most part, the teachers seem to have had intrinsic motivational goals in mind for their students by viewing an examination as a small part of a much larger learning cycle. However, looking back at Sloboda's (1994) ideas that examinations should ideally be used for internal rather than external motivational reasons, it is quite difficult to determine precisely from the current data sample whether parents and students got involved with examinations for reasons such as an overall desire to progress, or as a local, absolute performance goal. Many spoke in terms of performance goals, but they also had longer-term plans to keep playing, or to buy the set of pieces for the next grade. Generally, most families were happy to go along with the teacher, and some parents were quite blunt about using the examination as an external measure of 'value for money'.

Potential risks involved in the usage of the examination system were frequently cited. For the pupil these were straightforward: a disappointing result could cause a loss of self-confidence and motivation to engage with the instrument. For parents, the potential risks are greater, as they assume responsibility for the child's examination experience as well as their own. This was exemplified by parents asking the interviewer's opinion of a likely outcome, or even the teacher's judgement in entering the pupil and what that decision symbolised ('does that mean she'll fail?'). We found a substantial number of parents (< 80 per cent) expressing concern at feeling uninformed about the examination system (e.g. marks for the pass/merit/distinction bands). At times, parents questioned the validity and advantages of the system. For example, the parent of a twelve-year-old girl said:

> There were times where I thought – she shouldn't be doing this, she's only twelve!

In terms of potential pitfalls connected with the learning/examination situation, the teacher's part seems to be the most complex. Teachers attempt to protect both pupils

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and parents from possible disappointment, whilst maintaining their reputations, the judgement of pupils' learning and performing abilities and securing future parental support.

This study has certainly highlighted the triadic nature of music learning (teacher–student–parent), and how central the teacher is in shaping the form and content of this relationship, and so the experience of learning. These four teachers struck us as people who used their interpersonal skills to secure good relationships with the students and parents. It perhaps comes as no surprise to report that one of the teachers joked that she worked hard at 'keeping it right' between herself, the student, but most of all with the parent. The current study certainly highlights just how carefully the interpersonal relations need to be managed and how much energy needs to go into optimising the structure and timing of the examination in order for the teacher to reap the teaching benefits of entering the student for the examination.

Although we cannot generalise our findings beyond the current sample studied, it would seem that whatever the motives of teachers, they have to be highly committed to the examination system in order to become involved. The period of uncertainty about the examination dates during which time the teacher needs to be flexible about the preparation of pieces demonstrates the complexity and commitment required. Given the huge numbers of candidates who take examinations each year, it would appear that many teachers get a number of rewards from the system. Since some students went to lessons initially on the basis of the teacher's reputation for examination success, it seems that the teachers in the current study manipulated external and internal reasons for working on examinations to try to optimise the experience of the examination: for the child's overall progress and their own career profiles. It could be that many teachers do this.

In summary, the current data demonstrate that the teacher's portrayal of teaching and learning is highly influential. In fact, we were surprised by the extent to which we could see the whole learning experience being structured by the teacher. Although previous research has highlighted the role of teachers and parents in a student's learning experience (Davidson *et al.*, 1997), it was evident in this study that the parents counted on the teachers' opinions, as did the students. Although the teachers were nervous about the students and themselves in the examination situation, it is our belief that many teachers may not fully realise the extent of their influence in how students and parents approach learning. For example, the way in which a teacher discusses an examination had the potential to influence the student's perception of it as a learning/performance goal. Although students and parents made no direct reference to this kind of influence, it is obvious that a teacher's comment had a critically important role to play. For instance: 'It's important you do your best for this exam. You may play some wrong notes on the day, but the examiner will still be able to hear you've worked really hard' reveals the teacher's belief in the examination as a learning goal, whilst: 'The exam will only last ten minutes or so. Remember, the examiner is only judging you on those ten minutes, so you need to show him what you can do' points towards an underlying performance goal.

Of course, besides the critical role of the teacher, the study also demonstrates the rôle of the music examination as both an initiator and sustainer of motivation and also as a potential source of self-confidence to the student. Indeed, the vast majority of students displayed adaptive, mastery-orientated learning styles, in that they saw the examination as a challenge that they felt confident of attaining.

All the participants in the study considered the practice cycle, including the examination, to have been worthwhile. Indeed, 88 per cent of the families involved

believed that future examinations would be positive and likely undertakings. It is apparent that teachers, parents and pupils were working towards a common goal: that of making the examination a constructive learning experience. Positive and less positive ways in which the examination was approached have been explored in this paper. The teacher's psychological input and the family environment in which a student prepares have been shown to constitute a major influence on students' entire perception of their musical learning. These encompass not only the examination, but most crucially, where to go *after* the benchmark of achievement has successfully been attained.

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