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## Student Perceptions of the Meaningfulness of High School Guitar

By

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate what students in one high school guitar course perceived as meaningful about their participation. Over the course of six months, I observed classes and conducted a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five guitar students at a high school in Winnipeg, Canada. What they perceived as meaningful was multifaceted and related to fundamental human concerns. The guitarists valued opportunities to achieve, to make choices, to belong, to express themselves, and to play music that they loved. This study contributes student perspectives sorely needed in ongoing conversations concerning the meaning of music education in students' lives.*

*Keywords:* music, meaning, value, guitar education

Music educators generally acknowledge the importance of making education meaningful.

Leonhard and House (1972) assert:

Without meaning there can be no learning. The meaning may be obscure or scanty, or it may be of an entirely different order than we intend it to be, but meaning of some kind is an essential ingredient of learning. (p. 122)

Reimer (2003) proposed a philosophy of music education that might “provide a system of principles for guiding in creating and implementing useful and meaningful music education programs” (p. 2). The authors of the Housewright Declaration agree, “Music educators must lead the development of meaningful music instruction and experience” (Madsen & Music Educators National Conference (U.S.), 2000, section 2). Meaningful education, in the abstract at least, is easy to support. However, these statements beg further consideration. What do we mean by meaningful? Whose perceptions of meaning are considered when planning and carrying out instruction?

Jellison (2000) argues that teachers are in the best position and are the most qualified to decide what is meaningful for students. “Who better to decide what music experiences are important and meaningful for students and adults than music teachers?” she asks (p. 134). Jellison’s remarks follow a well-worn path in music education. As Westerlund (2008) observed, the traditional views espoused by music educators “[do] not grant the student any particular authority when it comes to questions of value” (p. 84).

Indeed, adult perspectives and priorities have long guided predominant rationales for music education, aligning those rationales to what adults believe is valuable *for* students. Music education philosophers, advocates, policy-makers, and practitioners have proposed and fiercely defended a variety of “ends” that they believe music and music education should serve. In doing so, these stakeholders “propagate, then perpetuate, and eventually legitimate certain

paradigms...they take to be real, good or valuable” (Regelski, 1997, p. 49). Inquiry into the aspects of music education that are meaningful *to* students requires a shift in focus from the perspectives and values of those adults empowered to make educational decisions to the perspectives and values of those engaged in the day-to-day business of learning.

Hylton (1980) was among the first researchers to explore what students found meaningful about participation in school music. Using student responses generated from a short questionnaire, Hylton (1980) developed the *Choral Meaning Survey* and found that students derived meaning from six dimensions of choral music. He labeled these dimensions achievement, spiritualistic, musical-artistic, communicative, psychological, and integrative. All six categories were positively correlated, and the students in his study rated achievement items as most meaningful.

Other researchers adapted Hylton’s (1980) approach and investigated students’ perceptions of the meaningfulness of secondary school band (Mills, 1988), choir (Kwan, 2002, 2007; Sugden, 2005), and middle school general music (Wayman, 2005). These researchers identified similar meaningful aspects of participation, including social, vocational, spiritual, achievement or esteem-based, and musical-artistic dimensions. However, participants in these various studies emphasized different dimensions. Sugden (2005), for example, found the musical-artistic dimension to be most meaningful to the choral students she surveyed and noted that the achievement dimension was considerably weaker in her study than in Hylton’s (1980). Sugden (2005) posited that contemporary teachers may place greater emphasis on their students’ musical-artistic development or that students may be involved in more varied types of musical activities. Indeed, individual music ensembles and the intentions of those involved may influence what student participants value most.

Researchers who conducted qualitative studies into students' perceptions of meaningfulness (e.g. Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Arasi, 2006; Countryman, 2008; Dillon, 2001, 2007; Piekarz, 2006) identified dimensions of meaning similar to those uncovered through quantitative methods, but provided nuanced insights into the perspectives of individual students and the experiences they found meaningful. Countryman's (2008) and Dillon's (2001) studies are especially noteworthy because of the depth of their examinations of meaning within particular contexts.

Countryman (2008) conducted a qualitative study into "the nature of the high school music experience" among 32 former secondary school music students. She identified five themes among their experiences—personal factors, social factors, expressions of enjoyment, musical factors, and transcendent moments—but as her thinking further evolved, she found her initial five categories to be "too atomistic to capture the richness of the participants' thoughts" (p. 92). Utilizing the theories of figured worlds (Holland, 1998) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), Countryman concluded that for many participants, self-making, community-making, and music making were "inextricably woven" dimensions of a holistic experience (p. 225).

Approaching the topic of meaning from a curricular perspective, Dillon (2001) asked, "What is the meaning of music to young people in a school?" (p. 78). He interviewed 21 student participants and found that meaning resided in personal, social, and cultural aspects of their participation. Noting the role that teachers play as "builder[s] of environments" (p. 185), Dillon made several recommendations for creating learning contexts that provide access to meaningful experiences, and proposed a holistic pedagogy that is "equally inclusive of context, making and reflection" (p. 238).

The current study contributes to this body of literature by examining meaning within a high school guitar course, a musical context not previously explored. The purpose of this case study was to explore what students who were enrolled in a high school guitar class found most meaningful<sup>1</sup> about their participation and to examine the extent to which the praxis<sup>2</sup> of the guitar course shaped what participants found most meaningful. The following questions guided this investigation:

1. What aspects of ensemble participation were most meaningful to guitar students in this class?
2. To what extent did the group's praxis play a role in facilitating meaningful engagement among students?

### **Method**

The current study took place at Brentford Collegiate,<sup>3</sup> a public high school in Winnipeg, Canada. Located in a predominantly working-class neighborhood, Brentford Collegiate served just fewer than 500 students in Grades 9 through 12 and focused on preparing students for employment after graduation. Once thriving, the music program at Brentford Collegiate had struggled in recent years. Only three seniors played in the school's band, and enrollment in choir, vocal jazz, and jazz band was too low for the courses to run. Brentford Collegiate's guitar program was far healthier, however. The program served 96 students—a fifth of the student body—and continued to grow.

I first learned of Brentford's guitar program when I was hired to teach part time at the school for a period of one year. I had no guitar students in any of my classes, but I was intrigued

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, I use "meaningful" in an affective sense, referring to those experiences and aspects of participation that students value or prize for themselves.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term praxis to underscore the notion that the teacher in this study reflected on his practices and made conscious decisions about how to proceed. Whether formally or informally, his practices were theorized.

<sup>3</sup> Names of the site and participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality

by the enthusiasm that they brought to the class across the hall. I approached the 11th- and 12th-grade members of the C-Slot guitar class and asked for volunteers who felt that participating in the class was a meaningful experience. From among those who expressed an interest in participating in the study, I selected a core group of five students who represented a range of ages and levels of experience.

Utilizing a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995), I conducted a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the five students—Hailey, Rick, Dale, Rena, and Bryce—over a period of six months. I also interviewed their guitar teacher, Mr. Gardner, and the school principal, Mrs. Turner; and I spoke informally with the students' friends, classmates, parents, and important others. I observed the student participants, their peers, and their teachers during guitar classes and group rehearsals, in free time between class periods, and at performances at the school and within the community. Artifacts collected during this study included concert programs, course syllabi, school newsletters, ensemble web pages, and performance DVDs created by parents.

Throughout the study, I monitored my subjectivity by devoting a portion of my field notebook to reflexive thought, by conducting regular member checks, and by subjecting my work to peer review. Other means of enhancing the trustworthiness of this study included triangulation of data through observations and interviews with a variety of participants and important others, prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation of the guitar class in a variety of contexts, and thick description in order to “get beyond superficial description to see the richness of thought and purpose that might lie behind the action” (Jorgensen, 2009, p. 70).

I transcribed interviews and portions of rehearsal and concert recordings, and coded and analyzed the data in two complimentary ways. I first utilized HyperResearch, a data analysis tool for qualitative research, to code data and identify themes. I then used MindMap Pro software to diagram these themes and examine the relationships between various dimensions of meaning perceived by each student.

### **Themes**

*The students of Mr. Gardner's C-Slot guitar class sit on the floor, leaning against the grey, carpeted risers that divide the classroom into levels. In pairs and small groups scattered throughout the room, they strum, pluck out melodies, and talk. The room is large enough and the acoustic guitars quiet enough to comfortably conduct conversation. Two dark-haired girls discuss the upcoming weekend as they thumb-type furiously into their cell phones. A boy with blonde hair and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt sits alone on the floor, his head propped on a chair, apparently asleep.*

*At the back of the room, eleventh-grade students Dale and Rick sit at Mr. Gardner's desk and work out by ear the lead guitar part for "Twist and Shout." Rick plays the Beatles tune through a pair of computer speakers connected to his mp3 player. He follows along on his guitar, fingers moving lightly across the fret board, until he reaches the section that has stymied them for the last several minutes. Dale searches the Internet for a transcription while Rick listens once more to the recording. He alters a note earlier in the sequence and hits on the right progression. "I got it, Dale!" Dale grabs his guitar and follows as Rick shows him the pitches. As they play together with the recording, Dale smiles and bobs his head with the music. He switches to the bass part, Rick plays chords, and the two begin to sing. "Well shake it up baby, now..."*

*Down the hall from the guitar room between two sets of doors that lead outside, Rena and her cousin sit and practice their arrangement. The warmth and gentle hum of the heater creates a cozy rehearsal space. They sit on the floor, legs stretched out in front of them, and glance from time to time at the chords and lyrics printed on a lead sheet. “Okay, let’s do it again,” says Rena. Mr. Gardner comes to check on them, and the three play their guitars together while Gardner sings. “Okay, great,” he says. “You can use a strum pattern there so it’s not all solid chords.” The girls experiment with several options, and while Rena plays the bass line, her cousin switches from block chords to an arpeggiated pattern. “Yeah, that’s good,” Gardner coaches. “Strum down on the pulse. Rena, try playing that note up here and then you can slide to the G.” He demonstrates a bluesy slide that Rena immediately imitates. “Okay, now what are you going to do here at the solo section?”*

*At the end of class, the students pack their bags and hang the school guitars on hooks. Gardner calls out, “We have Thursday for the Beatles and then that’s the last time to do it. Next week we’re back to ensemble playing.” The lunch bell rings and over the next hour Rick, Dale, and several other guitar students return to practice their Beatles arrangements, jam, and hang out.*

### **Building Skill**

The C-Slot guitar class was, first and foremost, a place where students could acquire skills and hone their technique. The guitar students practiced challenging passages in their repertoire and sought advice from Mr. Gardner about fingering, playing position, and other technical elements. “If I had a spare I’d be there in every spare,” Dale told me. “To get better, [to] practice. I go there at lunch and I practice...with Rob and Rick at lunch a couple days a week.” Rick considered the class “almost like a spare” because time spent in the guitar room so

closely resembled his time outside of school. “I play in my free time every day, like three hours a day,” he explained, “so [class is] just like practice to me.”

The guitar students who spoke with me valued the sense of personal growth they experienced as they became more skillful. Dale explained, “I like improving. I play stuff that’s harder all the time; I won’t play an easier song. As soon as I learn a song, I’ll move on to harder one.” Rick agreed that learning new music feels good. “Three hours of progress and you play a few songs right and you have them down pat and it makes you happy,” he shared. “Playing guitar when I have nothing else to do, that’s how I get three hours [of practice] in, but those three hours add up to how I feel.” Bryce, a senior who struggled in school and lagged behind his classmates in the guitar class, took pride in the progress he and his peers made as a group. “It’s cool how at the beginning of the year...it’s like, ‘Oh wow, it’s a lot of notes to learn,’” he told me, “and at the end of the year we play and it’s really good. We can do it.”

Students found the skills that they acquired in class particularly valuable because they enabled them to play music they loved. “You want to play all your crazy awesome songs that you know,” Hailey enthused. “That’s definitely what I’m getting the most out of this guitar class.” Dale noted that although the music played in class was not always to his taste, “I know playing the stuff I learn in class will make me a lot better than playing the stuff I used to play.” Rick agreed, “Whenever I learn a part or get rhythm patterns down pretty good, like the chords, it’s pretty self-rewarding. Then I can play it at home and with some of my bands.”

Developing the ability to play “their” music was a powerful motivator. Students willingly practiced at home, though not necessarily on the repertoire played at school. “I play a lot at home, as do a lot of people in my class,” Hailey explained. “They don’t necessarily play the [class] guitar pieces but I know a lot of them work on their skills at home.” Gardner said this intrinsic

motivation to play was a major difference between the guitar program and the school's struggling band program.

The class members took pride in performing well together but were generally more concerned with their individual progress than with their achievement as an ensemble. The school performances I attended were by no means perfect, but satisfied the students, Mr. Gardner, and—judging by the comments I overheard following concerts—members of the audience. “We sound good,” said Dale. “Nobody is ever out of tune or anything, it sounds fine.” Rick agreed, “On stage, with the guitar group we have here, I feel like we've...given people a good time.”

### **Appreciation of Music and Guitar**

As the students developed their abilities as guitarists, participants found their tastes in music became both broader and more refined. Dale shared that as a ninth grade student, he and a friend sat at the back of Mr. Gardner's guitar class and played their own songs all the time. “I never paid attention,” Dale told me, laughing as he recalled his bad attitude: “I was still a badass.” As he gained more experience on the guitar, however, Dale's tastes in music changed. He discovered a passion for soloing and improving and began to gravitate toward music that “takes a lot more skill than just playing the same open chords over and over again.” Influenced by his father and the guitar class, Dale became more interested in rock, jazz, and blues music. “I have an appreciation for the guitar now, so I'll listen to bands that have good guitarists,” Dale said. “It's not as much vocals and everything. I used to listen to all that screaming stuff and I didn't care about the guitar. Now I listen to the guitar more than anything.”

Like Dale, Hailey listened to guitar music with a deeper understanding of the technique and artistry involved in creating it. “If you don't play guitar or if you aren't really familiar with the instrument, it's just a guitar you're listening to,” Hailey told me. “But when you can play

guitar and you listen to them play that song, you're like, 'Oh, this is what he's doing with his hands, these are the chords he's playing, this is what position he's playing in, probably.'" As she learned to play the guitar Hailey began to develop what Eisner (2002) referred to as "connoisseurship," the ability to "notice in the field of their expertise what others may miss" (p. 187).

While Dale continued to listen to "the heavy stuff," the breadth of his current musical interests surprised him. "It's really weird," Dale reflected, "I can go from listening to metal and then I can listen to John Mayer and stuff like that. Wide horizons." Rena agreed, "I listen to way more [music] than I used to now that I play guitar."

### **Student Choice**

Instruction in the C-Slot Guitar class was highly differentiated, and students learned in numerous ways. Mr. Gardner assigned guitar parts based on each player's strengths and modified some parts to make them accessible to weaker players. "[I] simplify or modify their part so that they can succeed with the amount of commitment they're going to put in," Gardner explained.

Students had a say in the kinds of parts they preferred to play and came to specialize in melodic, harmonic, or bass parts. Many class members chose to stretch themselves by playing solos, singing, or picking up other instruments such as the drums. Class members also had frequent opportunities to choose their own music, to compose or arrange their own parts, and to rehearse their music in groups they selected for themselves.

The guitarists who spoke with me appreciated the ability to choose for themselves what, how, and how much they would learn. "Some teachers are like, 'Do this, do this, and do this,'" Bryce shared. "[Mr. Gardner's] like, 'Here, try this and if it doesn't work we can change it around a little bit to whatever works better for you.'" Rena's personal definition of "meaningful"

revealed the extent to which she valued this latitude. “[‘Meaningful’] means it’s something that I don’t feel pressure to do in any way,” she told me. “[It’s] something that I can connect to and express myself through, and that I have something in common with.” She continued, “It’s my own free will; it’s not something that someone’s telling me I’ve got to do, it’s something that I’m going to do whether someone wants me to or not.” Asked whether guitar class fit her definition, she replied, “Oh yeah.”

Dale, too, appreciated Gardner’s approach but shared, “I kind of wish it was a little more strict because then I would obviously get a lot better. . . . I would work a lot harder.” While Dale was the only student who addressed this point, I wondered whether others in the class might willingly sacrifice some of the relaxed atmosphere in exchange for “getting better.”

### **Belonging**

For Hailey, “the belonging of being in a guitar group” was particularly meaningful. “You get that sense of family from guitar that I’ve always kind of been drawn to,” she explained. “Everyone is accepted in guitar. . . . It is more of the family thing.” I observed this sense of closeness among many guitar students—those in the C-Slot class and in other guitar classes—in their interactions with each other. Though they teased each other mercilessly, students demonstrated a relaxed comfort with one another. “The playing is nice, that’s why we’re there,” said Hailey, “but I think more it’s that everyone is there together, and everyone plays guitar.”

The guitar program attracted students from a variety of peer groups, and those who spoke with me valued the diversity of their classmates. “I think if we were all very similar and we had lots in common it would make it completely different because we’d be the same people [and] it’d be boring,” Rena told me. She continued, “I think it’s how diverse our group is that makes it what it is.” Hailey said that people’s differences made the class “kind of exciting” and added that

being in a guitar ensemble “brings everyone together.” Rick agreed and argued that playing as an ensemble provided diverse people with something in common and helped them to connect with each other. “Once you play as a group it just kind of all ties together,” he explained. “Different parts are like different people. You add them all together and it makes a nice song. You have a whole bunch of people and it makes one...music community.”

Bryce, the quietest member of the C-Slot class, spent much of his class time alone but insisted that his peers were still “a big part” of his guitar experience. “They’re fun,” he said. “We all play together.” Like the other students who spoke with me, Bryce experienced a sense of belonging in the guitar group, but his feelings stemmed more from musical participation than from social interactions with other class members.

### **Being Heard**

Although students generally took a relaxed approach to school concerts, one annual performance event raised the level of anticipation in everyone who spoke with me. Solo Night was, as Hailey said, “the biggest guitar night of the year.” The annual event provided students with the opportunity to perform music they chose and arranged for themselves, and it showcased their progress over the school year in a much more visible way. “You get to pick whatever you want,” Bryce explained, “and the teacher kind of is there to help us, but [he] doesn’t really help us because we’ve learned so much we don’t need that much help anymore.”

Students valued the opportunity to express themselves and to communicate through the music they played. This expressive dimension was “all the way at the top of the chart” of what Rick loved about music. “If you really love something that much, you want to express yourself and show others what you love about it, what your tastes are, your passion about it,” he said. Rena shared a similar perspective. “I like expressing myself through the music [because] it

makes me feel lighter and it just makes me motivated to learn more,” she told me. “I’m not the most willing person to talk about how I feel so if I can let it out in a different way, that’s how I play guitar. I can connect to any piece of music and express myself through it.” Dale said that soloing offered him the greatest opportunity to express himself. “When I’m soloing I kind of put how I feel into it,” he reflected. “It’s all feeling. A lot of it is in the way you play it, different bends and stuff. Some people just play [the music] note for note and it just sounds annoying.... I play more with feeling.”

For many of the students who spoke with me, Solo Night was particularly meaningful because they felt could be seen and heard as individuals rather than as members of a large ensemble. “I like performing when I have a solo,” Dale explained. “It’s fun... ‘cause I make it up; I don’t take a solo from another song or anything. [It’s] to show off I guess.” Hailey explained, “You play something that you’ve worked on—you personally—and it really shows off what you’ve learned, as opposed to playing with a big group where you’re kind of just part of the sound.”

Gardner believed that this desire to be recognized could be attributed to the personalities of those who gravitated toward guitar class. “[They’re] independent,” he explained. “They have that little edge. Not all of them, but I would say in general.” He continued:

A band kid, a flute player, a clarinet player...I mean I might be stereotyping but they want to be a part of the big picture. They don’t necessarily want to be seen just them. And some of these [guitar] kids, they want to be seen *just them*. So those personalities are way more aggressive.... They’re athletic, they’re the mean girl, they’re popular, they’re whatever; it’s their persona. It’s aggressive, aggressive, aggressive behavior...yeah, this is a place for them. I don’t think they want to sit in band and have to be quiet and listen to the whole section, you know? I loved playing in band and, I mean, the feeling you get from a band performance with the sonorities and that whole thing, you won’t get that here. But what you get is on a different level. You get this bond in your soul...I don’t know what it is. It’s different.

The guitar students felt able to express themselves through music they chose and prepared, and they were confident they would be heard. Whereas a few non-guitar students

attended the spring concert, Solo Night was packed with friends and family. “Guitar concert is like, ‘Okay, we’ll see you play your song,” Hailey told me, “whereas Solo Night, ‘You guys *won’t* be disappointed.” Hailey believed the music played at Solo Night made all the difference. “This is a cool night,” she enthused. “You see so many people playing so many different things but it’s still stuff everybody knows.... It’s cool to see how people interpret things.”

### **Future Plans**

I interviewed Principal Turner about the Brentford Collegiate guitar program on the last day of the school year. “I think they live and die for guitar actually,” she told me. “They’re going to go on and be professional musicians.... Now whether it happens for them I don’t know, but they certainly have the dreams and intentions to go do that.” Mr. Gardner confirmed that some guitar students planned to go on professionally; the students who spoke with me were not as sure about what lay ahead, but all planned to keep playing.

Bryce said that guitar was a big part of his life and shared his plans to keep playing after graduation. “I like doing it, I’ve been doing it for a long time and I don’t want to stop,” he said. “I want to play guitar for the rest of my life. It’s something I don’t want to lose and something I am glad I learned.” Rick was uncertain whether he would play the guitar in a band or continue playing on his own after graduation. “It could be both,” he said. Although he was unsure of the context, Rick said he would keep playing the guitar “forever.... Unless I got my fingers chopped off, I’d find a way.” Hailey expressed a similar devotion to the guitar: “I want to try to get as good as I can before I get arthritis in my hands,” she laughed. “Don’t all crazy guitar players get arthritis? It’s something I think I’ll be doing my whole life.”

## Discussion

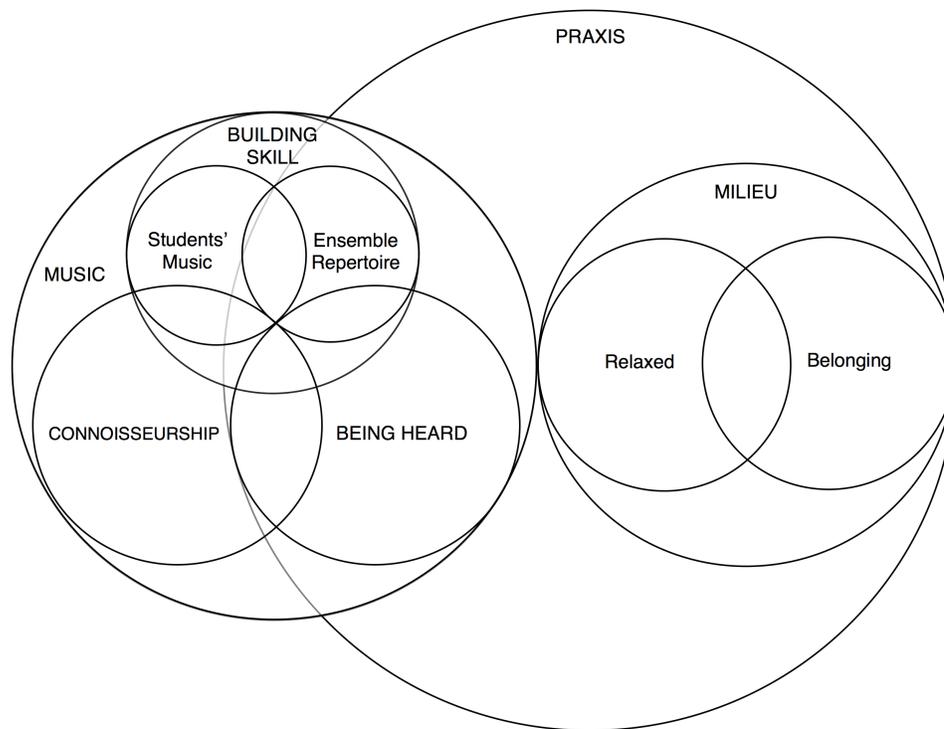
The purpose of this study was to investigate what students enrolled in a high school guitar class found most meaningful about their participation and to examine the role of context in shaping their perceptions. The research questions were:

1. What aspects of ensemble participation were most meaningful to guitar students in this class?
2. To what extent did the group's praxis play a role in facilitating meaningful engagement among students?

Student participants indicated that the C-Slot guitar class was meaningful to them in multiple, variegated ways (Figure 1). The course enabled participants to develop skills that they could apply to other musical contexts—contexts that extended outside the boundary of the school praxis and into their lives outside of school. As they worked with ensemble repertoire and music that they selected or created for themselves, students came to appreciate music more deeply, and valued the opportunity to be heard and to express themselves through their playing. The milieu of the class also helped to make guitar a meaningful experience. The relaxed and sociable environment of guitar class was enjoyable and provided students with choices about how and in what ways they wished to participate. Students felt a strong sense of belonging within the class and had a positive connection to Mr. Gardner.

These findings are consistent with the aspects of meaningfulness identified in research by Hylton (1980), Kwan (2002, 2007), and Sugden (2005). The guitar students emphasized dimensions of achievement, belonging, self-expression, and the opportunity to make music that they valued. They also emphasized choice and personal agency, themes that had not previously

come to the fore. As in previous studies, students in the current study perceived multiple dimensions of meaning to be salient parts of their experience.



*Figure 1.* Themes of meaning within the Brentford Collegiate C-Slot Grade 11/12 Guitar Class

While students articulated multiple dimensions of meaningfulness, they experienced meaning holistically, a finding echoed by Countryman (2008) and Sugden (2005). For these students, achievement helped to reinforce a sense of themselves as musicians, which in turn influenced relationships within the group and shaped the ways that they communicated and expressed themselves. The most meaningful experiences and aspects of participation described by students consisted of multiple dimensions. As Rick said, “[It’s] just basically what you love about music and how it makes you feel and the people around you that makes it all come together.”

While the dimensions of meaning identified by participants were consistent with those identified in previous studies, the ways that these dimensions functioned were specific to the

guitar class. *How* students defined achievement, the *ways* that they related to one another, the *kinds* of music they perceived as most compelling—these and other details were distinct to the guitar class and were shaped not only by the type of group, but also by the specific practices and intentions of its members, including Mr. Gardner.

The contrast between the guitar students' two year-end performances illustrates this point. At the school's spring concert, students performed successfully as an ensemble but were not emotionally invested in the results. They did not feel they would be heard as individuals—which was important to many of these students—and they enjoyed the music but did not feel strongly about it. Solo Night, on the other hand, was a deeply meaningful experience for the guitar students who spoke with me. It touched upon all of the aforementioned dimensions in ways that aligned with the goals and intentions of the group members. It enabled students to achieve something they cared about in an environment in which they felt supported and among important people. It also enabled students to express themselves and to share music that communicated something about them. Solo Night “[made] it all come together,” not simply by facilitating achievement, relationships and so on, but by providing access to these multiple dimensions in *specific* ways that were meaningful to these participants.

Regelski (1997) argues that the “goods of music” are contextual, rooted in “the situated and highly specific conditions of the here and now” (p. 26). Each music ensemble or course, then, has a particular set of “right results” that are shaped by the needs and interests of participants and influenced by the praxis of the class. To answer the second question guiding this study, the praxis of the C-Slot guitar class was flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of the students, and thus facilitated “right results” that were meaningful to participants.

Students in the guitar class had multiple opportunities to make choices for themselves as students and musicians. The guitarists chose their own performance groupings, arranged music for themselves, and had regular opportunities to select repertoire and make performance decisions. They focused on building their skill as guitarists rather than working toward a particular performance, and they were able to apply their skills to music they loved within and outside the classroom. Encouraged by Mr. Gardner, students could also choose whether to take risks like soloing, singing, or taking on a new and more difficult part. As a result, the members stretched themselves at their own pace and grew increasingly confident as they gained more experience. The impact of student choice was particularly evident during Solo Night, when students performed repertoire they had selected and prepared themselves.

In the sociable classroom environment, students also monitored their own progress and had considerable latitude to decide when to work and on what. The students who spoke with me enjoyed this freedom, felt a sense of responsibility for their progress, and took pride in the results of their efforts. This approach worked well for some students, particularly those who were highly self-motivated. However, as Dale observed, the relaxed approach may have led some students to achieve less than they would have in a more demanding environment.

Gardner likewise shared that he would prefer a more rigorous class, but altered his approach to make it more accessible to a wide range of students at the school. Of those students who moved at a slower pace Gardner said, “As long as they can still take, I don’t know, fifteen chords out of it so they can sit around the campfire and remember that...that’s value to them. To the rest of the [students in the] program that’s not as valuable, but [these students] still have a role and I don’t want to become elitist.” Rather than cater to the most dedicated guitarists,

Gardner established a flexible, workshop-style class that met the needs of a greater number of students at Brentford Collegiate.

The differentiated style of the class was possible in part because of the guitar itself, which enabled participants to create satisfying musical performances both soloistically and within a group context. As Hailey observed, “I think it’s easier to [play] on your own in guitar as opposed to band where it’s easier to have the group play with you.... With one [guitar] you can play so many things.” Much of the music that students valued could be played independently or within a small group, and could be simplified or made more complex to match the skill level of each student. As a result, each class members was able to succeed in ways that were significant to them.

Rather than follow a more traditional ensemble model, Gardner created a course that worked for the students in the group and facilitated meaningful participation in specific ways. The C-Slot guitar class emphasized individual skill development and student choice, and it facilitated self-expression and a sense of belonging. Students learned ensemble pieces that helped them to develop as musicians while also arranging and performing music that they chose for themselves. This praxis engendered “right results” for these students, and contributed to a thriving guitar program.

### **Conclusion**

What students perceived as meaningful related to fundamental human concerns. Feeling a sense of competence and personal agency, finding a place, connecting with others, expressing one’s self—these issues are of key importance to adolescents and are central to human experience. Through their participation in the school’s guitar course, students engaged in

experiences fundamental not just to their education as musicians, but to their education as whole beings.

The findings of this study suggest what is meaningful *to* students *is* meaningful for them. Meaningful experience is not incidental, however. It requires time, commitment, and emotional investment. Engaging regularly in musical experiences that address these fundamental human concerns may form habits of mind and behavior that will continue into the future, regardless of whether or not graduates continue to participate in group music-making. “What endures?” is an important question in education. This study points to these important facets of human life.

The findings of this study also suggest that a different orientation to school music may be fruitful. As music educators, we can all too easily focus on the group to the extent that we lose sight of the individuals. We often concern ourselves with creating a version of the ideal ensemble—one that reflects the “right results” communicated by stakeholders outside the music classroom—such that we lose sight of, or worse, compromise the quality of students’ experiences. Rather than focusing our attention on specific types of ensembles, we should instead focus on the students we wish to serve and on creating contexts that facilitate meaning in multiple, variegated ways. This may prompt us to offer different courses with different praxes. It may also require us to approach current offerings differently, to ask different questions, and to make different decisions as we proceed. In all cases, placing increased focus on students and the quality of their experiences involves being less rigid and formulaic about the ways that music groups look and operate as well as being more focused on the humans in the ensemble.

Regardless of how we proceed, school music offerings ought to meet two key conditions for meaning: they should provide opportunities to be successful in ways that are meaningful to the students in the group, and they should take place within a supportive and connected classroom community. These two conditions are moving targets that require a responsive and reflexive teacher.

Finally, facilitating meaningful experiences may involve asking questions that extend beyond the standard, albeit important, question: “Are all students in my group achieving success?” We may also choose to ask questions such as:

- Are students achieving in ways that matter to them?
- Are they forming positive relationships, and if not, what can I do to help?
- Do they have opportunities to be seen and heard, both when making music and within the social environment of our group?
- Do they feel they belong here and that they are part of something good?
- Do they have opportunities to express themselves and communicate with others, and do they have the necessary skills and knowledge to do so?
- Are they connecting in some way with the music we’re making, and do they have opportunities for choice?
- What are *these* students telling me explicitly and implicitly about the experiences they find meaningful, and how am I responding?

These questions are responsible, ethically grounded, and have the potential to extend far beyond performance goals to make a significant difference in students’ lives.

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