

UK children play musical instruments as part of family tradition and not to boost social status

Embargoed until 0001 GMT Wednesday 28 October 2015

British parents encourage their children to play musical instruments as part of a family tradition and not to boost their social status as Americans do, research says.

Dr Aaron Reeves, of the University of Oxford, found that UK parents did not see musical achievement by their children as character building or useful in getting university places or jobs.

Instead, it was usually only those parents who played instruments who encouraged their children to follow suit, he says in an article in the journal *Cultural Sociology*.

Dr Reeves, who analysed interviews with 44 people in the UK [see Note 1 for more details], says: “Respondents do not strongly associate musical practice with developing valued character traits nor with social or educational attainment.

“Instead, parental encouragement to play music is shaped by family ties and the parental perception of natural talent in their children.”

This contrasted with research carried out by other academics in America, he said. “Middle-class parents in the United States appear to associate cultural practice with other forms of utility, such as developing specific character traits and facilitating educational success. Middle-class families are very often marked by a pattern of ‘concerted cultivation’, where parents organise music-centred activities for their children, often in addition to school-based musical practice.

“These parents associate musical practice with increasing the possibility of educational success. The utility of music is not located in the practice itself, but in its capacity to increase the likelihood of educational success and also cultivate other valuable character traits. Parents who raise their children according to the logic of concerted cultivation are also more likely to provide them with a ‘sense of entitlement’.”

Researchers had attributed this “to parental anxiety over the declining fortunes of educated Americans. These parents have become increasingly worried about providing their children with skills and aptitudes enabling them to stand out from their competitors in the job market.”

By contrast, Dr Reeves, says, “for British respondents, no such connection was made between what is perceived as an overbearing parenting style and future educational or career possibilities.

“The parents interviewed here did not connect music with utility but rather they implicitly focused on the value of music as a family tradition and, to a lesser extent, as something valuable in its own right. British parents who encourage their children to play musical instruments often articulate that support as an effort to forge family cohesion.”

One Scottish parent, a chemist by profession, said during the interviews: “We’ve got two that are learning musical instruments...if we think it’s maybe worthwhile for them to keep on we try and encourage them, but we wouldn’t force them because there just isn’t much point in doing that.”

A housewife said: “My son’s just turned five and I want him to do the guitar because his uncle does it...but it’s up to him.”

In some UK families, said Dr Reeves, music was even “perceived to be an obstacle to educational success, or at least ancillary to it.”

Cultural Sociology is published by the British Sociological Association and SAGE.

For more information, please contact:

Tony Trueman
British Sociological Association
Tel: 07964 023392
tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk

Notes

- 1.** Dr Reeves analysed interviews conducted for the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion research project, which included 44 interviews with adults in 30 households, 26 of them parents. The Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project was a mixed methods project, involving focus groups, a nationally representative survey and then in-depth interviews with a sample of respondents to the survey. Interviewees included people from a range of ages, ethnicities, class positions and regions of the country, but are not representative of the UK population.
- 2.** The article is entitled ‘“Music’s a Family Thing”: Cultural Socialisation and Parental Transference’.
- 3.** The British Sociological Association’s charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk