Music lessons make children feel clever

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Music lessons help boost academic results by convincing children that they can learn new skills and become intelligent, new research suggests.

Teenagers who are high achievers in music are more likely to think that you can learn to be clever and this has a positive impact on their school work.

Children who took fewer music lessons or did not learn music at all were inclined to have a more defeatist attitude, known as a fixed mindset, and did not make such fast academic progress.

The research claims to be the first of its kind and took place at a girls' day and boarding school, Queen Anne's School in Caversham, near Reading. The project started in 2015 and now includes schools from other parts of Britain as well as Germany.

It is being led by Daniel Müllensiefen, a music psychologist at Goldsmiths, University of London, who won a €250,000 award from a German foundation to expand his work.

He told The Times: “I wasn't only interested in measuring musicality but also other abilities such as intelligence, personality, sense of school belonging and personal strength. We have come back to the school each year and the same students have sat a battery of about 20 tests and questionnaires, including three musical listening tests, an IQ test and a personality test.”

Almost 180 girls aged 11 to 17 sat the tests, which were then compared with their academic results and whether they viewed their abilities as innate or changeable. Dr Müllensiefen said: “One of the results we found was that there is a chain of links going from musical abilities to conscientiousness to academic performance. It appears that people learning an instrument use this experience of acquiring a new skill and having a new way of expressing themselves.

“This might then actually change their perception of what they can achieve with learning and how they perceive their cognitive abilities and intelligence.

Amy Fancourt, head of psychology at the school, said: “In the first year we found a relationship between musical listening skills and academic achievement. When we compared the data from the first year with the second year, we found a picking up of musical activity alongside that of academic achievement. Those who had increased or taken up musical activity, it predicted their academic performance.”

Camille Morana, 16, is in sixth form. She has been playing the violin since she was six and did her grade 8 at 12, and is now working towards her diploma. She said: “Doing music has definitely given me so much confidence in other things, such as asking questions in class. You realise you can learn from your mistakes and ask questions and get things wrong.”