

Constructions of Musical Ability: Discursive Evidence from High School Instrumental Music Students

Adam Harry

University of Iowa (USA)

Abstract

Music education research has consistently demonstrated that students' beliefs about musical ability impact their motivation, self-concepts, and involvement in music education. Few researchers have used social constructivist perspectives to analyze ways that discourses about musical ability inform students' beliefs, relationships, and behaviors. In this discourse analysis, I use a critical disability studies lens to critically analyze discourses about musical ability used by twelve high school instrumental music students in a series of two semi-structured interviews. The participants evoked discourses about technical mastery, communication, movement, talent, effort, dedication, and passion to construct musical ability, produce types of musicians, and develop a social hierarchy. These discourses were grounded in neoliberal values and able-bodied norms, and infused notions of musical ability with moral dimension and social power. These discourses informed classroom participation, managed teacher and peer relationships, impacted students' sense of belonging, and constrained possibilities for inclusivity in music classrooms.

Keywords

Musical ability, discourse analysis, social constructivism, Foucault, postmodern, critical disability studies

Students' understanding of musical ability can have a strong influence on their motivation and persistence in music education and music-making activities (Demorest, Kelley, and Pfordresher 2017; Lamont 2011; Rudock and Leong 2005). Extant research has indicated that students' decisions to continue in music education classes are affected by their perceptions of their musical ability (Evans, McPherson, and Davidson 2012; Hallam 1998), musical self-efficacy (Hallam 2002), and musical self-concepts (Demorest, Kelley, and Pfordresher 2017). Shouldice (2014) observed that researchers historically have focused on studying the influence that students' perceptions of and beliefs about musical ability have on student motivation using psychological frameworks such as attribution theory, expectancy-value theory, and self-efficacy theory. Evidence from these studies demonstrated that students' motivation is affected by whether they believe their success or failure in musical activities is mostly determined by whether they hold a fixed or growth mindset (Dweck 2006); that is, whether they believe musical ability/talent or personal effort has the most impact on their musical success (Legette 2003; e.g., Schmidt 1995; Wigfield and Eccles 2002). However, studies based on motivational theories typically do not define musical ability or examine its meaning to their participants. Rather, musical ability is presented as a readily apparent and unproblematic concept.

In recent decades, relatively few researchers have conducted studies on students' conceptions of musical ability using social constructivist perspectives (Hallam and Shaw 2002; Hallam and Prince 2003; Hallam 2010; Randles 2011; Shouldice 2014). The findings of these studies shared many prominent themes in students' beliefs about the constitutive components of musical ability, including (a) being able to sing or play an instrument; (b) having a sense of rhythm; (c) understanding and interpreting music; (d) demonstrating motivation through personal effort and practicing, and (e) being able to communicate or express thoughts and feelings through musical performance. Evidence across these studies suggest that individuals' understanding of musical ability were affected by age, musical training, and musical experience. In general, individuals with less musical experience tended to emphasize the ability to understand, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate music, whereas individuals with more musical experience highlighted communication, ensemble skills, organization of sound, and emotional sensitivity (Hallam and Shaw 2002; Hallam 2010). Hallam and Prince (2003) explained that non-musicians who participated in their survey study stressed music appreciation whereas musicians articulated more complex

conceptions of musical ability than the other groups, emphasizing the importance of emotional sensitivity, expression, motivation, and commitment.

Individuals' beliefs about the source of musical ability also seemed to be affected by age and length of time participating in school music programs. Shouldice (2014) observed that younger students increasingly identified effort as a contributing factor to one's musical ability across grades one through four, whereas Randles (2011) found that students' emphasis on effort and musical self-perceptions declined in high school. Shouldice (2014) proposed that "children's belief in the influence and importance of effort strengthens through the elementary grades and then begins to weaken as they progress through the middle and upper grades" (340). Randles (2011) and Shouldice (2014) both found that students' musical self-perceptions were less positive as they aged. Shouldice suggested that this change could indicate greater self-awareness, but that it was also possible their musical self-perceptions reflected information and feedback from "parents, teachers, peers, and culture in general" (340). Shouldice (2014) and Randles (2011) findings span across the grade levels that US schools typically transition from general music courses to performance-based large ensembles.

Hallam (2010) noted that "musical ability is perceived in complex ways which depend on the environment within which individuals are located" (327). The social and discursive context of formal musical learning likely informed the beliefs of the participants in prior studies the longer they participated in school music programs. Although prior research provided insights into students' perceptions of and discourses about musical ability in the U.K. and U.S. schools, researchers primarily reported descriptive survey data. A critical analysis of more nuanced, in-depth data on the discourses that construct musical ability in school music programs is needed to better understand how these discourses affect students' self-perceptions, classroom relationships, participatory behaviors, and educational access.

A Critical Dis/ability Studies Perspective

Disability studies perspectives provide multidisciplinary ways of thinking critically about how notions of disability and ability (dis/ability) relate to educational equity and inclusion in music classrooms. Dobbs (2012, 2017) explained that disability studies aims to decenter able-bodied norms and critique ableist, deficit discourses that marginalize disabled people. She proposed that disability

studies perspectives present important and difficult questions for the field of music education: “How is music ability socially and culturally constructed in classrooms, schools, or communities? What systems of belief or ideologies are implied? What does it mean to deploy the term music ability” (22)?

Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2017) explained that critical dis/ability studies (CDS) is an emergent field of scholarship that draws upon a variety of critical philosophical perspectives, particularly postmodernism, to critique and expand upon early disability studies scholarship. Many CDS scholars use Foucault’s (1972, 1978) theories about discourse and power-knowledge to analyze and critique constructions of the body, normalcy, and dis/ability. Tremain (2001, 2015, 2017) drew upon Foucault’s (1978) concept power-knowledge and Butler’s (1993) deconstruction of the material basis of sex to theorize how knowledge produced about the dis/abled body-minds is created by and reconstitutes social power relationships. Foucault (1975) explained: “We should admit rather that power produces knowledge ... that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (27).

Butler (1993) applied Foucault’s notion of power-knowledge in her deconstruction of the concept sex as a pre-discursive reality upon which gender is constructed. Butler posited that references to a pre-discursive, transhistorical reality are themselves performative discursive acts that name, define the limits of, and apply social meaning to materiality. She explained: “If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification” (30). Butler also suggested that discursive objects, like sex, appear stable and naturalized because the discourses that construct them are repetitive and referential to existing power structures. “‘Sex’ is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms.... Generally speaking, a performative functions to produce that which it declares. As a discursive practice (performative “acts” must be *repeated* to become efficacious), performatives constitute a locus of *discursive production*. No “act” apart from a regularized and sanctioned practice can wield the power to produce that which it declares” (emphasis original, 70). In this way, iterative and referential discursive

statements (re)constitute a particular conception of materiality to support hegemonic power relationships. However, she believed that these referential iterations offered opportunities to destabilize the hegemonic discourses that produce social categories to open the possibility for more equitable relationships.

Tremain (2001) proposed that impairment and disabled body-minds can also be understood as a discursive object signified and materialized by particular discourses that are historically, socially, and culturally bound. She traced the origins of the concept of impairment to the rise of medical sciences during the Enlightenment as a form of “bio-power” (Foucault 1978, 140)—the governing of characteristics of people when constituted as populations. “As *effects* of a historically specific political discourse (namely, bio-power), impairments are materialized as universal attributes (properties) of subjects through the iteration and reiteration of rather culturally specific regulatory norms and ideals about (for example) human function and structure, competency, intelligence, and ability. As universalized attributes of subjects, furthermore, impairments are naturalized as an interior identity or essence *on which* culture acts in order to camouflage the historically contingent power relations that materialized them as natural” (Tremain 2001, 632).

Tremain’s deconstruction of disability and impairment was grounded in a critical analysis of various functions of discourse, or what Foucault (1978) called its “tactical productivity” (102). Mills (1997) explained: “One of the most productive ways of thinking about discourse is not as a group of signs or a stretch of text, but as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972, 49). In this sense, a discourse is something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect)... A discursive structure can be detected because of the systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context, and because of the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving” (15). According to this description the first function of discourse is to create objects or concepts, such as sex, gender, impairment, and disability. Second, discourses construct, name, categorize, and socially position subjects or “kinds of people” (Hacking 2007, 285) to produce and sustain particular social effects and power relationships. Third, discourses naturalize particular systems of reason and ways of behaving. Lastly, these distributions of power inform individual behaviors, social relationships, and institutional practices. For example, discourses about impairment and disability have generated associated social hierarchies, laws,

medical and social practices, and institutional structures designed to regulate and manage impairment and disability in society.

The theoretical perspectives and analytical methods of CDS and postmodernism can also be used to examine constructions of musical ability as a product of discourse and power-knowledge. A CDS analysis of musical ability should go beyond describing its constitutive characteristics to examine the social effects of discourses that construct it—how they manage identities, behaviors, and social relationships within a given social context. In this study, I used a CDS framework and Foucauldian discourse analysis to critically analyze discourses mobilized by high school instrumental music students that construct musical ability. My analysis was guided by the following research questions: What discourses do high school instrumental music students employ to construct concepts of musical ability and talent? What discourses about musical ability do high school instrumental music students use to construct and differentiate various types of musicians? How do constructions of musical ability and types of musicians inform social and institutional practices in music classrooms? How do discourses and associated constructions affect student participation, engagement, and relationships?

An Incitement to Discourse

Tamboukou and Ball (2003) proposed that Foucault's genealogical methods for analyzing historical texts could be combined with data generated by qualitative research methods to draw upon the strengths of each. To produce a discursive text for analysis, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with twelve high school instrumental music students. I recruited participants from a suburban high school in Wisconsin with an approximate enrollment of 1600 students because of its proximity and its demographics closely reflected statewide averages (63% White, 21% Hispanic, 7.7% Black, 3.4% Asian, less than 1% Pacific Islander and Native American/Alaskan/Hawaiian, and 5.9% two or more races). The instrumental music program included a freshman band and orchestra, an upper-level orchestra, two auditioned bands, extra-curricular jazz ensembles, and curricular courses in music theory and audio recording. I explained the study to each large instrumental ensemble, and twenty-six students volunteered for the study by submitting informed consent forms and completing a demographics questionnaire. I selected twelve participants based on "maximum variation" (Seidman 2013, 58) according to grade, gender, ensemble

participation, and instrument (see Table 2). Almost all the volunteers were white, so variation on the basis of race was not possible.

Pseudonym	Grade	Gender	Ensemble	Instrument
Jerry	9	Male	Orchestra	String Bass
Emily	9	Female	Band	Bassoon
George	10	Male	Orchestra	String Bass
Rachel	10	Female	Band	Percussion
Mary	10	Female	Band	Clarinet
Susan	11	Female	Band	Clarinet
Jenny	12	Female	Orchestra	Violin
Jason	12	Male	Band	Percussion
Maggie	12	Female	Band	Flute
Dave	12	Female	Band	Saxophone
Jeff	12	Male	Band	Percussion

Table 2. Description of the participants.

Generating the Discursive Text

I conducted two twenty- to seventy-minute semi-structured interviews with each participant to generate as much discursive content as possible. The transcripts collectively served as the discursive text for analysis. In the first interview, I asked questions about their musical background, involvement in their school music program, and their beliefs about musical ability. The second interview focused on the effects of discourses about musical ability: (a) participants' self-perceptions of their own musical ability, (b) the ways that peers and teachers talked about musical ability, and (c) the ways that musical ability affected their relationships, experiences, and participation in music class. Although the participants did not know me, they knew that I was a university researcher and an instrumental music teacher, which may have affected how they answered my questions. However, the interview process gave me opportunities to build rapport with the participants to increase trustworthiness of the data. I also used exhaustive follow-up questions to verify the participants' answers, probe for conceptual meanings, and clarify ambiguous statements to ensure trustworthiness of the data (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). All interviews were open-ended, concluding with an invitation for additional comments to ensure participants could explain and clarify their perspectives.

Identifying Discursive Structures

Discourses can be identified by their systematic structure must be repeated and referential to be intelligible (Butler 1993; Mills 1997). To identify discourses about musical ability in the interview transcripts, I first applied structural codes, or “content based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a larger segment of data that relates to a specific research question” (Saldaña 2025, 146), to all relevant statements in the interviews. I then assigned descriptive or *in vivo* codes to summarize the content of each statement. Finally, I triangulated similar statements made by several participants and themed descriptive codes across the interviews to identify discursive structures. Repetition indicated that a discourse was a constituent element of constructions of musical ability, but it did not necessarily indicate consistency in participants’ perspectives about particular characteristics of musical ability or the social effects these discourses produced. I present the clearest examples from the interview data to demonstrate the discursive structures and various participant perspectives with as much context and “thick description” (Geertz 2017, 3) as possible.

The Apparatus of Musical Ability in the Instrumental Music Classrooms

In the following section, I analyze the apparatus, or *dispositif* (Foucault 1980), of musical ability in the instrumental music classroom. Foucault (1980) explained that the apparatus consists of discourses, institutions, practices, rules, and regulations that manage ways of talking and behaving and (re)produce social power relations. I organized the elements of the apparatus by their discursive function: (a) constructing musical ability, (b) constructing types of musicians, (c) (re)producing social relationships, and (d) managing of behaviors and social relationships.

Constructing Musical Ability

The discourses participants used that constructed elements of musical ability were varied and complex within and across interviews, but several structural themes emerged: (a) technical mastery and musicality, (b) communication and movement, and (c) effort and talent. These elements were so persistent across

participants' responses that they seem to represent the performative referential repetitions that construct musical ability—the discourses that must be evoked for it to be perceptible that one is talking about musical ability. In other words, the importance of these discursive structures goes beyond their content; it is in how they “govern what is ‘sayable’ and ‘thinkable’” (Hall 2001, 73) about musical ability.

Technical Mastery and Musicality. Participants frequently explained that technique on their instrument was foundational for achieving higher levels of musical ability, describing good technique as a prerequisite for musicality or musical expression. They characterized high-ability musicians as individuals who could transcend the technical demands of a piece: “I like to focus on the fundamentals... the best thing you can do when it comes to playing an actual piece is only as good as the weakest part of your technique. But, at the same time, I think a lot of people do get a little caught up in technique.... I think the reason might be because it is less abstract than trying to make a beautiful piece of music” (Jason). Jason’s comment exemplifies how participants framed technical mastery as a necessary component of good musicianship but as insufficient on its own. The purpose of technical mastery is to allow a performer’s musicality to be perceptible. From this perspective, musical performances exhibiting abundant emotion but insufficient technique, such as a young child singing a song or an amateur playing for enjoyment, would not qualify as good musicianship.

Some participants conflated musicality with various technical concerns. When asked to describe a good musician, Sarah described a classmate:

Sarah: This person practices every day before and after school to make sure that he knows that all the notes are right, and everything is perfect...

Researcher: Okay. So, when you say “perfect” what does that mean to you?

Sarah: Well, I would say getting all the notes right at a decent tempo and playing it how the composer wanted it with all the musicality to it.

Researcher: Okay. Musicality being?

Sarah: Like the rhythms. Like staccatos and legatos. Like articulations.

Sarah defined musicality as a combination of rhythmic accuracy and articulations, which are typically considered technical skills. Although participants often described technique and musicality as distinct concepts, Sarah’s comments indicated that their discursive relationship may be more complex and interrelated. The term musicality may simply represent musicians’ ability to determine and technically execute idiomatic expectations of a particular work.

Lastly, some participants considered extreme levels of technical mastery, or virtuosity, an indicator of higher musical ability on its own. Steve described his favorite pianist, Valentina Lisitsa, saying, “You can’t see [her] hands moving because they’re so fast. That’s what makes her so fun to watch, I suppose.... Cause, I mean, she’s just technically amazing and talented at the piano.” Although Steve mentioned Lisitsa’s musicality in the interview, he focused on the technical aspects and virtuosity of her playing when asked to explain what made her a good musician. This statement reflected findings in prior research indicating that technical mastery is often valued beyond its service to musicality (Ginsborg 2018).

Discursive connections among musical ability, technique, and musicality are pervasive and may seem like common sense. However, in a CDS framework, the stability and naturalization of these connections are understood as performative repetitions of a particular form of power-knowledge that produces hegemonic effects in music classrooms—defining what constitutes valid participation, managing social roles and relationships, and informing student behaviors. Because technical mastery is discursively constituted as an essential learning goal that acts as the gatekeeper to valid music making, other learning goals become subservient to it and some pedagogical possibilities become unimaginable. Music teachers often view opportunities for creativity or improvisation as optional ancillary activities that take away time from preparing a technically superior concert performance. Allowing students to regularly experiment with new instruments in the spirit of amateurism is impossible in instrumental music classrooms because it would interfere with the development of technical expertise (e.g., Regelski 2007). This perspective also delimits the possibilities for including students with disabilities in instrumental music classrooms because technical mastery is positioned as more essential to musical learning than making music in an inclusive learning community.

Communication and Movement. All participants indicated that communicating meaning through music making was the greatest indicator of musical ability. All participants described good musicians as those who effectively communicated emotion, composer’s intent, or one’s identity and personal experiences through their performance. The participants often explained how the best musicians “put emotion into the music” (Rachel) or “read between the lines” (Jason) to reveal deeper meanings of the music to the audience. Jeff described his favorite musician in this way:

I think she captures the essence of what the artist was trying to say when they wrote it. Either that or she has something to say while she is playing it and she's really good at sort of emphasizing parts, pulling back... The way she phrases things or articulates certain notes gives the piece some character instead of just being notes on a page... It becomes kind of an entity in your head that makes you feel something, and I feel like she's really good at making a piece of music into something that's more than the music on the page.

All participants conveyed that good musicians communicate something through their performance beyond executing the written notation. This discourse portrays music as a medium that can potentially communicate information that might be described as nonmusical—emotion, intention, or identity—if the performer has adequate musical ability.

Several participants emphasized movement as an important way musicians communicate with the audience and other ensemble members. When asked to describe a good musician, Emily focused on how musicians looked and moved while performing: “They don’t need the music. Like, they just know the music so well, and they enjoy it so much that they don’t need the music anymore. They can focus on, you know, the movement. Like the movement that they have when they play, and sometimes you can tell by how their face moves. They’re like the little things, and the fact they can have those little things in there while having a good tone, perfectly in tempo... that’s what a good musician looks like, in my opinion.”

Like Emily, many participants identified the body, posture, and movement as indicators of musical ability, reflecting previous research findings indicating the significant influence of visual information on individuals’ assessments of musical performances (Tsay 2013). Movement can communicate tempo, express emotion, or indicate a performer’s personal investment in the music. Conversely, several participants described low-ability musicians as having poor posture and a rigid comportment. To demonstrate musical ability, a musician must manage their body and move in particular ways to communicate with ensemble members and the audience.

Visual indicators of musical ability are highly subject to individual and sociocultural biases related to able-bodied norms, race, and gender. For example, several studies have shown that evaluations of musical performance are affected by the physical attractiveness of the performer (Wapnick et al. 1997; Wapnick, Mazza, and Darrow 2000, 1998). Gustafson (2009) documented early music educators’ interests in managing their students’ comportment and movement based on idealized and racially coded readings of the body. Koza

(2008) described how interpreting performance conventions and individuals' bodies during auditions for university music programs has historically contributed to significant and enduring racial disparities in the student demographics of schools of music in higher education. The impact that visual information has on assessments of musical performances goes beyond bias. Instrumental music educators actively manage students' bodies based on contemporary perceptions of proper technique and performance etiquette, and discursively coding comportment and movement with musical ability serves as a socially acceptable proxy for racism, sexism, and ableism to continue to operate.

Effort and Talent. Participants invariably described musical ability as the level of an individual's current musical skills that developed from various sources, including effort, practice, talent, life experiences, teachers, enculturation, and parental guidance. They emphasized the role of effort and frequent practice in developing musical ability but periodically evoked various notions of talent as an important contributing factor to musical ability. This emphasis may have reflected students' passing knowledge of widely known research on the importance of dedicated practice (e.g., K. A. Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 1993).

Participants varied widely in their opinions of the character and scope of the role of talent in developing musical ability. Alec described talent as a latent, inborn potential that is converted to musical ability through practice and effort: "I think that there are many people out there who have high abilities and natural talent, but you can have the most potential in the world and you're not going to become anything unless you practice. Essentially, practice converts your talent into ability...." From this perspective, talent is viewed as a *resource* that influences the potential of practice to result in musical ability.

Other participants described talent as something that determined the effectiveness of one's practice. Those with less talent could still become good musicians, but they would have to practice longer or work harder than those with more talent. Maria explained: "I do feel that there are people who naturally can achieve... There are people who it just clicks for them when they try this talent or this skill. It just works for them automatically. Whereas, for others, it takes practice. It takes hard work and a lot more dedication. For these people with the natural talent for whatever it may be, it's just a little bit easier. And you can tell in what they are doing; their natural flow is just better almost than those who have to work really hard for it." This characterization of musical talent as

a natural *aptitude* for musical growth was the most common among the participants.

Despite participants' emphasis on the individual effort of musicians, references to talent, biology, and nature also appeared in their responses. George explained: "I have no musical talent, probably, but I do have musical skill. I probably will hit that point where I am like, 'Oh, I have gotten to my max skill, but I need some actual talent, which I can never get.' Cause, you know, you start off with that talent—natural born—and then you got skill." For George, talent was an inborn *capacity* that completely delimited an individual's musical potential. Other participants employed talent in ways that contradicted their previously stated beliefs about the central role of effort. For example, Julianna repeatedly denied the existence of natural talent but later claimed that prodigies like Mozart had "some wiring in their brain" that made their musical ability possible. Comments like these revealed cognitive dissonance in some participants' beliefs regarding the relationship between musical ability and talent.

Together, the participants' statements about musical talent are references to twentieth century eugenics discourses about musical talent and aptitude. The notion that talent is an innate capacity or aptitude that affects that ease of skill development and delimits one maximum ability level, which is unevenly distributed across individuals, directly reflects the definition of musical talent proposed and propagated by Carl Seashore (1919). Koza (2021) has thoroughly documented Seashore's involvement with the American Eugenics Society and theorized the ways that the racial and political projects embedded in eugenics discourses about musical ability and talent have continued to influence music education research and practice.

Constructing Types of Musicians

In addition to articulating characteristics of musical ability, participants used discourses to describe and socially position different types of musicians based on musical ability. Each Participant used different words to categorize types of musicians, and I did not aim to make a typology based on their answers. Rather, I examined the discourses and "dividing practices" (Foucault 1982, 777) that participants used to sort, categorize, and socially position types of musicians based on musical ability. These dividing practices reveal how constructions of musical ability confer social status and power to some and marginalize others.

Dedication and Practice. Just as participants emphasized the role of effort in developing musical ability, they characterized high-ability musicians as

dedicated individuals who practiced frequently. The idea that practicing music will lead to improved skills is consistent with recent research (Ericsson and Pool 2017; Harwell and Southwick 2021), but the way participants made this discursive connection was nuanced in a different way: “There’s a friend of mine who... I never necessarily thought he was super good at music. He played the trumpet and then he played the horn. So, now... he’s going to major in horn performance, but I never really thought he was phenomenal at music or like could really hit his music notes. But he just practices all the time, and I think he is really talented because he has a drive to be talented. And he really wants to succeed in music even if he wasn’t innately good at it.” For many participants, visible practice habits were sufficient evidence that an individual was dedicated enough to be a high-ability musician, irrespective their current skill level, because students perceived dedicated practice as the primary pathway to developing technical mastery and musicianship.

Participants were aware that perceptions of an individual’s dedication and practice time informed their subject location and social status, which informed their behaviors. Jenny stated, “The way I see myself is just someone who tries to keep up a little bit with the other players that I deem [to] have a higher musical ability than I do. Even though I like playing and everything, I’m just not one of those people who will spend one hundred percent of my time practicing an instrument.” Jenny did not view herself as a future performer and her reason for musical participation was personal enjoyment and social interaction. She practiced just enough to maintain a particular social position in the music program—someone “right in the middle.” This statement suggests there are complex relationships among practice, motivation, and musical self-perceptions that are typically not captured in contemporary scholarship on student motivation. For students who participate in music for social reasons, practicing is a way to maintain social cohesion and a sense of belonging, not to develop technical mastery or achieve musical excellence.

Confidence. Participants identified confidence as a characteristic of high-ability musicians. They explained that confident performers consistently played louder in class and were more frequently selected by their teachers to be musical exemplars for their peers. Participants said that playing confidently in rehearsal was a way that individuals demonstrated their musical knowledge, technical mastery, and potential leadership capabilities:

Emily: People that have a higher understanding of music at my age are more of the leaders in class, and the people that aren't as good at music, they can look up to us...

Researcher: What does a leader look like in the classroom?

Emily: Well, like the regular good musicianship. They're prepared, preparedness, knowledge of the notes, the basic things. When they volunteer... Confidence.

Dividing practices not only produce types of subjects; they also stratify them into hierarchies and create power relationships. Discursive connections among musical ability, confidence, and leadership status played a substantial role in producing a social hierarchy within the music classroom. Several participants reported that students who volunteered to play or played loudly and confidently in the ensemble were designated as leaders in the ensemble by peers and teachers. Conversely, several participants described students who exhibited a lack of confidence using deficit language, such as having “and inferior mentality” (Dave). Participants associated a lack of confidence with lower social status in similar ways to the discourses about dedication and practice, and they likely perceived lower confidence as an indication of being unprepared for rehearsal. Demonstrating enough confidence to be designated as a leader by peers came with social benefits, which I discuss below.

Passion. Participants emphasized the importance of passion because they believed that it was the primary source of two of the major characteristics of musical ability. First, participants explained that passion was the reason high-ability individuals were more dedicated and practiced regularly to develop technical mastery of their instrument. Second, participants described passion as the source of a musician's ability to communicate emotion and meaning through their performance. Jason concisely captured both discursive elements: “Well, as anything goes in life, you've gotta have a passion just so that you can justify it to yourself putting in all the hours. But I think, with music, passion is especially important because it's not just about putting in the hours. It's also about having a personal connection to what you are doing. So, I mean, first of all, you need passion.” Other participants explained that performances by individuals who lacked passion were typically mechanical and uninteresting.

Discourses about passion were particularly powerful because they transformed musical ability into an object of ethical or moral judgment. Participants also frequently linked low musical ability with lack of passion or “not caring” about music. Alec explained: “I think people who are truly the worst musicians are the people who don't try to be musicians—the people who just use the class

to socialize, or who don't really have any real interest in what they are doing. They should pick classes based on what they are interested in, not based on what gets them the least homework. Also, people who don't practice— That kind of goes along with not trying. I mean you can be pretty bad, but as long as you practice and you're making an effort to get better, you will eventually." In some cases, participants conflated lower musical ability and lack of passion with behavior that they considered unethical and considered them "troublemakers" (Maggie). Others felt that low ability students participated in music for the "wrong" reasons (e.g., to socialize or get an "easy A") at the expense of their more dedicated peers or were.

The participants' derision of lack of passion operated in similar ways to how Foucault (1965, 1973, 1975, 1978) described the discursive functions of sexual deviancy, laziness, delinquency, and pathology. Discursive connections between dis/ability and morality have deep historical roots. Foucault explained that, at the beginning of the European Enlightenment, madness was understood as being caused by disordered and unregulated passion. Disabled populations were subject to mass institutionalization, and Foucault argued that treatment was characterized by *moral* re-education through the management of one's passions. Gustafson (2009) explained that school music programs also have historically served as a method of managing student behavior and moral development by directing their passions toward a socially-valued activity. Similarly, discourses about passion mobilized by the participants play a critical role in how the power-knowledge about musical ability is used to govern the interior selves of students in instrumental music classrooms. A student lacking passion for music becomes a problem that requires pedagogical or social intervention.

Career Orientation. Participants periodically referred to career orientation when describing high ability musicians, differentiating between career-bound musicians and people who make music for fun. The participants' career goals informed their decisions about course enrollment, classroom engagement, and independent practice: "My own ability is probably somewhat average. I honestly don't put in a ton of effort outside of class because I like playing my instrument, but I don't see it as something that I will use as a career in the future, so I'm the type of person to focus my energy on things I feel like might come in handy in the future" (Susan).

Participants committed their time and energy to activities related to their chosen career path. Students who intended to pursue a music major after high school auditioned for the top concert ensembles, participated in extracurricular

ensembles, and were perceived as high ability musicians by peers. Others chose to participate in non-auditioned ensembles, did not practice outside of class, and pursued non-musical activities related to their other career aspirations. The association of musical ability with career orientation reflected longstanding historical discourses about the capacity to labor as the primary criterion distinguishing ability from disability (Baynton 2017; Foucault 1965). The participants' utilitarian approach to deciding their level of involvement in music echoed Seashore's (1919) belief that trying to musically educate students with insufficient musical aptitude was a waste of time and resources.

(Re)producing Social Relationships

The interviews included several questions and probes about how musical ability was discussed, demonstrated, or evaluated in the participants' music classrooms. Participants used language indicating positionality (e.g., higher, lower, better, worse) and deficit language when describing undesirable characteristics or behaviors to sort students into different types of musicians and position them within a social hierarchy (e.g., "favorites," "best players," "the best musician in school"). This ability-based social-hierarchy was legitimized and supported by a variety of pedagogical practices.

Ability Sorting Pedagogies. Participants identified several institutional and pedagogical practices that supported and legitimized the ability-based social hierarchy in their music classrooms. Beyond skill assessments and ensemble placements, auditions played a role in positioning students within an ability-based social hierarchy: "I almost didn't audition because I didn't think would have a chance of like getting in just because it—Wind Ensemble is like put on this, like, pedestal... I think mostly really talented—not really talented, but most of the people who are really confident and actually want to do stuff with music try to audition just to see if they can get in" (Dave). Participants noted that extra-curricular ensembles like jazz band and show choir targeted high-ability students because they often required an additional audition and a significant amount of time investment. Students perceived successful auditions as an institutional validation of an individual's musical ability: "I feel that when you get into the higher ensembles it's, 'Wow! You're a good musician. Good job. Good for you.' And if you don't and people thought you were a good musician, it's like, 'Oh maybe you weren't as good as you thought'" (Emily). In this way, audition results altered students' social status in the music program and impacted their musical self-concepts

Participants also identified several other ways that their teachers conveyed their perceptions of students' musical ability, including: (a) selective part distribution, (b) assignment of leadership roles (e.g., section leader or drum major), (c) solo and ensemble group assignments, and (d) invitations to play with the Wind Ensemble when expanded instrumentation was needed. In each case, the teachers selected high-ability students for socially desirable roles and extended learning opportunities. Social roles like section leader and drum major even gave specific students social and logistical power over their peers, particularly during the marching band season because of its military-like structures and procedures.

Participants also identified some intra-ensemble dividing practices. For example, both band and orchestra participants described a handout distributed by the teachers that listed the characteristics of different types of musicians for student self-assessments: “[My teacher] had this sheet that had what types of musicians there are. Like there is a “player,” there is a “real musician,” and then there's like an “artist” or something... He has us evaluate ourselves as to where we would fall in that stratus [sic] of musical ability. And, well, for me, I'm. *laughs* I'm not that good, 'cause, I dunno, my self-esteem is pretty low. I kind of made myself fall into like the first two, because I don't really focus on playing really, really well. I just want to like have fun playing with others...” (Jenny). Jenny's nervous laughter and broken speech during indicated that this self-evaluation process was difficult for her to talk about. The categorizations and descriptions communicated that specific ways of participating in music class were more valued than others. Jenny's musical self-perceptions and self-esteem were negatively impacted because her reasons for participating in music did not align with those embodied in the teachers' pedagogy and codified in official documents.

Peer and Teacher Relationships. Several participants explained that their musical ability affected their relationships with teachers and peers. Differences in relationships with teachers and peers seemed to be a meritocratic social effect of the discursive dividing practices. Maria explained: “Yes, because I feel that I'm not as good as others, I often feel that I can't just talk to our teacher unless I am asking for help with something. My relationships with my peers— I am good friends with some of the people who are musically talented, but I don't feel that I can really talk to them about music because... there is that difference in ability” (Maria). Having a higher level of musical ability resulted

in greater social integration with peers in music classes and these students were more likely to socialize in the music area.

Other participants described observable differences in how their music teachers related to students with higher musical ability levels: “Every teacher, I guess, kind of picks favorites, but you can kind of tell more with certain teachers, and I know that I’m one of the favorites. I don’t know if that’s because of my playing or my—Just ‘cause I’m friends with one of the other favorites—like, *the* favorite of the music department...” (original emphasis, Dave). When I asked Dave to clarify the term “*the* favorite,” he explained: “He is just always in the music wing or the music office. Because I guess he’s the only one who’s following up with music after, like as a career choice.... I guess he should be given more attention—not attention, but more exposure to things than other students because he’s wanted to be a music teacher for a little bit, and so that’s— I guess they’re kinda trying to mentor him a little bit, which I guess that’s good.” The closer relationships high-ability students enjoyed with their teachers resulted from pedagogical practices commonly taught in teacher preparation programs. Teachers frequently praise student success and provide high-ability students with additional learning opportunities, resulting in more contact time. Achieving higher levels of musical ability was rewarded with social status, belonging, and the teacher’s time and attention. As a result, high-ability students felt closer to their music teachers and more socially integrated with peers in the music program. Conversely, lower-ability students often described feeling socially isolated and uncomfortable interacting with their music teachers unless they were asking for help with their music.

The practices above and their social and psychological effects indicate how musical ability functions as a regulatory norm mobilized in music classrooms as a form of bio-power—encouraging certain types of musicians and musical engagement classrooms while discouraging others. The instrumental music classroom can operate as a “functional site” (Foucault 1975, 134) where institutional processes are used to rank and distribute bodies based on musical ability to produce a particular tactical and disciplinary effect. Students who demonstrate higher musical ability are rewarded with access to more learning opportunities, social status, and a deeper sense of belonging in the music area, whereas low-ability students are socially and spatially marginalized.

Social Rules and Behavioral Effects

The social hierarchy produced and maintained by the sorting strategies and institutional practices above was also managed by a system of social rules. The social expectations related to musical ability were often unspoken in class but clearly guided participants' behavior. These social rules allocated individuals with differing degrees of power and privilege, substantially impacting students' participation in the classroom.

Praise. All participants described praise as a social reward for effort and good performance, both indicators of musical ability. Students praised and encouraged peers who engaged in socially valued behaviors, such as playing well in an ensemble, performing solos, or participating in extra-curricular music activities. Dave shared, "Whenever somebody in my section does something really well, I always kind of give them like a, 'nice job.'" Some participants indicated that praise like this is more frequently given to students with higher musical ability. In one sense, congratulating peers for performing well is a prosocial, friendly behavior. However, disproportional conferral of praise based on musical ability creates a cumulative social and psychological impact on students' sense of belonging.

Social Disciplining. Participants avoided criticizing peers' musical ability and many of them appeared uncomfortable when I asked them to describe someone whom they felt was not a good musician. Maria explained that students' reluctance to critique others was either to avoid being perceived as rude or out of empathy for their peers: "I don't even really see people giving that much constructive criticism. I think maybe they are afraid of offending people, which I understand completely. I don't give a lot of constructive comments to others because I am afraid of putting them down or making them feel bad if they take what I am saying wrong" (Maria).

Although participants avoided verbally criticizing others, they also described how students used nonverbal communication to convey frustration with peers who came to class unprepared. For example, Maria explained that students might laugh at individuals who make mistakes in rehearsal. Susan described similar expressions of frustration when students made frequent mistakes during rehearsal: "You can see people slouching, and you can people sighing, and you can see people rolling their eyes. Sometimes, like, people talk about their frustration afterwards" (Susan). These social dynamics communicated that the purpose of rehearsal is to demonstrate preparation and learning that occurred before class and coordinate the ensemble. The participants

interpreted mistakes as an interruption in the rehearsal process, not a necessary part of learning in music class.

The social disciplining of students who made mistakes in rehearsal was directly related to and justified by the moralization of musical ability by its discursive connections to dedication and passion. Rachel explained that students who repeatedly made mistakes, slowing the pace of rehearsal, may be socially marginalized and isolated: “If [my part] is not up to par, um—like I didn't work on it to make it better—I would almost see my teacher get frustrated with me or my peers would get frustrated with me because it is something I could work on... and if I don't work at it, I feel like that would change the relationship or cause it to be a little strained because you could be putting forth effort and you are not” (Rachel). Statements like these indicated that participants were acutely aware that making mistakes was associated with social risks because their classmates interpreted it as a lack of dedication or passion rather than a necessary part of the learning process.

Self-Editing. Participants described various self-editing behaviors in response to the social disciplining described above. For example, several chose to play quieter or stop playing altogether during difficult musical passages to avoid making audible mistakes:

When we first get a piece and I don't know it, I know that I am going to play softer and kind of hide behind other musicians so nobody can hear me, in case I mess up and make this huge mistake, because I don't want people to hear me making huge mistakes.... And then, once I know the piece, and once my ability is up to par, I start playing louder and start becoming a part of the band, I guess, and the part will be there where it needs to be. Um, so yeah, it would affect my learning. (Jenny)

For several participants, rehearsal acted as a kind of panopticon that creates “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1975, 201). Participants behaved as if their playing was always audible and closely monitored and evaluated by teachers and peers. Their self-editing demonstrated an internalization of discipline and self-surveillance that constrained their own musical participation and risk-taking.

Participants intuitively understood that a particular level of musical ability and preparation was a prerequisite for being socially welcome in the ensemble. Susan described the social risks of making mistakes during rehearsal: “I guess that's why it's stupid, 'cause I know that people aren't going to dislike me unless, though, it's a mistake that I make over and over again. Because I've been in that

situation, and I know other people get annoyed when you are wasting—well, not wasting time, but spending a lot of time on one person or one section” (Susan). If they could not demonstrate the expected level of musical ability, they hid their playing from others until they could. These behaviors normalized the expectation to demonstrate a prerequisite level of musical ability to be fully welcome in the music class, inducing those who do not to withdraw from full participation even in the absence of overt exclusion.

Speaking Privileges. Several participants reported differential speaking privileges afforded to students based on their musical ability. Participants who identified as lower-ability musicians avoided asking questions during rehearsals because they feared judgement from their peers: “I feel like I can't speak about things that we're talking about because I am not as knowledgeable about music.... I feel that the people who are more talented usually feel more comfortable speaking in the group setting. I assume that they feel less likely to be judged by others because they know that they're good and respected for their talent” (Maria). Contrastingly, participants who identified as high-ability musicians felt more comfortable speaking in class: “I think [my musical ability] gives me confidence to participate. If I know I have comparatively strong abilities, then I have a lot of confidence to raise my hand if there is a question.... Since I know I have relatively strong abilities, I am relatively likely to contribute a valuable answer. So, yeah, I think that musical ability contributes positively to my willingness to participate in class” (Jason). Although Jason attributed his comfort with speaking in class to his confidence, that was not the sole reason for differences in students' speaking privileges. Both Maria and Jason indicated that the primary reason for their degree of comfort was how their musical ability compared to their peers. Jason felt comfortable speaking because his musical ability was “comparatively” stronger than his classmates. Despite being a member of the top wind ensemble, Maria's social position in the musical ability hierarchy made her uncomfortable with speaking during rehearsal, even when she needed to ask questions that would support her musical learning and growth.

This evidence again suggests how musical ability served as a regulatory norm that resulted in unequal power distribution among the students. The unequal power distribution based on musical ability resulted in what Fricker (2007) calls testimonial injustice, which “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word” (1). Students' position in the musical ability hierarchy affected how their speech was received by peers, resulting in differential outcomes depending on who was speaking. The

dividing practices related to musical ability effectively determined who could speak and who must remain silent. Students perceived as good musicians were socially empowered to speak in class because they were respected by their peers. Several participants explained how high-ability students were afforded more credibility and allowed to break some of the social rules. For example, high-ability students were empowered to critique the ensemble or give other students constructive feedback without negative social consequences.

Like the self-surveillance and internalized discipline demonstrated when self-editing, lower-ability participants avoided speaking or asking questions because of the social risks when making themselves heard. Susan explained her reaction when lower-ability students speak in class: “Sometimes, they voice their opinions, but, yeah, I would say not always. Or if they are, it's almost obnoxious. Like, it's not something that's maybe helpful.” Susan's annoyance with lower-ability students is legitimized by the moralization of musical ability the normative expectation of a prerequisite level of musical ability for full membership in the ensemble.

Lower-ability musicians navigated these differential social expectations and risks by recruiting higher-ability peers to speak for them:

Researcher: Do you feel like students [ask questions] in music class when they don't understand something that happened in rehearsal?

Jenny: Sometimes. I feel like it's mostly they'll talk to who they deem as their leader... Personally, I do that. And then sometimes the leader will, like, ask the instructor in front of the whole class... So, he can help say it, so then the person's question gets answered with it remaining anonymous as to who asked it.

Participants explained that it was commonly understood that high-ability students would ask questions on behalf of their peers and were frequently recruited by other students to voice questions about the music. Lower-ability students might be negatively judged by their peers if they asked the questions themselves, whereas high-ability musicians could interrupt rehearsal to ask questions with less social consequences.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

This discourse analysis suggests that music ability operates as a discursive regulatory norm used to govern students' bodies and internal states, inform their musical identities, and manage their social relationships in music classrooms. Musical ability was naturalized and stabilized as a trait of individuals through

performative discursive repetitions that reference technical mastery, expressive communication, bodily movement, effort, and talent. The discursive constellation of musical ability, talent, dedication, practice, and career plans reflected eugenic and utilitarian beliefs about musical talent, resource allocation, and educational efficiency (Seashore 1919; Bobbitt 1912). These discourses continued to govern practices in the music classrooms. For example, the instrumental music teachers dedicated their time and allocated material resources for extracurricular music ensembles toward high-ability musicians. The participants drew upon both eugenic discourses about innate talent and more contemporary ideas about the importance of deliberate practice to sustain conflicting views about the role of effort and talent in dynamic tension, suggesting that binary psychological models of implicit theories of ability (e.g., fixed vs. growth) may oversimplify how students are making sense of it in music classrooms.

The discursive connections among musical ability, technical mastery, efficiency, and career orientation reflected the aesthetic values of Western classical music and historical discourses constituting dis/ability as a function of the capacity to labor (e.g., Foucault 1965; Baynton 2017). In instrumental music classrooms, musical ability is often narrowly constructed as being grounded in technical mastery developed from years of dedicated practice. As a result, instrumental music pedagogy tends to focus on technical precision and prioritize producing future professional musicians, and amateurism, making music for pure enjoyment, and using music as a form of socialization are devalued. The participants' statements reflected Ruddock's (2018) claim that Western societies commodify music for public consumption in ways that promote the perception that musical performance should be restricted to "only some gifted individuals" who "demonstrate skilled performance ability or deep musical knowledge" (490). When musical excellence or career preparation are positioned as the primary purpose of school music curricula, students who have different reasons for making music may moderate or discontinue their musical participation at school and in their daily lives.

Discourses linking music ability to dedication, confidence, passion, and career goals acted as "dividing practices" (Foucault 1982, 777) that differentiated types of musicians and located them in an ability-based social hierarchy. Common pedagogical practices in instrumental music education, such as ensemble auditions, establishing section leaders, and ability grouping for solo and ensemble contests institutionally formalized these dividing practices and legitimized students' placement within the ability-based hierarchy. These social and

pedagogical dividing practices affirmed the participation and belonging of high-ability musicians, rewarding them with praise, learning opportunities, leadership roles, and social privileges. Conversely, low ability musicians were non-verbally disciplined, silenced, and socially marginalized. Notably, none of the participants described making music outside of school for personal enjoyment, individual expression, or personal wellbeing.

Discourses about passion and dedication were particularly powerful, because they infused evaluations of musical ability with moral dimensions that rationalized judging and governing students' internal selves. These discourses indicated that participating in music class for fun, relaxation, or socialization were morally questionable, whereas pursuing musical excellence or a musical career were exalted. Participants perceived making mistakes in rehearsal as moral failings and evidence of a lack of passion or dedication, rather than a necessary part of learning. Narrow and rigid notions of musical excellence combined with high social risks, students' learning and long-term relationship with music making are affected in detrimental ways. Common discourses about setting high expectations and pursuing musical excellence may lead many students to avoid asking questions or participating less in class out of fear of judgment and social marginalization.

The moral dimensions of musical ability served as a powerful rationale for differential power distribution, and a variety of social and internalized disciplinary tactics. These social effects had a substantive impact on the learning process and students' level of participation and sense of belonging in their instrumental music class. The moralization of such a narrow construction of musical ability delimits what is considered possible in instrumental music education. Even if teachers and students are ideologically committed to the idea of inclusive music classrooms, the radical structural and pedagogical changes this demands become unthinkable possibilities.

From a CDS perspective, the social and institutional power attached to constructions of musical ability has significant implications for inclusion in music education. These discourses are part of broader ableist logics that govern contemporary schooling (Hehir 2002). These ableist logics rationalize the disproportionate conferral of material and social benefits to those positioned as capable and competent, producing deep inequities that are perceived as ethical and legitimate (Baynton 2017). Deconstructing musical ability potentially opens it up to constitutive instabilities that offer opportunities for epistemological change in music education. Cultivating a more reflexive understandings of

musical ability, decentering hierarchical comparisons of skill, and embracing more diverse ways of being musical may create the necessary conditions of possibility for more welcoming and inclusive learning environments.

About the Author

Adam G. Harry is the Assistant Professor of Instrumental Music Education at the University of Iowa, where he teaches undergraduate courses in instrumental methods and instrumental conducting and graduate courses in disability studies, psychology of music, and qualitative research methods. He earned his Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. His research interests include postmodernism, dis/ability studies, universal design, and culturally sustaining pedagogies. He has published research in the *Journal for Music Teacher Education*, the *International Journal of Music Education*, *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, and *Music Educators Journal*.

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