
Music Education as Investment in Cultural Capital

Sture Brändström

Abstract

The purpose of this article was to investigate how Swedish 12-13- year-olds use music in their daily lives and engage in optional music education as offered by municipal music schools. The main issue concerns how the sociocultural and musical background of parents relates to their childrens' musical activities? Interviews were used as the data collection method. The participants were divided into three main groups: those studying at the municipal music school (n=90), those who had previously studied but had dropped out (n=147), and those who had never studied music (n=132). The questions concerned: parents' musical interest, music activities of siblings, pupils' career aspirations, pupils' likes and dislikes of music, pupils choice of instruments, and other recreational activities outside of music. Results show that the way children use music and music education depends on both sociocultural and musical background. Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory was applied to the study in order to interpret and explain the results.

Introduction

This article discusses the concept of music education as investment in cultural capital. Under investigation is optional music education in Sweden but the current sociocultural interest has implications for other contexts and other countries as well. Some important perspectives emerge from issues which surround this topic, including the reason why parents register their children at municipal music schools, why some pupils cease instruction after just a short time while others continue to the end of their schooling, and why some families choose not to make use of optional music lessons.

One perspective which I believe has important implications for the way we justify music education in society comes from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977), who has published widely on the topic of education sociology. His view is that the school system as a whole contributes to the existence of inequality in society (Bourieu & Passeron, 1977).

This study applies Bourdieu's theory of the cultural capital in an empirical study of Swedish optional music education. The intention is to use the concepts capital and habitus to interpret and explain the results. My intention is to provide details on how children and their parents use music education, not only for the music 'per se' but also for extra-musical reasons and interests.

In everyday situations, 'capital' is often associated with money or material assets. Pierre Bourdieu has incorporated this important aspect of the capital concept into his theory, though what has interested him most is *cultural capital*. He refers to the ability to find one's way around the field of art, familiarity with classical music and literature, and the ability to express oneself in a sophisticated manner. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) cultural capital is primarily determined by the parents' level of education. One inevitable consequence of Bourdieu's narrow definition of the culture concept is that the working classes, or the dominated, lack culture. Concepts such as popular culture or working class culture become self-contradictions when seen from this perspective.¹

¹ This is something for which he has also been criticised, by among others Paul Willis: "Apparently 'culture' really does mean Bourgeois culture. The dominated have no culture... They disqualify themselves because they never had a chance" (Willis, 1981, p 55).

The Swedish system of municipal music schools (MMS) started on a small scale in the 1930s and was based on the premise that the financial position of parents should not determine which children learn to play music. Before this, the alternatives on offer consisted mainly of private tutors and some instrumental tuition at State secondary grammar schools. Both of these options were unavailable to the majority of Swedish children and adolescents. Many Swedish municipalities commenced music schools in the period after the Second World War and in the 1960s the number of establishments accelerated sharply, resulting in nearly all Swedish municipalities having some sort of optional music tuition supported by the municipality (Reimers, 1994).

In Norway there was a similar but somewhat delayed development; the first Norwegian music schools were established around 1950 and the real development gained momentum in the 1970s. In a Norwegian study, Kalsnes (1984) investigated the reason for pupils giving up music school. She concentrated on instructional content and organisation, and the extent to which these met the wishes and requirements of the pupils. She found that many pupils became bored and disappointed with their music lessons, due in part because they were not allowed to play the pieces they liked. This was one of the main reasons why many of the children ceased learning. Kvist (1988) also reached a similar conclusion; the main explanation was given as distorted social recruitment. In many cases the gap between the musical frame of reference of the home environment and the music school was too wide.

Graziano (1991) conducted a study into the importance of the home environment to the successful study of music. She carried out in-depth interviews with 12 parents of piano playing children and found that they shared a strong belief in the importance of education, and all valued discipline, responsibility and perseverance – characteristics that piano playing was thought to promote. A pedagogic implication of her research is that tutors need to take greater responsibility for pupils who are losing interest. Graziano suggested that teachers need to support their pupils and to motivate them. She also proposed that the term 'drop-out' should be used with more care by music teachers and questioned why ceasing instruction in an 'optional' activity such as instrumental lessons was considered to be such a serious matter.

The importance of family and musical background to the success of children in their instrumental lessons was the focus of attention by Howe & Sloboda (1991) in England. They interviewed children, in an average school with an interest in music, and their parents. The replies showed that few parents expressed any interest in music, but that they still invested money and time in their children's music studies. The fundamental view of all appeared to be the same: "Almost every parent and every child took it for granted that weekly lessons and daily practice were the norm" (p. 51). One of the most important influences for music study included older brothers or sisters who had played a musical instrument. It was most unusual however, for friends outside the family to have any influence on the children's decision to concentrate on music studies.

Brändström & Wiklund (1995; 1996) shows that girls are about twice as likely to study at MMS in Sweden as boys. As far as the socioeconomic background of the pupils was concerned, it revealed that children of middle and higher level professionals and academics were roughly twice as likely to attend the music school as children whose parents were manual labourers.

One can also note a connection between the educational background of the parents and the attendance of the children at the music school. The educational background can be regarded as an indicator of the family's cultural capital. The children's music studies can be explained as the more or less deliberate strategy of the parents to keep and preferably increase this capital (Brändström & Wiklund, 1996, p. 35).

The study reported here could be considered part of an evaluation of the Swedish municipal music school. In accord with Sundin (1988) I believed it necessary to start out with two groups of pupils: those going on to higher music education, and those who pursue music education for recreational purposes. Based on the musical and technical

skills among students in higher music education institutions and the large number of Swedish professional musicians most Swedes would agree that the MMS has succeeded with the first of these groups. However, what about the other group: future amateur musicians and pupils who will not be musically active in adulthood? This group of pupils, the largest at the MMS, are obviously very important. A third group that must also be considered is the group of children and youths who do not attend the music schools. What factors affect their decision not to register?

The decision to play at the MMS may be considered to be part of the individual family's lifestyle. The professions of the parents, the volume of capital and the division of economic and cultural capital, cannot on their own explain the pattern, but they must be seen as important background variables. The family's musical habits and the children's music background are both important aspects of who will study at the MMS. Children whose parents and siblings play, are more likely to study at the MMS and girls are much more likely to study at the music school than boys. The decision to study music therefore appears to be related to gender as well as social and musical background.

Based on the above, the study to be reported here will focus on the research question: How do 12-13-year-old children use music in their daily lives and engage in optional music education such as that offered by Swedish MMS schools? ² Specific issues concerned: parents' musical interests, music activities of siblings, pupils' future career aspirations, pupils' likes and dislikes of music, pupils' choice of instruments, and other recreational activities outside of music.

Method

Structured interviews were undertaken with children aged twelve and thirteen who were attending sixth class at schools in the municipality of Piteå in northern Sweden. Of the municipality's 554 children in this age group, 369 were interviewed (184 girls and 185 boys) from eleven different schools in the district. Participating schools were selected according to the principle that the sample should reflect a broad representation of the schools in the municipality in terms of size, school form, demographic situation, and distance from the city center. To analyze the results, the participants were divided into three main groups: those studying music at MMS at the time of the interview (n=90), those who had previously studied at MMS but had now ceased instruction (n=147), and those who had never studied at MMS (n=132).

Results and Discussion

Musical background

Musical background	MMS students (n=90)	MMS drop-outs (n=147)	Never in MMS (n=132)
Parents' playing	54	33	23
Siblings' playing	59	52	30

Table 1: Distribution of musical background in percentages among those who are studying, those who previously have studied, and those who never have studied at MMS (n=369)

Table 1 shows that 54% of the MMS pupils had at least one parent who was playing or who had previously played a musical instrument. This could be compared with 23% of the non-playing children. The results also indicate that it is almost twice as

² The term 'use' refers to the children's and parents' choices and actions being active and meaningful while at the same being limited by thinking in grooves and unspoken bounds. Brändström & Wiklund (1995; 1996) demonstrate the existence of a social use of music education.

likely for those who studied music, in comparison with those who have never studied, to have brothers and sisters who participate at MMS (59% and 30% respectively). Consequently, the musical environment in the home appears to exert an important influence on whether a young child will undertake training at the MMS.

The results suggest that parents' general interest in music as well as the more tangible help they can give their child when practising at home, play an important role for long-term success in music. Parents who have an involvement in music are also probably more aware of how to contact a MMS, whereas parents who do not have an involvement may not have access to the same level of information. In one sense any decision by a child and their parents to study at MMS will occur as a natural consequence of the general musical environment in the home background (cf. Howe & Sloboda, 1991). As can be seen in the Table 2, even the order of children could be of some importance to our understanding of this issue.

Position in the famil	MMS students	MMS drop-outs
Youngest child	32	40
Middle child	29	26
Oldest child	37	27
Only child	2	7
Total %	100	100
Number	147	90

Table 2: Distribution in percentages of position in family among those who are studying and those who have previously studied at MMS (n=237)

Table 2 shows that 8% more of the youngest child in the family dropped out of instruction compared to the children who continued studying. This contrasts with the results for the oldest child in the family where 10% more of the children continued to study at a MMS. These results suggest that it is more usual for the eldest brother or sister than for the youngest member of the family to play an instrument and to continue studying for longer. The youngest child in the family is more likely to stop his or her music studies at an early stage. This is a somewhat unexpected and interesting result, which can be explained in part by the change, over time, in the way parents bring up their children. One possible explanation is that the first child is in many cases brought up more 'strictly and ambitiously' than his/her younger siblings. This tendency may be reinforced as the parents become older and acquire a more calm and relaxed, and perhaps less authoritarian relationship with their children. The youngest child may be more likely to be 'allowed' to give up his or her music lessons compared with older brothers and sisters. Both cases concern not only differences in direct and deliberate influences – but also systematic, long-term and often unconscious patterns of upbringing.

An alternative interpretation could be that the activity of music study at MMS is already 'taken' by an older brothers or sisters. Activities that the eldest child is involved in may seem unattainable or even boring to younger siblings. This may lead younger children to seek out other leisure time activities after having studied music for just a short time. Davidson and Sloboda (1996) found that the children who succeeded best in music were thought of as the 'musician' in the home environment – they were made to feel special. It could be that the first child reaches this level because s/he is the first one to take up an instrument while the succeeding children feel that they don't want to be like their brother or sister – they want to be 'special' at something else.

Plans for the future

The interview study reported in this article included a question relating to the profession that pupils would most like to pursue in their adulthood. What *horizons of*

opportunity do twelve and thirteen-year-olds have and how do these turn out for children from different social backgrounds?

The children's horizons of opportunity, as expressed by them in their plans for the future, were shown to be related to their likelihood of studying at MMS. The results show that it is more than twice as likely for pupils who play music, compared with those who have never played, to want to become higher professionals or academics (34% and 14% respectively). There were also more 'don't knows' in the latter group. These examples show how optional music studies are often connected to the views of one's own ability, and future study and work plans. The social ambitions of pupils at the music school were often higher and in many cases more realistic, compared with their peers who did not study at MMS.

The horizons of opportunity concept, central to Bourdieu's education sociology, implies that people internalise future prospects that are realisable and lie within the reach of the social group to which they belong. As accumulated capital assets vary greatly among social classes, a corresponding inequality in objective life chances follows³.

A synonym for cultural capital, sometimes used by Bourdieu, is information capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993). Persons possessing large amounts of information capital are able to evaluate the educational programmes and professional careers that exist, for themselves and their children. Bourdieu regards the concepts of cultural capital or information capital as applicable to all societies with a developed education system. These forms of capital therefore also exist in Sweden and have shown to be useful tools for socio-educational research – even if they do not have quite the same significance and unified content as in French society.

Musical taste and distaste

Musical preferences	MMS students (n=90)	MMS drop-outs (n=147)	Never in MMS (n=132)
Preference heavy metal	14	19	23
Distaste classical music	26	44	36

Table 3: Distribution of musical preferences in percentages among those who are studying, those who previously have studied, and those who never have studied at MMS (n=369)

Few differences in musical taste between the three groups of pupils were observed, but children outside MMS tended to have a stronger preference for heavy metal (23%) compared with those who do take part in the activities of the music school (14%). There are also more obvious differences in terms of musical dislikes. Interestingly, nearly half of those who have previously studied at MMS (44%) said that they dislike classical music. Thus, some of these students may have left the MMS because of the repertoire they studied. At the very least the result suggest that this may have been a contributory factor. Those who continue their studies are either more adaptable or more used to classical music at home, compared with the above-mentioned 'drop-outs'.

Studying at MMS can also be a manifestation of 'the good cultural will' – aspirations of the working and lower middle classes for the cultural heritage of the bourgeois. ⁴ Good cultural will from parents does not prevent children from experiencing conflict between the music taste at home and the music they play at MMS. In other

³ An objective life chance refers to the likelihood of realising one's plans for the future in terms of 'measurable' living conditions, such as level of education, salary, dwelling, etc.

⁴ Gustavsson (1991) uses the idea of 'admiration take-over' for a similar attitude of groups who strive socially upward.

words, the music school can be said to practise a form of symbolic violence against pupils who are less well off in terms of cultural capital. All this is said in the knowledge that MMS nowadays supports many genres and styles and does not work exclusively with classical music. However, the results indicate that there seems to be a problem of balance in terms of the repertoire studied at the MMS (cf. Kalsnes, 1984; Kvist, 1988).

According to Bourdieu (1979), taste has a discerning value – its meaning is defined in relation to other people's tastes. The taste that characterises one particular group implies distaste to the tastes of other groups. In Bourdieu terms, the pupils who continue in MMS have inherited a cultural capital from their home environment and they are equipped with a habitus connected to the legitimate culture (classical music, literature, etc).

Habitus can be viewed as the product of an individual's living conditions and his or her past experiences in life. Habitus will be activated, controlling thoughts, feelings and actions, every time a person encounters a new situation. Every individual is equipped with a unique habitus, while different social groups also have a group or class habitus based on the common living conditions of the group members. As living conditions vary for different socio-economic groups in our society, the structure of habitus will also vary for each group. "The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

Choice of instrument

Instrument	MMS students (n=90)	MMS drop-outs (n=147)
String- and Wind instrument	31	66
Piano	46	12

Table 4: Distribution of instruments in percentages among those who are studying, those who previously have studied at MMS (n=237)

As evident in Table 4 twice as many string and wind playing pupils had ceased their studies compared to those who still were studying those instruments (31% and 66% respectively). What is behind this pattern that differs so clearly from piano playing, an instrument in which there is a much stronger possibility for long-term involvement and study (46% and 12% respectively)? As the piano is learned mainly by girls, gender is possibly a major factor. There are also a couple of aspects of the piano as an instrument, which may be significant in this matter. Unlike string- and wind-instruments the piano does not need to be packed up and tuned before every practice, which probably makes practising easier and more frequent, especially at the beginner stage. You can 'sit down' even if it is just for a few minutes.

Another interpretation could be that the piano in the home represents a certain hereditary capital – economic as well as cultural. In opposition to orchestra instruments, it is not possible to hire pianos through MMS, so the families who do not have a piano at home have to pay for the instruments themselves. Throughout this century the piano has been the bourgeois instrument 'par excellence' and during the boom years after the Second World War many ambitious working class people acquired this status symbol – according to the above-mentioned principle 'admiration take-over' (Gustavsson, 1991). The family's investment in musical instruments and study is at the same time an investment in cultural capital and a more or less conscious way to optimise the objective life chances for the next generation.

Of all the art forms, Bourdieu (1992) feels that music, through its wordless character and 'incorporeal' nature, occupies a unique position in that it is connected to

the soul. To be indifferent to music is to be barbaric, according to Bourdieu, and he does not mince his words when he talks about the social use of music: no practice is more distinctive, i.e. more tied to the cultural capital, than the ability to play a 'noble' musical instrument like piano or violin (p. 176).

The relation between music and sport activities

Sport activity	MMS students (n=90)	MMS drop-outs (n=147)	Never in MMS (n=132)
Team sport	24	27	38
Individual sport	13	14	8

Table 5: Distribution of sport activities in percentages among those who are studying, those who previously have studied, and those who never have studied at MMS (n=369).

Interestingly, those who play music are as likely to be involved in sport as those who do not play at MMS. The level of sporting activity therefore does not appear to be affected by music playing, but as is apparent in Table 5, those who study at MMS are slightly more likely to be involved in individual sports. In contrast, those not connected with the music school tend to be more inclined toward team sports.

To give a true picture of the use of the municipal music school, it must be remembered that music study is often one of several leisure time activities. Most children are involved in some sport, so the relationship between music participation and sport is, in my view, a highly relevant area for research, not least due to the often talked about competition between sport and music for economic resources and time.

Franzén (1994) studied how involvement in sport can also be understood from a sociological perspective. The choice of sport often seems to relate to social background. According to Franzén, children and youths from a middle-class background prefer individual sports, while the working classes are more likely to be involved in team sports.

It can be stated that children who commence studying at MMS and who also devote themselves to individual sports have developed a habitus aimed at autonomy. They have received an upbringing that is aimed at independence, and encouragement to compete and stand out in different ways. Sport and music are both parts of this upbringing and could be considered as investments in cultural capital: "You learnt something different", as one music pupil said. There is commonality of discipline and training to control the time and body, in both music and sport that parents expect will pay future dividends (cf. Graziano, 1991).

The other side of this somewhat simplified argument would then be that children who are involved in team sport and who do not study at MMS have developed a different habitus. Their upbringing has been aimed at not diverging from friends and classmates. The difference between these two forms of upbringing is related to the material living conditions of different social classes. To once again refer to Bourdieu (1977): material and cultural inequality in living conditions will through habitus result in a corresponding inequality in the distribution of objective opportunities in life.

Conclusion

In my way of thinking, the way children regard and use music and music education is shown to depend on both sociocultural and musical background. My study included the music activities of parents and siblings in terms of the overall musical environment, and this was related to the family's cultural capital in terms of Bourdieu's (1977, 1979) seminal work. All these different elements work together through the habitus effect and express themselves in the form of participation or non-participation at MMS, choice of instrument, listening habits, and the way the future and one's ability is viewed. These socioculturally conditioned pre-dispositions are, using one of Bourdieu's metaphors

from the field of music: "...collectively orchestrated without being a creation of an orchestral conductor's organising actions" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

Bourdieu mistrusts cognitive internalisation of society norms. He is more inclined to see habitus as competence that is inside people's bodies – not only in their minds. During his time of study, Bourdieu took special interest in phenomenology and above all Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962; 1994), whose thoughts on 'the phenomenology of the body' and 'the living body' have a lot in common with Bourdieu's habitus concept. Habitus integrates the individual's earlier experiences, and its physical roots will cause people to be drawn to and prefer to be in environments that are in harmony with habitus, environments where people feel at home and can experience physical balance and well-being. These circumstances are integral parts of social and cultural reproduction and essential contributions to the existence of the social world and the established order of things.

The embryo of the habitus concept could already be seen in Bourdieu's earlier anthropological studies in Algeria, expressed in terms of a sense of honour, and a sense of practice (Broady, 1990; Callewaert, 1992). Habitus becomes an explanatory link between structure and practice and the introduction of the term can be seen as a will to bridge the gap between a scientific macro and micro level: "...our object becomes the production of the habitus, that system of dispositions which act as a mediation between structures and practice" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 487).

Bourdieu (1977) posit the habitus concept between the mechanism and finalism poles. Habitus is neither habit, nor mechanic reproduction or deliberate strategy, but something new in-between. The mechanism and finalism poles are rejected by Bourdieu and the opposition of the concept is declared a false dilemma. "The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and reasonable" (Bourdieu, 1977, p 79).

Acknowledgments

This article is based on the first part of the thesis *Två musikpedagogiska fält. En studie om kommunal musikskola och musiklärarutbildning*. (Two Music-pedagogy Fields. A Study of Municipal Music Schools and Music Teacher Education). It is written by Brändström & Wiklund, and accepted in 1995 by Umeå University, Sweden. The full data set can be found in Chapter 3 of the thesis; a condensed version and a re-analysis is provided in this article.

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About the Author

Sture Brändström took his piano pedagogic certificate and solist diploma at School of Music in Gothenburg. In more than 20 years he combined piano teaching with public appearances as a pianist. During the 1980s Brändström was engaged in research and he defended his doctor's thesis in pedagogy at the University of Umeå in 1995. His research areas include instrumental training, musical learning, action research, and education sociology. Brändström has recently published a text that is concerned with music teachers everyday conceptions of musicality.