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Parents', Pupils' and Instrumental Teachers' Perceptions of Graded Music Examinations in Relation to the Cultural Educational Context in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Taking graded music examinations has always been a commonplace activity within the process of instrumental learning in Hong Kong. A high rate of entry for graded examinations, such as from the ABRSM, Trinity College London, Central Conservatory of Music, and Shanghai Conservatory of Music was recorded in the past ten years. Previous studies suggest that graded music examinations have beneficial effects, such as concerning motivation, certification, and a formal measuring of musical achievement. Although relatively few studies have examined the role and effect of these external examinations within the instrumental learning and teaching process in Western countries, it has been observed that there is an association between the perceived importance and advocacy for taking these graded examinations as part of the competitive culture in the Hong Kong education system. Nevertheless, there is very limited evidence on how pupils, parents, and instrumental teachers perceive and employed these examinations. This study, therefore, aims to understand how stakeholders perceive and value graded music examinations in the highly achievement-based society of contemporary Hong Kong.

The study was based on a theoretical framework inspired by Bronfenbrenner's Social-ecological systems theory (1994) aiming to look at relationships and interactions between layers of contexts and individual's perceptions and behaviour. The study took place in 2018 and 2019 in Hong Kong and included $N=182$ questionnaire responses from instrumental teachers, parents, and pupils and $N=14$ individual interviews. Three cases were drawn from the interviews to form groups of trios (teacher-pupil-parent) to study interactions between stakeholders and group relationships of perceptions.

Results suggest that instrumental teachers, parents and pupils have different perceptions and levels of agreement about the value of graded music examinations, such as beneficial effects, level of association with the Hong Kong education environment, and also pedagogical approaches towards graded examinations. Although most participants agreed that motivation was one of the key reasons for taking graded examinations, there was an observed tendency that more emphasis was put on non-musical functions, such as gaining credit in schools, certification, aiding future studies, and for comparisons between pupils. Negative issues were also raised as a result of the over-emphasis on graded examinations, such as an unhealthy variance in the quality of instrumental teaching, huge competitiveness between pupils, and also social inequalities in accessing examinations. Results imply that reconsideration is needed on the function and role of these examinations in a highly achievement-based context.