

# What do children think of music teachers? Their conceptions about cello teaching and learning

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We present an exploratory study about the conceptions held by basic level conservatory students about what they think of cello teachers and how different teaching strategies could improve their learning skills, focused on the educational-evolutionary variable. In this research, twelve Spanish children participated, and they were evenly in four different grades of basic level in Spanish conservatories. The main aim of this study was to describe, from a qualitative perspective, the different conceptions about cello teaching and learning. This project helped to develop and test the goodness of the materials, tasks, and criteria of analysis needed. Data were collected through a structured interview, which contained questions and tasks on five different studios related to teaching and learning musical instruments. It seems that children come with constructive ideas to the music lessons, but when they receive instruction, these ideas disappear gradually. Theoretical and educational implications suggested by the findings of this investigation are discussed.

*Keywords:* learning conceptions; music students; teaching approaches; learning outcomes; conceptual change

As is happening in other educational areas, learning and instruction of instrumental music performance is being subjected to changing demands. Both the curriculum reforms that have taken place and the development of recent research require a more constructivist approach to learning and teaching in this domain, which, however, is hardly seen in the music classrooms. We could find many different causes for the resistance to this educational change in music performance classrooms (e.g. Bautista and Pérez Echeverría 2008, Pozo *et al.* 2008, Torrado *et al.* 2005). Among them, this project focuses on

Table 1. Assumptions of the different theories about learning and teaching (adapted from Bautista *et al.* in press).

<i>Assumptions</i>	<i>Direct theory</i>	<i>Interpretive theory</i>	<i>Constructive theory</i>
Epistemological	Knowledge (partial and/or complete) reflects reality in a direct way.	Knowledge reflects reality in a blurred and distorted way.	Knowledge is a construction elaborated by the student, who builds own and personal models to interpret reality.
Ontological	Learning is conceived in terms of states or static products.	Learning happens over time, in a basic way, and it is conceived in terms of processes.	Knowledge is a construction elaborated by the student, who builds own and personal models to interpret reality.
Conceptual	A direct and linear relation is established between conditions and learning outcomes.	A direct and linear relation is established between learning conditions, learning processes, and learning outcomes.	A complex and interactive relation is established between the three learning components.

investigating the role of *the conceptions that students have about teaching and learning music*, as an essential component of their learning practices.

Research on the conceptions that students have on how to learn is still a nascent area, but remarkable importance has been obtained in the last two decades thanks to the research on metacognition, theory of mind, strategies and styles of learning, and conceptual change from the implicit theories in various domains (Pérez Echeverría *et al.* 2006). The studies carried out at the Autonomous University of Madrid concerning these conceptions have shown that achieving a constructivist approach requires a real conceptual change, a new mentality in teachers and students. This means that the implicit *direct* theory of learning (see Table 1), close to behaviorism, or *interpretive*, which assumes a cognitive activity by the student but subordinate to the achievement of results or learning product previously defined, should be changed to promote *constructivist* ideas, in which the student's mental activity is not only the engine but the goal of learning (Pozo *et al.*, 2006).

## METHOD

### Participants

This study was carried out with 12 cello students aged 8-12 years (5 male, 7 female) who were in four different courses of basic level (BL) in Spanish conservatories. While we were carrying out this study, all participants developed their activity in various official conservatories from the regions of Madrid and Valencia.

### Materials

We designed and implemented structured individual interviews to assess the conceptions of children, through questions about processes, conditions, and results (in line with Pozo 2008). Starting from the interviews used by Scheuer *et al.* (2002, 2006) in their research with children, we designed different tasks which were the goal of this preliminary investigation.

We prepared three different videos responding to cases of the three implicit learning theories of teaching music. In these videos, a girl makes a pitch mistake in her weekly cello lesson and her teacher reacts to the situation in three different ways to help her, according to the epistemological, ontological, and conceptual assumptions of the theory in question (see Table 1). After the children watched the three videos, they were asked to choose both the “worst” and the “best” way of teaching, as well as justify their choice.

### Procedure

The four teachers of the 12 students were first asked about the students’ availability, and the parents consented to record the interviews. After this, the children were interviewed in their conservatory or at their homes, and the interviews were recording with a video camera.

In order to describe qualitatively these students’ conceptions about cello teachers, tasks of choice and rank provided data that enabled descriptive statistical analysis (taking as independent variables the developmental and educational level). The relationship between their responses and the theory maintained was analyzed to check the consistency of these implicit theories.

## RESULTS

While we should take the results with caution, because of the small sample size, they indicate that the children in the 1<sup>st</sup> basic level (BL) chose the *constructive* teacher as the best, while children in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> BL preferred the

Table 2. Selection of the “best” and the “worst” videos of ways of teaching for students in each basic level (BL).

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Interpretive</i>	<i>Constructive</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> BL (8, M)	Worst		Best
1 <sup>st</sup> BL (8, M)		Worst	Best
1 <sup>st</sup> BL (8, F)	Worst		Best
2 <sup>nd</sup> BL (9, F)	Best	Worst	
2 <sup>nd</sup> BL (10, M)	Best	Worst	
2 <sup>nd</sup> BL (10, F)	Best	Worst	
3 <sup>rd</sup> BL (10, F)	Worst	Best	
3 <sup>rd</sup> BL (10, M)	Worst	Best	
3 <sup>rd</sup> BL (11, F)	Best		Worst
4 <sup>th</sup> BL (11, F)	Best		Worst
4 <sup>th</sup> BL (12, F)	Worst		Best
4 <sup>th</sup> BL (12, M)	Worst		Best

*direct* or *interpretive* way of teaching. Finally, if the students in the 4<sup>th</sup> BL chose the *direct* way of teaching as best, they also thought the *constructive* was worst. Inversely, the students who chose the *constructive* did not like the *direct* way.

As appears in Table 2, the *constructive* method was chosen least as the worst method, while the *direct* method was chosen most as the worst. According to the children’s responses and choices, it seems that they think both *direct* and *constructive* theories of teaching and learning could be good for learning, and their reasons for this are simple. For example, in their opinion, a good *direct* teacher is demanding of their students and uses techniques such as repetition and correction as teaching methods.

Asking the students to play it, to play it, and, and, and, if they make mistakes, ordering them to repeat it until things work out more or less...demanding from them, because the mistakes should be mentioned, and if they make mistakes again, they should be asked to repeat again, and sometimes, if necessary, he may play with students.

When talking about why they felt the *constructive* theory was best, they said that a teacher using this method should involve the student in his own learning process in an active and reflective way.

He shouldn't mention the error if you make a mistake, or mention what the error was, or how the error was made, but just talk with you, if a teacher doesn't let you figure out the mistake you made and the way to correct it.

Because the teacher let the girl think, which was a good idea, and, and the girl will do so at home...because she helped the girl think of what happened and, and analyze what she can do to correct herself.... In fact, you learn a lot in this way...in order that she can realize her errors, and it was the method the teacher used.

Finally we asked about the worst theory, most students immediately cited the *direct* method. They felt this method could obtain results but that the student would not necessarily understand the process to achieve them.

She ends up doing it...because finally she managed to do it due to the repetition, but it's not, not the best solution she can find.... She may be gaining bad habits at home because there's no one who can tell her, "wrong, repeat 5 times again." Well I don't know, but I think that it is the worst, at least for me, particularly for other students, but, because a teacher can be there without doing anything, but, always, always in some cases he does so.

## DISCUSSION

We would need to interview more children in order to confirm these findings, but the trends suggest that children arrive at the conservatory with *constructive* ideas, and then, in advanced courses, they opt for simpler, less desirable designs, focusing primarily on learning outcomes. Such conceptions evolve gradually according to the educational-evolutionary variable, reaching again a more complex theory in the more advanced grades. Therefore, teachers should consider what to prioritize in their lessons and what is happening in the classroom when they have a student who comes with previous *constructive* ideas. Finally, they should observe if a student loses or modifies that idea when he/she comes into contact with the education center.

Presently, we are working on refining the tasks and extending the sample to compare children educated according to different types of practices.

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