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Abstract

Dutch music education in schools generally is based on the underexpectation of student's musical development. From a social constructivist viewpoint however, a child is seen as competent: learning from the complex (musical) world and co-constructing knowledge in interaction with other children and adults. The aim of this research was to design and execute intervention in the preschool, which is based on the image of the competent child, and evaluate the opportunities and challenges of these interventions. Three categories of interventions were designed: (1) content interventions: confronting children with 'complex' music, visiting a concert and allowing children to explore various musical roles; (2) pedagogy interventions: learning music through musical interaction, exploring violins in small groups and bringing in professional musicians to learn with; and (3) media intervention: playing on real instruments (in this case violins). These interventions were executed by teachers, a pedagogue and musicians in three preschool groups, half an hour twice a week, over a six month period and evaluated by means of observations and interviews with teachers and musicians. The results show that the content and media interventions offered most opportunities for execution. The pedagogy interventions appeared most challenging; teachers and musicians felt they lacked time and skills in guiding the children appropriately. Social constructivist music education could, therefore, only be partially achieved due to lack of skills of the music teacher and musicians as well

constraints following from the particular school environment. This paper ends with recommendations for future education.

Keywords: Social constructivism, preschool music education, qualitative research

Introduction

Music education in Dutch schools generally is based on the under expectation of student's musical development (De Jong & Van der Heijden, 2005). This implicit view has influenced the way in which music education for young children in preschools is presently designed and taught. It shows the following characteristics:

- strong focus on 'school music'. Topics of songs often relate to seasons and generally music is simplified for children into duple and major (Bresler, 1998; Gordon, 2003);
- music classes are usually in large groups and teacher-centered. The musical roles of children are limited to reproducing songs, while leaving little opportunity for any personal creativity (Haanstra, 2001);
- children often learn 'beside each other' but not 'from each other' and the teacher is seen as the main conveyer of musical knowledge (Bresler, 1998, p. 15);
- little or no connection with the professional music world. Young children rarely attend concerts in a concert hall (Bremmer, 2006) and professional musicians seldom visit preschool children.

This view and practice has the tendency to focus on what children do not know (i.e. the focus on inability of children's to understanding and making music), instead of focusing on the natural ability of children to engage in music and thereby stimulating

and extending the musical potential of children (De Jong & Van der Heijden, 2005).

From a social constructivist point of view, however, a child is seen as competent: full of potentials, creative, motivated to learn, forming own ideas and hypotheses, learning in interaction with other children and adults, and learning in and from the complex world. From birth children have the capacity to express themselves in endless ways, among others verbally, musically, visually, through movement, logic and metaphores (Rinaldi, 2006). Children are in a sense budding artists and researchers: they constantly explore and experiment with hypotheses, and through unexpected events they develop ideas for a new plan or an experiment (Huisingh, 2009). Children do not receive 'objective' knowledge passively but are active agents in their own learning, constantly co-constructing their own knowledge in contact with their surroundings. Linear developmental models of children are questioned as each child develops in its own unique way using its own learning strategies.

Childhood in this view is not seen as a preparatory or marginal phase but just as important as every other phase in life (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). The child should therefore be able and capable to manifest itself to the world as the world to the child. From birth the child is an active participant in and contributor to all social and cultural processes.

Recent (brain) research seems to support this view: infants and young children show far greater musical understanding and abilities than researchers previously 'expected and understood' and certain research recognizes that a child is musically competent from birth (Woodward, 2005; p. 250; Gruhn, 2002). Kessen, Levine and Wendrick argued that

'early childhood education may require, not so much the building of new

perceptual and cognitive structures, but rather the maintenance of capacities, which for whatever evolutionary reason are still available to most children' (as cited in Zimmerman, 1993, p. 1).

If the young child is viewed as musically competent, it begs the question how music education should be designed to guide the musical potentials of these children.

The objective of this research project was therefore to design and execute interventions for preschool music education that are based on the image of the competent child, and evaluating the opportunities and challenges of this type of music education. This led to our main question for research: *'How can preschool music education that is based on the image of the competent child be designed and executed?'*

Methods

Based on the image of the competent child three categories of interventions (content, pedagogy and media) were designed, executed and evaluated. These were executed by a music teacher, preschool teachers, musicians of the Dutch string orchestra Amsterdam Sinfonietta and a pedagogue in three preschool groups with approximately 20 pupils per group, during half an hour twice a week, over a six month period. The school where the project took place had a near to complete black population and predominantly made use of traditional school methods during their lessons.

The interventions were evaluated by means of weekly observations of the music teacher and with semi structured interviews at the end of the six month period with children, preschool teachers and musicians. The children, three preschool teachers

(group interview) and six musicians (interviewed in two groups) had their own topic guide focusing on the interventions they were most concerned with. The data were triangulated to evaluate the seven different interventions.

An overview of the interventions

A. Content interventions

Intervention 1 Confronting children with 'complex' music (listening and singing), music that is not simplified for children (Gordon, 2003).

Examples of operationalisation: singing folk and work songs in different tonalities and meters; taking the repertoire of the orchestra and the musicians as starting point to play for the children instead of regular repertoire for children.

Intervention 2 Exploring musical procedures and artifacts (De Jong & Van der Heijden, 2005).

Examples of the operationalisation: visiting and performing at a concert in a concert hall where procedures of the listener and performer can be experienced, and exploring artifacts such as music scores, instruments etc. that are placed in the classroom.

Intervention 3 Exploring various musical roles (Woodward, 2005).

Examples of the operationalisation: inviting the children to make individual and group compositions. Giving the children the opportunity to improvise during every music class, performing together with Amsterdam Sinfonietta at a concert and attending several concerts as listeners.

B. Pedagogy interventions

Intervention 4 Learning music through musical interaction and learning music 'informally' in a formal setting (Gordon, 2003).

Examples of the operationalisation: during the music classes, the children will be encouraged to engage in one-to-one musical interaction. They will learn music 'informally' by freely absorbing and responding to the songs presented. The songs will be sung from beginning to end (as opposed to singing a song line by line and then have the children repeat these parts) and often without text to challenge the children to 'analyze' the music before responding to the songs.

Intervention 5 Learning and working with various adults.

Examples of the operationalisation: a music teacher, preschool teachers and professional musicians will attend the music classes, and parents are invited to participate in the classes once a week.

Intervention 6 Learning from each other in small groups (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1998).

Examples of the operationalisation: the children will be able to explore sounds, to compose and improvise *together* on violins in small groups during a period of six classes.

C. Media intervention

Intervention 7 Playing on real instruments in contrast to instruments made for children (Barett, 2000).

Examples of the operationalisation: The goal of the 'violin project' is not to give violin lessons but to use the violins to improvise and compose.

Results

A. Content interventions

Intervention 1 'Complex' music.

The preschool teachers and musicians were generally surprised about the concentration shown by young children when listening to 'complex' music not composed for children. One musician commented:

'Children enjoy looking at musicians who play music, children seem to be taken along into the concentration of the musicians. They tend to be more easily distracted by pieces that are composed for children, just like the musicians themselves'.

The music teacher mentioned that finding a song repertoire that varied in meter and tonality simply took too much time.

Intervention 2 Musical procedures and artifacts.

The preschool teachers and music teacher mentioned that by visiting a concert and performing at a concert the children had opportunities to explore the musical procedures associated with a concert listener and performer.

'A concert listener listens calmly to music, I guess that is one of the most important procedures to be experienced'

one preschool teacher said. Another preschool teacher commented:

'As a performer they really stood very still on stage, usually they fool around'.

When exploring the musical artifacts in the classroom, the music teacher and preschool teachers noticed few children were attracted to the objects and they felt that more children could have been guided actively in the exploration of the objects.

Intervention 3 Various musical roles.

The music teacher, preschool teachers and musicians were all of the opinion that the children had had many opportunities to explore and experience the role of listener and performer. In the role of performer children explored ensemble playing, interpreting music, listening to each other and communicating with an audience. One musician said:

'Being open to each other at rehearsals [...] and allowing different interpretations to be heard in the music. [...] that was exactly what the children were invited to do on their own violins'.

More challenging was allowing the children to explore the roles of improviser and composer. Some musicians for instance mentioned that they could recognize a child's musical idea but they lacked in skills in guiding the children to expand on those ideas. The music teacher often experienced an inability to guide the children in varying their improvisations.

B. Pedagogy interventions

Intervention 4 Musical interaction and 'informal' learning.

The preschool teachers noticed that children responded well when songs were sung from beginning to end and without the song text. One preschool teacher mentioned:

'It's actually easier for the children to sing along because the songs are offered without words'.

The music teacher found it challenging to place musical interaction at the heart of the music classes. There seemed too little time per lesson (30 minutes) to regularly engage all children (approximately 20 pupils per group) in a one-on-one musical

interaction.

Intervention 5 Learning with various adults.

The preschool teachers valued their presence in the music classes seeing what the (individual) children were learning. It was therefore easier to recognize the musical behaviors of children in their own classes. The music teacher noticed that the preschool teachers felt that they lacked in skills to build on the development of the musical understanding and abilities of children. Preschool teachers could however talk *about* music during their classes. The musicians believed that through their presence in music classes they could offer children insight into the profession of 'musician' in contrast to the profession of 'music teacher'. They could guide children in experiencing ensemble playing, communicating through music, producing a beautiful sound on the violin and thinking in musical structures. One musician said:

'To me, music is a way of communicating. [...] I can play for children and let them respond to that music. I can't talk about music but the music speaks for itself'.

It proved to be very challenging to involve parents. During the six month period only one parent visited a music class.

Intervention 6 Learning in small groups.

The preschool teachers noticed that the children in small groups learned from each other through imitation. They observed that the children copied each other, e.g. in the way they held the violins. The children also copied each other's newly discovered sounds. The musicians had difficulty in letting the children work together and guiding the joint composing and improvising on the violins. One musician commented:

'Only a few times could I get the children to work together but usually it

turned into a chaos [...]’.

C. Media intervention

Intervention 7 Playing on real instruments.

The preschool teachers were initially skeptical about playing the violin with children but were impressed by the ease and pleasure with which children could produce sounds. The musicians, however, noticed that the children were not motorically developed enough to play the violin and that they had trouble producing clear or nice sounding tones. The musicians also mentioned that a violin is inspiring to explore, offering endless sound possibilities and the children enjoyed the experience of playing an instrument from the professional music world.

‘It’s a complex instrument, and the children spent a lot of time exploring the sounds that can be made on a violin’.

The musicians found it hard to not give violin lessons but instead to see the violin as a means to compose and improvise.

Conclusion

Preschool music education that is based on the image of the competent child was perceived as a complex form of music education and could only partially be executed. Valuable insight was, however, given in the challenges encountered whilst executing this type of education. In general, one of the main challenges was to execute the interventions in a school environment that predominantly makes use of traditional school methods. In such an environment, the initiative to learn is usually set by the teacher or the method, and the teachers tend to work in defined timeslots and in large groups. In education that is based on the image of a competent child, the

initiative to learn is set by the children, and they need to have the opportunity to work in their own time and in small groups. For this type of education the specific conditions of the school where the research was done was therefore not ideally suited (due to the learning attitudes of the children, defined time slots, and large groups).

Specifically, it was found that the content and media interventions offered most opportunities for execution. Children showed the ability to sing and to listen to complex music, to be capable of exploring various musical roles and procedures, and to be able to improvise and compose with a real instrument. The pedagogy interventions appeared most challenging. The teachers, pedagogue and musicians generally experienced difficulties in guiding the children instead of instructing them, specifically in guiding the children in composing and improvising *together* in small groups and taking the musical ideas of children as a starting point. These challenges should require more experimentation and research.

Recommendations

This research project did not have the intention to design a fixed format for preschool music education that is based on the image of a competent child but to explore one of its possible forms. Based on our current experiences, we offer some recommendations.

- there must be an enabling environment i.e. the school, including parents, teachers and school head, and musicians must share the (social constructivist) pedagogical view of this type education and they must create the right conditions for it;

- children should be confronted with complex music (listening and singing);
- experience implicit musical procedures by visiting concerts in a concert hall;
- offer various musical roles, including improviser, composer, listener and performer;
- invite western or non western professional musicians to the classroom;
- allow children to work together in small groups and to musically interact one-to-one;
- encourage children to bring in their own musical thoughts and ideas, and to help them expand on those;
- give children an opportunity to play and experiment with real instruments.

In our opinion, the musical potentials of children were addressed more during this research project than they would have been in more traditional forms of preschool music education. In light of this experience more research would be advisable.

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