

Children's Initial Interest in Learning the Cello: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Understanding why children want to learn a musical instrument and the meanings they make from their initial interest can inform pedagogical approaches that enhance music education programmes and support sustained student learning. Research has focused on musicians' motivations, with less attention given to children's perspectives during early learning. This study applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Participatory Action Research, a combination of methodologies rarely used in music education research, to investigate the initial interests of 14 seven-year-old beginner cellists. As lessons commenced, the children and their mothers participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Analysis revealed rich and novel idiographic insights into the development of children's musical motivation. Thematic findings indicated that children were primed for learning through prior musical enjoyment, exposure to stringed instrument classes, and a newfound affinity for the cello. Intrapersonal factors included four key motivations: a desire to be creative or musical, the pursuit of a hobby, curiosity about learning, and mood regulation. Interpersonal influences encompassed children's desires to connect with family members, form peer friendships, including through orchestra participation, and build a relationship with the teacher-researcher. Each child had a unique configuration of motives, suggesting the value of personalised pedagogy in the earliest stages of learning.

Keywords

children, instrumental music education, motivation, initial interest, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

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Introduction

Beginning one-to-one instrumental music lessons can be a pivotal experience in a child's life, as early encounters in this context can significantly influence ongoing musical involvement (Gaunt et al., 2021) and shape future social, emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual development (Hallam, 2010). The reasons children start learning an instrument in formal settings, such as schools, are often influenced by practical factors, including teachers' choices, instrument availability, school ensemble requirements, and parents' interests, values, and financial considerations (McPherson et al., 2006), as well as musical enculturation and exposure (Cantero & Jauset-Berrocal, 2017). However, these structural constraints can encourage or even compel children to play instruments that do not align with their preferences, leading to resentment and disengagement from musical activities (McPherson et al., 2012). Therefore, understanding what motivates children to learn an instrument is key to helping teachers and parents promote ongoing musical involvement, develop effective and relevant educational programmes (B. P. Smith, 2011), and reduce future dropout rates.

Previous research examining the motivations of young musicians as they learn and refine their musical skills has shown that musical motivation is defined and determined by multifaceted interactions between individuals and their environments (Hallam, 2002). Key influences include personal factors, such as behavioural and cognitive traits, identity, and goals, alongside environmental factors, including culture, learning context, family, and friends (Hallam, 2002). Studies drawing on theoretical frameworks such as self-determination (Wieser & Müller, 2024), self-efficacy (Hendricks, 2016), self-regulation (Cheng & Southcott, 2023), expectancy-value (see the PRISMA review by Sin et al., 2022), and musical identity (Evans & McPherson, 2015) collectively demonstrate how personal agency affects interest development, commitment, social interactions, and perseverance in both skilled students and experienced musicians, despite the inevitable challenges in developing musical skills. Similarly, mastery goals play a vital role in motivating people to learn and improve new musical abilities (Schmidt, 2005).

The learner interest development model, which overlaps with theories of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and goal setting, describes interest as a distinct motivational variable comprising separate yet interacting affective and cognitive factors that develop through individual interactions, specific content, and the environment (Renninger & Hidi, 2022). Interest develops through four phases, beginning with triggered situational interest, where a new experience, supported by others, initiates an individual's short-term interest. This can evolve into maintained situational interest, characterised by increased focus and deeper engagement. Over time, an emerging interest may develop, where an individual's curiosity becomes effortless and more autonomous. Finally, well-developed individual interest is marked by an enduring motivation to invest significant effort and derive personal meaning (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). In music education research, Roberts (2015) found that learners' situational interest in classroom music was linked to novel lessons that incorporated physical activity, self-efficacy, challenge, and creativity. In a studio teaching setting, Renwick and McPherson (2002) observed that a young clarinettist's intrinsic interest, as demonstrated by increased practice, the use of more advanced strategies, and greater persistence, occurred while learning self-selected repertoire.

Historically, studies of young learners' initial musical motivations have focused primarily on the broader roles of families and teachers, with limited attention to children's specific interests in playing certain instruments, their motivational drives, and the influence of peers and schools (Hallam, 2002). A combination of parental influence and learner age may explain why children begin music lessons (McPherson et al., 2012). For example, Kawase et al. (2018) examined when children start group music lessons in relation to sociability, finding that younger children's enrolment in music lessons is often linked to parents' beliefs about developmental benefits, whereas older children tend to be more autonomous in selecting musical activities. Relatedly, social influences on adolescents' musical interests evolve over time; parents are most influential in early

adolescence, teachers and friends become more relevant in mid-adolescence, and friends are predominant in late adolescence (Földi et al., 2024).

Among family-related influences, parents' contributions to children's music learning have been widely recognised in the field, particularly in encouraging lesson enrolment and providing the financial, emotional, and practical support needed to sustain study (Creech, 2009, 2010; McPherson, 2009; McPherson & Davidson, 2002). Building on this knowledge, Ilari (2013, 2018) applied Lareau's (2011) theory of concerted cultivation to research on musical parenting. Concerted cultivation is a parenting style common among busy, middle-class, urban families, in which parents intentionally support children's participation in extracurricular activities to develop their skills and talents. Ilari (2018) emphasised the importance of parents finding a balance in musical parenting, as highly structured environments that support children in pursuing multiple extracurricular interests can lead to overscheduling and negative outcomes, such as reduced time for practice.

In contrast to the well-established role of parents, few studies have examined how sibling relationships influence children's musical interests (Koops & Kuebel, 2019). Koops and Kuebel (2019) proposed that family dynamics, particularly how siblings relate to each other and to their parents through music, significantly shape children's musical development. The concept of sibling deidentification, which theorises that siblings differentiate themselves to establish independence, reduce rivalry, and acquire parental love (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Schachter et al., 1976, 1978; Whiteman et al., 2007), can explain how sibling interactions and parental involvement in sibling exchanges both support and challenge the development of musical engagement and interest (Chitwood, 2018).

Acknowledging the limited research involving children, Corrigan and Schellenberg (2015) examined the traits of parents and children who began and sustained music lessons. They found that predispositions, specifically agreeableness and openness to experience, characterised by sensitivity and an appreciation for the arts, can be key predictors of music learning and the duration of instruction. Corrigan and Schellenberg (2015) also identified connections between openness and traits associated with creativity, intelligence, academic performance, and intellectual abilities. Treger (2020) similarly found that openness, along with self-music overlap, curiosity, and need for cognition, were predictors of playing a musical instrument.

Enjoyment is a central factor in children's sustained interest in musical pursuits, including the expectation that learning and developing musical skills will be fun (Briggs, 2010). This core determinant underscores the importance of understanding the key elements that contribute to children's enjoyment of music and their sense of fun, a topic the current study aims to explore. Driscoll's (2009) study suggests that the intrinsic pleasure children aged 13 to 14 derive from learning music is crucial for motivating them to engage in instrumental music lessons. Playing alone for enjoyment and performing in groups were the two activities students found most rewarding, while social factors also significantly influenced young people's engagement. According to Woody (2021), enjoyment is a vital intrinsic characteristic that supports young musicians' motivation to continue learning and participating in music. Other factors include "social connection, expression, learner-directed/autonomy, creativity/experimentation, and identity," and extrinsic motivations encompass "virtue/value and achievement" (Woody, 2021, p. 1321).

While the existing literature primarily focuses on musicians' motivations during learning, research on children's prior beliefs, dispositions, and expectations before lessons begin and during the early stages remains limited (Oliveira et al., 2021). Therefore, the present study offers a novel perspective by inductively analysing and interpreting the lived experiences of a particular group of children as they began cello lessons, and by examining the perceived influences on their initial interest in learning. This idiographic approach provides theory-informing, context-specific insights with the potential for transfer to other similar settings (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1: How do 7-year-old beginner cellists experience and make sense of their initial interest in learning to play the cello?

Research Question 2: What factors do children and their mothers perceive as associated with that initial interest?

Method

Study Design and Context

This study originated from a larger project led by the first author, a teacher-researcher, which examined the lived experiences of 14 seven-year-old beginner cello students over more than 4 years (MacArthur, 2022; MacArthur et al., 2023, 2024, 2025). A key theme in the larger project was the children's initial interest in learning the cello, which forms the focus of this article. The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID 1544350) approved all aspects of the research, which was conducted at the teacher-researcher's workplace, a large, well-resourced, independent Australian metropolitan K–12 school with over 2,500 students, mostly from mid- to high-income backgrounds. The school allowed the research to occur onsite, with the Coordinator of Junior Music acting as an independent advocate to consult with stakeholders and manage potential dependency concerns.

Participants

Fourteen children (five boys and nine girls) and their mothers participated. All parents were invited to take part; however, only mothers attended the interviews. Thirteen children came from two-parent families (mother and father). One child's mother and father were separated, and that child moved between their homes. Before lessons began, the children completed a term of introductory stringed instrument sampling group classes and, based on ability and engagement, were recommended for individual tuition. All 14 children applied for cello lessons and were assigned to the teacher-researcher as their cello teacher. The independent advocate organised recruitment and consent at enrolment; participation was optional, and withdrawal had no consequences for future lessons, assessments, or performance opportunities. The school principals approved the children's involvement in both cello lessons and the research project. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Data Collection

Each child and mother undertook separate, one-to-one, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews at the school when lessons commenced, with only the teacher-researcher and the participant present (see Appendix for protocols). Child interviews were held separately from cello lessons. They remained conversational, non-evaluative, and neutral, exploring views on music, interest in the cello, prior music-learning experiences, and everyday musical activities (including at home, at school, with friends and family, in extracurricular activities, and at community events). Parent interviews covered musical engagement at home, sibling relationships, concert attendance, inter-generational and cultural influences, prior experiences learning to play an instrument, perceptions of their child's motivation, and anticipated benefits of playing an instrument.

Analytic Approach

The larger project employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; J. A. Smith et al., 2009, 2022) and Participatory Action Research (PAR; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Kemmis

et al., 2014). Because this study reports on the first phase of the larger project, we focus on participants' initial experiences of the cello, as captured in the first interviews, while working within core PAR principles. Consistent with these principles, the teacher-researcher worked reflexively with her students as co-researchers in a collaborative environment, sharing knowledge and power to explore teaching and learning processes (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014).

IPA, grounded in phenomenological philosophy and hermeneutics, examines how individuals understand and communicate meaningful life events through careful analysis of vivid, detailed, and personal accounts gathered via semi-structured interviews (J. A. Smith *et al.*, 2009, 2022). The methodology analyses participants' sense-making and, through a double hermeneutic, incorporates researchers' interpretative engagement. In this study, the teacher-researcher transcribed all interviews and conducted an idiographic, case-by-case analysis, involving detailed notetaking, line-by-line coding, and the development of emergent themes for each participant. Subsequently, a cross-case synthesis identified thematic convergences and divergences, and first-order participant accounts evolved into second-order researcher interpretations (J. A. Smith *et al.*, 2009, 2022).

Two core IPA strategies guided the analysis: abstraction, which inductively groups conceptually linked, emergent themes within cases to identify patterns and coherence across cases; and contextualisation, which situates themes within participants' narratives and life contexts. Through this process, emergent themes were organised into subthemes and then abstracted into higher-order, superordinate themes (J. A. Smith *et al.*, 2009, pp. 96–98). We also employed Smith's concept of "the gem as a valuable interpretative tool for IPA" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 201). The gem, which can be "shining, suggestive and secret," is a significant participant comment identified by the researcher as central to understanding the participant's experience and as illuminating the interpretation (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 201). Collectively, these analytical processes provide detailed insights into the psychological and social implications of the children's initial interest in the cello (J. A. Smith *et al.*, 2009, 2022). IPA is particularly suitable for music education research, as its constructivist approach provides an authentic perspective on interpreting real learning experiences and strengthens the evidence base for practice (Crawford, 2019).

PAR is a collaborative research method commonly used in educational research. It involves the teacher-researcher adopting an insider role, managed through reflexive journaling and support from a critical friend (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). In this study, elements of a critical approach (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014) were included, involving the teacher-researcher and students reflecting, analysing, and taking action to co-create positive change in the teaching and learning environment. Although participants were not engaged in all phases of the research, the inquiry was shaped by children's active involvement and reflection on their learning (Onsrud *et al.*, 2023).

We addressed the teacher-researcher's positionality through iterative, reflexive reviews of emerging interpretations and theme development, consistent with IPA and PAR protocols, and through regular consultations with the second and third authors and the independent advocate, who served as critical friends. These discussions examined core aspects of the analysis, challenged assumptions, and questioned previous beliefs and interpretations to reduce bias and uphold the study's integrity and trustworthiness (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; J. A. Smith *et al.*, 2009, 2022). Given the rarity of IPA and PAR in child-centred music education research, this study offers a fresh perspective on the development of young learners' musical interests.

Results

The systematic inductive analysis of the transcribed interviews, following the IPA conventions outlined earlier, revealed a hierarchy of superordinate and subthemes (J. A. Smith *et al.*, 2009) related to children's initial interest in learning the cello. Figure 1 provides an overview of these

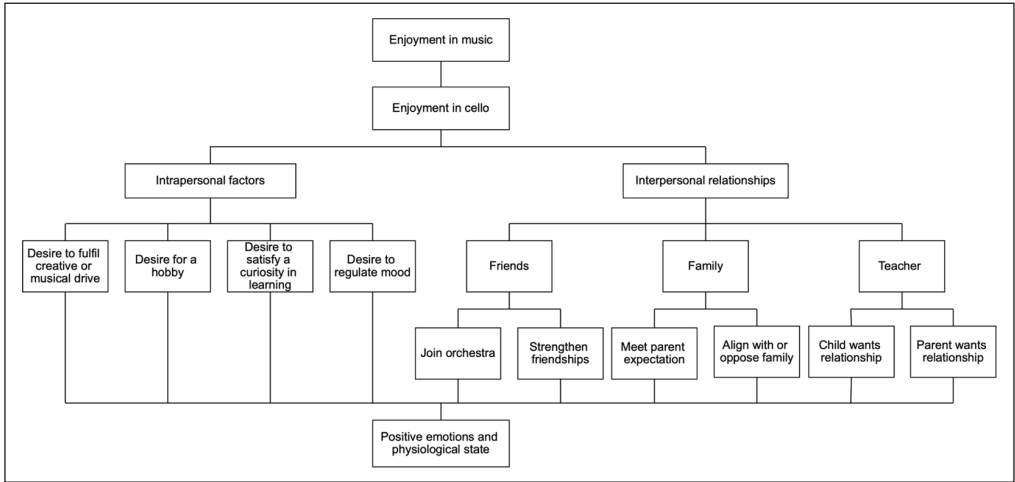


Figure 1. Themes concerning children’s initial interest in learning the cello.

themes. Table 1 maps each child’s interests, as reported independently by the child and mother, highlighting convergences and divergences across the cohort and indicating combinations of themes in each case. The following section presents the thematic findings, illustrated with IPA “shining” gems (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 201), to illuminate the analysis.

Enjoyment in Music

All children described enjoying music across various genres they encountered, such as popular, Western classical, and culturally specific styles. They described it as fun and linked it to being physically active, playful, creative, and expressive, which fostered positive emotions and feelings of vitality, contributing to an energised physiological state. Lily’s views reflected those of many in the group; she said that music was “fun and active, it’s fun to do, and there’s lots of stuff!” Engaging with music made Lily feel “happy and exciting!” The children’s prior music experiences included attending live performances (such as Western classical and popular music concerts, musicals, school, and community events) and everyday participation (including dancing, singing, improvising, composing, listening, and playing other instruments). Further investigation of interview accounts revealed that all children were raised in musically enriched home environments, where at least one parent valued and promoted familial musical engagement through shared listening and singing, using the radio and streaming services, watching YouTube, and paying for and attending concert performances. Parents intentionally exposed their children to a range of musical experiences because they valued artistic interests and wanted to nurture their children’s appreciation of music. William’s mother encapsulated parents’ sentiments:

I like to encourage their music. I think it’s really important that they do music. They’re bright, and I think it stimulates them further, not only for music but for other things that’ll happen in life, and it gives them a well-rounded view of the world. Music is really beautiful. It’s really good if you can have it in your life.

Mothers reflected on how their own childhood musical experiences, including learning an instrument, shaped their beliefs about the importance of music education. Table 2 summarises parents’ prior music learning; 11 children had at least one parent who had learned an instrument. Mothers who had learned an instrument expressed regret about quitting, frustration with poor teaching, or

Table 1. Thematic Material Related to the Children’s Initial Interest in Learning the Cello.

Child	Intrapersonal factors				Interpersonal relationships				
	Desire to fulfil a creative/musical urge	Desire for a hobby	Curiosity in learning	Desire to regulate mood	Friends		Family	Teacher	Parent wants relationship
					Join orchestra	Strengthen friendships			
Ava	✓ CM	✓ CM	✓ CM			✓ C		✓ C	
Charlie	✓ CM						✓ M		✓ M
Daniel	✓ C	✓ CM	✓ C		✓ CM	✓ CM	✓ M		
Elie	✓ CM	✓ CM	✓ C	✓ C		✓ CM			
Grace	✓ C					✓ C	✓ M		
Henry	✓ C		✓ C	✓ CM					
Isabella		✓ C	✓ C	✓ C				✓ C	
Jack		✓ CM						✓ M	
Lily	✓ CM	✓ CM		✓ CM		✓ M			
Matilda	✓ CM	✓ CM	✓ CM	✓ C	✓ M	✓ M		✓ CM	
Olivia	✓ CM		✓ CM	✓ CM	✓ C	✓ C		✓ CM	
Pippa	✓ CM	✓ CM	✓ C			✓ C		✓ C	
William	✓ CM	✓ C			✓ C	✓ C		✓ M	
Zoe	✓ CM		✓ CM			✓ CM	✓ CM		

Note. ✓ = thematic material identified from the interview data; C = child interview; M = mother interview.

Table 2. Parents' Prior Experience Learning a Musical Instrument.

Child	Parent instrumental experience (Yes/No)
Ava	Yes
Charlie	Yes
Daniel	Yes
Ellie	Yes
Grace	Yes
Henry	No
Isabella	Yes
Jack	No
Lily	Yes
Matilda	Yes
Olivia	Yes
Pippa	Yes
William	No
Zoe	Yes

Note. "Yes" indicates that at least one parent in the household had prior experience learning a musical instrument; "No" indicates that neither parent had prior instrumental learning. Parent interviews were conducted with mothers, who also reported on fathers' experiences.

disappointment that they had not learned their preferred instrument. Of the three mothers from households where neither parent had prior instrumental training, two cited a lack of opportunity, and one explained that the absence of music in her upbringing motivated her to enrol her child in lessons. These experiences strengthened mothers' resolve to support their children's cello lessons.

Enjoyment in Cello

The children expressed a sense of fun and enjoyment while learning the cello during the initial string sampling classes. They associated the cello with pleasurable feelings of physical activity and creative engagement in musical play; it felt "good." Many students were also curious about linking cello skill development to musical expression, which generated excitement and supported their ambition to play "songs," their term for repertoire learned in class, including method book pieces and familiar folk melodies. The conflation of "songs" with repertoire likely reflected children's classroom and everyday musical experiences, where musical expression was predominantly conveyed through singing. A compelling theme in many children's enjoyment of playing the cello was the pleasure derived from the sound they produced, particularly in the cello's low register. Ellie explained, "I really like the sound because it's very low and slow." Children described an affinity for the cello's timbre and were motivated to achieve it through nuanced control of their skill development. Ava stated, "It's very big and . . . the sound's very cool and . . . I like . . . to play the bow with it . . . but I don't like it when it hurts my hand! . . . I like the bow, it makes more big sounds." The connection between physical activity, sound, expression, and enjoyment in skill acquisition was evident in all children who remained in the study long-term.

Intrapersonal Factors

Situated within the superordinate theme of children's enjoyment in music, which was further expressed as enjoyment in the cello, the analysis identified two domains: intrapersonal factors and

interpersonal relationships. Each domain comprised subthemes associated with positive emotional and physiological responses, which further enhanced children's interest development. Intrapersonal subthemes included four internal motives: the desire to fulfil a creative or musical drive, the desire for a hobby, the desire to satisfy a curiosity in learning, and the desire to regulate mood.

Desire to Fulfil a Creative or Musical Drive. Playing the cello contributed to most children's engagement with creativity and musical expression. These children reported feelings of vitality arising from their creative experiences, which were personally fulfilling and led to positive emotions. Matilda enjoyed playing and singing music and described improvisation and composition as satisfying her creative drive. She stated, "You can learn the songs . . . you can mix up songs . . . then make up a bit of your own words . . . It makes me feel creative . . . because mixing things and making new things, it's fun!" Daniel described the cello's low register as emotionally rewarding and musically satisfying: "It makes me feel happy and, ahhh, musical!" William identified how active participation in music fostered creativity and positive emotions. He said, "It's more fun to make the music, as well as going through the beat with it . . . It makes me feel . . . good . . . it's just [good] in a way of music!"

Desire for a Hobby. Children expressed a desire for a musical hobby, and two provided pragmatic reasons for their initial interest in the cello, explaining that their decision was based on opportunity. Although these children generally enjoyed music, situational interest influenced their choice to begin lessons. Pippa's prior music experience was through dance, and she enjoyed the creative freedom of choreography because she could "just make up whatever you want." Like all the children, Pippa thought music was for fun. However, through listening to popular music, she associated musical engagement with fame. Pippa connected sound, listening preferences, songs, and musical elements with positive emotions, suggesting that her desire to learn music focused on developing her ability to communicate musically. Pippa liked the cello because it was "different" from the more popular violin and piano. She explained that she chose the cello "because I liked it a lot more, and I wanted to do an instrument." Pippa's mum explained,

This is her first go at an instrument. She's always been keen on it. She's always asked to do an instrument, so the opportunity came up, and we took it . . . we were doing all these other activities, so it was one of things, "Now we've got to put in something else as well!" So, it was a timing thing as well. This seems to work, so I'm glad.

Jack's mother explained his previous short-term lessons in guitar and ice-skating: "He just gets so excited about music, and I think . . . he wanted to be involved in music rather, didn't know quite which instrument to do." Jack reported wanting to play the drums, but when recommended for cello lessons, he explained, "That kind of took its place."

Desire to Satisfy a Curiosity in Learning. Curiosity about learning and acquiring new skills, alongside creative engagement, piqued the initial interest of several children. Matilda explained, "I wanted to learn new songs and other things about the cello." The children considered possibilities for their musical futures by wondering what would happen next in their cello skill development. Ellie exclaimed, "In the group lessons, we didn't get to do much of . . . the bow and that . . . and I really wanted to keep on learning 'til we used our hands at the top!" For these children, curiosity linked novelty with growing capability and progress; they anticipated that gaining new techniques and repertoire would expand what they could do musically, making early learning feel exciting and purposeful.

Desire to Regulate Mood. Although all children reported that playing the cello and listening to music enhanced their enjoyment and motivation to continue learning, for some, this was explicitly linked to music's ability to regulate mood. Henry associated the calming effects of musical engagement with changes in his physiological state. "My mum said, 'Do you want to play cello?' And I said, 'Of course I do, because it makes me feel relaxing.'" Seeking physiological and emotional regulation was significant for Henry, who struggled to maintain attention and focus in a generalist classroom and during the interview. However, when Henry played the cello, he focused his attention, moderated his energy levels, and concentrated on the connection between skill development and musical expression (MacArthur et al., 2024). Ava revealed that her emotions were connected to the sensory experience of playing an instrument and listening to sound, which evoked an exhilarated, euphoric response. She exclaimed, "Ahh! I LOVE [shouted] it! I LOVE playing an instrument. And Ahh! I LOVE hearing the music."

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships, including friends, family, and the teacher-researcher, were key to children's initial interest in the cello. Across cases, child participants described their experiences with excitement and optimism, noting that playing the cello enabled them to connect musically and expressively with others and that these social-musical experiences fostered a sense of vitality.

Friends. Many children regarded playing an instrument as a valued social activity within their friendship networks, perhaps because group sampling classes preceded one-to-one tuition. Students discussed their instrument preferences with friends and agreed to continue learning together, sharing their musical experiences. Ellie explained, "I wanted to do it with my friend!" Lily was also motivated by peer interest, and her mother stated,

I'm thinking, "Are you serious, cello?" Like, big! I was assuming . . . maybe a violin . . . And she said, "No, Mum, cello. The girls are doing it." And I realised . . . the fact that her friends, having them with her as well, her close friends are with her, that has helped a lot as well.

Daniel attributed his initial interest in playing the cello to a social-musical aspiration to join the school orchestra, which he knew would be possible the following year. He explained, "I wanted to go in the orchestra also, so that's really why . . . I like . . . the sound it makes." Daniel had seen his older musician siblings playing in school orchestras, and his close friend was a violinist, which further motivated him.

Family. Some children faced parental expectations to learn an instrument. Zoe revealed her parents' implicit demands when asked why she wanted to play music, saying, "Because my mum told me to . . . Or dad, I don't know, I wasn't born then . . . My mum and dad talked about it when I wasn't born, about the music." Daniel was one of five siblings who played piano, each of whom was also expected to learn a second instrument. His mother explained, "We all start with piano, and as they get older, they choose something else that they want to do."

All mothers expressed excitement about their children's interest in the cello. Twelve mothers reported that their co-parents were supportive; however, two mothers noted that their children's fathers held negative views about their children playing a musical instrument. These fathers questioned their children's genuine interest in learning the cello, anticipating minimal practice and short-term commitment. Jack's mother spoke about family tensions surrounding the decision to start lessons:

My husband was very negative about it. "He's done . . . guitar before, and he never practised . . . it's a waste of money . . . why do we bother?" I was caught in the middle because Jack was begging me; he really wanted to do cello . . . I said, "Look, this is what Dad has said. You have to make a promise to me that you will practice . . . It's not just something that you will do for a couple of weeks. Because if I go in and bat for you and say, 'Jack will do it,' you have to support me . . . you have to make sure you do it because next time he will say, 'No,' and I won't go into bat for you. So, can you promise me that?"

Jack reflected on his parents' perceptions of him learning the cello, "Dad doesn't; he's never really told me what he thinks about me playing the cello. Mum is the only one that . . . is just . . . really encouraging and stuff like that!"

William's mother reported that she had difficulty convincing her husband to allow cello lessons. She stated that her "husband was a bit . . . [gestures and intimates that her husband was less willing . . . laughs]. But I thought he should do it." William noted a difference in his parents' support, commenting, "[Mum] said that she's very proud of me that I, that I'm doing the cello"; however, his dad remained silent.

Grace initially wanted to play the violin to align with her violinist friends, but parental bias led her to choose the cello. Her mother explained:

My brother learnt violin. I really didn't want her to learn violin, so I was glad she liked the cello . . . I think it's really beautiful . . . I am happy she is doing that . . . My husband's put on a lot of cello, where they play Rock, 2Cellos, and Apocalyptica . . . She's never seemed interested in it, but maybe that's played a part.

Lily was motivated by the potential positive impact cello playing might have on her family. She wanted to play the cello because, "Anytime, like if there's no electricity and there is no music, I can just play the cello and my mum, everybody can hear music . . . [and] make them happy as well!"

Siblings influenced children's motivation to play an instrument. Children with older siblings reflected on how their brothers' or sisters' previous experiences learning an instrument had shaped their own motivations and expectations. Ellie stated, "It feels good that I'm not the only one in the family that doesn't do an instrument and that I can learn an instrument now." Daniel's choice of the cello reflected his desire to be different from his older siblings. He said, "I wanted to be the only one who played the cello . . . and be the first one playing it." Olivia shared how playing the cello enhanced her relationship with her pianist sister, "I'm happy that I get to play instruments because it just makes me feel good, and sometimes I try and play with my sister with the piano!"

Olivia's account also shows how sibling influences and parental decision-making intersect. Olivia said she also played the piano, although not by choice, "Because my mum decided and my dad, because my sister started piano." Her mother explained that she had wanted to play the piano herself as a child, so when Olivia's sister showed interest in lessons, she enrolled both children to "give both kids the same opportunity." However, she reflected,

Olivia didn't really enjoy it, she said . . . "I want to stop" . . . When she was exposed to the cello and loved it, she talked about it all the time, and she said, "Can you please talk to my music teacher? I really want to play this." For the first time, I thought, "Wow, she's really passionate about this instrument."

Isabella's older brother played the cello, and her desire to learn reflected nuanced family dynamics, including her perception of his experience as burdensome, her empathy for him, and her view of playing the cello as a chance to succeed in ways her brother might not have:

I thought I would want to play the cello because Jonathan was . . . so if he didn't want to take it to our grandma's place, and I could . . . He wouldn't have to worry about it . . . He wouldn't have to put it in the

back . . . He wouldn't like to pack it all up again, cos he would get all frustrated, and he didn't really like playing the cello until I got it . . . When I first got it, I told Jonathan, and he said, 'Cool that you got it; maybe you should play for us.' And I said, 'Ok,' and then I practised . . . It makes me feel happy . . . and proud . . . and a good player . . . And I feel confident that I am going to do it and not argue [with] Mum and Dad.

Children with younger siblings described family scenarios in which they served as musical role models, and the cello became a sought-after possession. Lily exclaimed, "My little sister said she likes it because she can play on it as well." Ava described dynamic musical interactions with her younger brother around the cello, saying, "My brother, he says, 'Can you teach me how to play it too?!'"

Teacher. Four participants expressed initial interest in developing the teacher-student relationship. For example, Jack's mother explained her son's interest:

His words were . . . "I really like it, it's really, really good, Mum. I really want to do it with Ms MacArthur! Please, can I do it?" . . . You're a big part of this process for him, wanting you as his teacher and wanting to show you he can do it.

Charlie wanted to play guitar but was too young to meet the school's intake requirements. His older siblings were the teacher-researcher's cello students, so Charlie's mother encouraged him to learn the cello until he could learn guitar. She explained that Charlie's siblings had a trusted relationship with the teacher-researcher, and she wanted to offer Charlie a similar experience. For example, Charlie's brother disclosed schoolyard bullying to the teacher-researcher, who then communicated this information to his classroom teacher. Charlie's mother said, "I spoke to him about whether this would be a nice one to learn cos he knows you and is familiar with the cello, and he seemed really interested." However, Charlie revealed that sibling rivalry sparked his interest in the cello. He expressed frustration that his siblings' practice in shared living spaces disrupted his TV viewing: "Half is, I want to annoy my brother and sister more than I do! . . . And the other half, I want to learn the cello."

Discussion

This study investigated the lived experiences of children initially interested in playing the cello, examining how they made sense of their musical motivations and the factors perceived as influencing their decision to learn, revealing a hierarchy of themes (Figure 1). The children's enjoyment, first in active, creative, playful group music activities and then in their developing affinity for the cello, indicates that these children were primed to learn a musical instrument through rich exposure to formal and informal musical activities at home and school. Within this initial interest, the children associated the concept of "fun" in music (Briggs, 2010) with their enjoyment of playing an instrument (Woody, 2021). More specifically, the children experienced satisfaction and, for some, novelty in connecting physical gestures and skill acquisition to sound production, which elicited rewarding emotional and physiological responses.

Our finding that the children's enjoyment in music and the cello was closely linked to intrapersonal factors and interpersonal relationships aligns with the key findings of McPherson et al. (2012), who identified situational interest, environmental factors, and personal relationships as significant influences on children's motivation to learn an instrument. The subthemes provide compelling evidence of the complex internal drives that can underpin children's initial musical motivations. We found that children's early interest stemmed from their desire to satisfy needs

related to being creative or musical, pursuing a hobby, developing curiosity in learning, regulating mood, and intentionally cultivating close interpersonal relationships with peers, family, and the teacher. Although these categories of children's initial interest emerged from the analysis, each child presented a different set of thematic influences (Table 1), indicating the individualised nature of early musical motivation.

The nuanced intrapersonal subthemes emerging from our study resonate with aspects of Treger's (2020) findings, which highlighted early predictors of music learning, including openness, self-music overlap, curiosity, and cognition. However, our research revealed that the children in this study purposefully pursued instrumental music lessons to create opportunities for musical self-expression (Woody, 2021; Woody & McPherson, 2010) and to access positive emotions and physiological states. Our thematic findings also largely correspond with Cantero and Jauset-Berrocal's (2017) study, which found that students' instrument choices are primarily driven by intrinsic motivation and, when influenced by external factors, are shaped by positive family attitudes and peers who play the same instrument. However, we also established that an anticipated connection with the teacher can serve as a motivating factor. Our participants' initial interest in playing the cello to build musical relationships beyond the family unit with peers and teachers highlights children's awareness of music as a relational resource for expanding and developing their musical social circles and establishing mentorships. Although the field acknowledges social factors as vital to young musicians' sustained engagement (Moore *et al.*, 2003), our findings suggest that such strong social motivators exist even before lessons begin.

Participant accounts suggest that mothers were well-meaning in encouraging their children to learn the cello. They were motivated by beliefs about musical value and achievement-related goals. This aligns with Sin *et al.* (2022), whose expectancy-value review found that parental support, involvement, behaviours, and expectancy-value beliefs, as well as children's perceptions of these, positively influence children's musical behaviours and their own expectancy-value beliefs. Our findings add a new perspective by showing that most children had at least one parent with childhood instrumental learning experiences (Table 2), and that this history positively shaped parents' intentions to support their children's interests. Some mothers viewed learning the cello as an enriching educational ideal that promotes life skills (e.g., William's mother), whereas others saw it as an opportunity to enhance an already busy schedule (e.g., Pippa's mother). A few mothers linked learning the cello to an obligation to meet ambitious expectations, such as Daniel's mother, or acknowledged their influence on instrument choice, as with Grace's mother. Zoe recognised that her parents had predetermined that she would play an instrument even before she was born.

Although longer-term participant experiences were not the focus of this study, these findings on early parental influence, together with the indication that mothers intended to actively support their children's musical engagement by providing opportunities, reinforcing values, and overseeing early development, align with Ilari's (2013) study of concerted cultivation in children's music learning. Given these circumstances, the challenge for the children was to seize the opportunity to learn the cello, separate themselves from their parents' projections and expectations, assert musical independence and autonomy, and make the experience their own. Considering parents' dominant role in children's early musical pursuits (Ilari & Young, 2016; McPherson, 2009; McPherson & Davidson, 2002), navigating this multifaceted endeavour was undoubtedly complicated.

The prominence of mothers rather than fathers as musical advocates among the study's adult participants is significant. This reflects a common trend in music education research involving parents and warrants further investigation (Ilari, 2018). The children's fathers were mostly background figures, except in two parenting partnerships where they expressed strong negative opinions about their children's initial and ongoing interest in learning the cello. The two children from these families likely encountered uncertainty and emotional obstacles during their early learning

and may have faced additional pressure to demonstrate enthusiasm, commitment, and measurable success. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise the problematic situations that parental conflict can create for children aspiring to play an instrument, including the potential for interpersonal strain within the family and heightened learning-related stress. In particular, Jack's mother's emotional appeal to her son to take long-term responsibility for his initial interest in the cello reflected a tense family scenario.

Our findings on sibling influences highlight how children learn to play an instrument to be seen (MacArthur et al., 2025), especially during a developmental phase when they seek autonomy from their parents (Eccles, 1999; Ilari, 2018) and aim to distinguish themselves (Koops & Kuebel, 2019) and deidentify (Chitwood, 2018; Schachter et al., 1976, 1978) from their siblings. Seeking differentiation was particularly evident among the younger siblings in the sample. For example, Daniel wanted to be the only one of five children to play the cello, whereas Isabella was motivated by the possibility of outperforming her older cellist brother. Similarly, Charlie's desire to both emulate and retaliate against his older siblings in the practice room reflects a shared sense of sibling rivalry. These examples suggest that the children's drive to compete and succeed in the family's musical arena significantly influenced their initial interest, and that for some, taking the opportunity to play the cello was a strategic move related to family positioning. Moreover, children noticed that introducing the instrument into the family led to interpersonal adjustments and new relational complexities (Koops & Kuebel, 2019). For example, some older siblings in the sample quickly assumed enhanced leadership roles within their families, such as Ava, who was asked by her younger brother to teach him cello.

Conclusion

IPA and PAR investigate and interpret the lived experiences and learning contexts of small groups of participants, producing findings that can be applied across similar settings rather than large-scale, generalisable results. This study took place at a well-resourced Australian independent school that offered a comprehensive music curriculum to predominantly affluent families. It reports only on children's initial interests, as their longer-term musical behaviours are documented elsewhere (MacArthur, 2022; MacArthur et al., 2023, 2024, 2025). Therefore, there is a clear need to extend this work through mixed-methods and quantitative longitudinal research involving students and families from diverse demographic and cultural backgrounds, including varied learning abilities, to examine how early motivations relate to ongoing engagement.

Despite these limitations, our findings indicate that children's overall enjoyment of music and their chosen instrument, along with the complex interplay of intrapersonal factors and interpersonal relationships, were associated with their initial interest in learning. Key pedagogical implications include the importance of teachers understanding and valuing their students' rich musical backgrounds, identifying each child's unique constellation of motivations, and being sensitive to sibling and parental relationships, including familial challenges or expectations. In addition, educators should recognise peer influences and consider their role in fostering an enriching, creative early learning environment. By integrating these principles, music education providers can enhance their ability to attract and retain young beginner musicians.

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Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID 1544350). The study was conducted in accordance with the approved ethics protocol, including procedures for working with child participants, parent/guardian consent, child consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms.

Consent to Participate

Written informed consent was obtained from children and parents before participation, with an approved independent advocate acting on their behalf at all stages of the research.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the ethics approval for this project did not permit the sharing of collected data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Stephanie MacArthur: stephanie.macarthur@unimelb.edu.au

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Appendix

Child First Interview

1. Tell me about yourself and your family.

Prompt: How old are you? What do you like doing? Who is in your family, and what do they like to do?

2. Tell me about what you like doing at school, which classes and activities, and why?

Prompt: What about Reading/Maths/Sport/Lunchtime/Assembly?

3. Can you tell me about any other musical instruments you play/have played?

Prompt: When and why did you start? How did it feel playing this instrument? Do you read music when you play this instrument? Do you still play any of these? Which ones?

4. What activities do you do outside of school? Can you tell me about these?

Prompt: Swimming/Taekwondo/Tennis/Art class/Kumon

5. What about dance/callisthenics/gymnastics? Tell me more about these activities and the music that is used in these activities.

Prompt: What kind of music is it? (fast/slow, happy/sad, etc.) How do you use the music in the activity/routines?

6. Could you tell me more about the music that you might listen to at home or with friends?

Prompt: Do you use the radio/YouTube/Karaoke/Singstar/iPad?

7. What do you think about music?

Prompt: What is it for? What does music do? Why do we listen to it?
Why do you want to play music? How does it make you feel?

8. Tell me about what you think of the cello.

Prompt: Explain what you knew about the cello before you had the group classes. Do you know anyone else who plays it? What do you think of the sound it makes? What do you think about how you play it? What does it feel like to play it?

9. After the group classes finished, why did you decide that you wanted to continue learning the cello?

Prompt: What was it about the cello that helped you decide to have lessons?

10. What do the rest of your family think about you learning the cello?

Prompt: What have Mum and Dad said about you learning the cello?

11. Please explain to me how you will learn to play the cello.

Prompt: Tell me about what you have to do with your body to play the cello. What does your brain have to do?

What have you already learned about your body and thinking skills from classroom music/prior instrument?

What do you imagine will happen in your lessons?

12. How do you think that you will improve your playing each week?

Prompt: What will you do with the cello between lessons? How difficult do you imagine it will be?

13. What do you imagine you will do with the cello in the future?**14. What other musical activities do you imagine you might be involved in?*****Parent First Interview*****1. Please tell me about your family's musical background and interests.**

Prompt: Do any family members play a musical instrument? Have any in the past? What, when, how long for, why did they stop, why do they continue? What about listening to the radio, going to concerts, gigs, and so forth?

2. Please tell me about your child's background in music.

Prompt: What musical experiences have they had in the past? For example, preschool music classes, dance, preschool musical performers, singing, radio, karaoke?

How did these experiences impact them?

3. Please tell me more about your child, their character and the way they engage with learning.

Prompt: What kind of learner are they? What engages them? What have been areas of success and areas of focus to improve?

4. What do you think about your child starting cello lessons?

Prompt: What were your thoughts when your child expressed an interest in learning cello? How does it relate to the character of your child? What were their motivations for learning? Have you set any conditions on their learning?

5. What do you think the process of learning the cello will involve for your child?

Prompt: What concepts of cello-specific skill development and application do you already have? What do you know about how to play the cello? What do you know about the stages of development?

6. What are your expectations for their skill development in cello playing?

Prompt: Do you have any expectations of what you would like to see them achieve? If so, is there a particular timeline for these milestones?

7. How do you think your child will work to adopt the physical skills, the music reading and comprehension skills and the expressive elements of playing music?

Prompt: Go through each of these elements. What reflections do you have about your child in terms of their physical, mental and expressive skills?

8. What are your thoughts on practice?

Prompt: Do you have an opinion on the role of practice in music learning? How do you envisage your child working on it?

9. What do you expect to be your role in your child learning the cello?

Prompt: Is this consistent with your role in your child's academic learning? Is it consistent with your role in your child's extracurricular learning?

10. What outcomes from learning the cello do you hope or expect your child will experience?

Prompt: Have you considered whether learning the cello will have any ancillary benefits for your child? For example, academic or social? What about other aspects of their school experience?

11. What are your thoughts on ideal approaches to teaching your child music?

Prompts: What style of learning does your child enjoy? What approaches engage and motivate your child?

12. What thoughts about your child's future musical engagement do you have?

Prompt: What do you think your child will do with music in the future? Cello or otherwise. Why?