Bend the twig and bend the tree

In search of a musiceducation approach for young children

Abstract

In this article the possible role of musical free-play in the musical development of young children is explored as the researchers are looking for a musiceducation approach based upon the notion of the competent child.

Ellen van Hoek
Member of the research group of the professorship 'arts-education'
Amsterdam school of the Arts
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
ellenvanhoek@hetnet.nl

Suzan Lutke
Member of the research group of the professorship 'arts-education'
Utrecht school of the Arts
Utrecht, The Netherlands
suzan.lutke@muziek.hku.nl

Christiane Nieuwmeijer
Member of the research group of the professorship 'arts-education'
Utrecht school of the Arts
Utrecht, The Netherlands
christiane.nieuwmeijer@planet.nl

Preface

The foundation TOEVAL GEZOCHT, the initiator of this research project, is intrigued by the potentialities of young children and, consequently, by the musical capacities that they are born with. The methods of Reggio Emilia, which are partly based on social constructivism, have, in the past, inspired the foundation to focus primarily on visual projects. The knowledge, experience and inspiration thus attained have led to a follow-up project that is financed by the Fund for Cultural Participation (*Fonds voor Cultuurparticipatie`*) and supported by the professorship 'arts-education' of the Utrecht School of the Arts. This article describes the first phase of this project that consists of exploratory literature research with the goal of uncovering building blocks upon which to base such an approach. We have searched through international digital university libraries, publications by The Netherlands Culture Network and articles that have been made available through the international academic network of the foundation TOEVAL GEZOCHT. We have looked for literature studies, project summaries, research reports and instruction material.

The central question posed by this study is:

> *Which theories about, methods for and experiences with music education are available outside the Netherlands that are based on the concept of the 'competent child' and which points of departure do they offer for an approach within the first years of Dutch primary education (age 4-6)?*

1. Reggio Emilia as source of inspiration

The source of inspiration for this project has been the results achieved by the Reggio Emilia approach. Reggio Emilia is a town in Northern Italy where a new educational vision was developed after the Second World War, initially for 4-6 year-olds and subsequently also for the very young. Loris Malaguzzi, the originator of this method, views children as being rich and full of potential; strong, powerful and

competent from birth. (Edwards et al., 1998, Rinaldi, 2006).   A significant postulation is that children are orientated towards communication in a 'hundred languages': verbal language, facial expression, sound, movement, dance, drama and music as well as logic and metaphor. These languages mutually stimulate each other and each possesses its own power of expression and potential. The concept of 'the three educators' is one of the most essential products of the Emilia approach. The children are each other's primary educators, adults are the secondary educator and the tertiary educator is the child's environment. The children are the protagonists within their own development and a system has been developed to allow the adult to observe, analyse and document the children's development, in order to allow them to take the lead. (Edward et al, 1998, Bremmer & Huisingh, 2009).

It has traditionally been the visual potential of children that has enjoyed most attention in Reggio Emilia. Experiences with music have not frequently been published. Matthews (2000) describes a musical project at a Reggio-based school in the USA. According to Matthews, the greatest eye-opener is that the issue is one of capitalising on how musical the children *are* rather than how musical they might *become*.

The views that learning is a collective process and that the child is the manager of its own learning process share many characteristics with learning theory based on social-constructivism. Within social-constructivism, the child is seen as the initiator of its own learning process, and its social context is the rich learning environment within which that learning takes place. We can lay a theoretical basis for the further development of a music educational method for young children by allying ourselves to such social-constructivist principles.

2. Social-constructivism

2.1 Attributes of social-constructivism

The origins of constructivism can be found with Piaget and Vygotsky. The principle of constructivism is that people construct their own knowledge, as opposed to earlier learning philosophies in which learning is perceived as being passed on from one person to another. The various educational methods based on social-constructivism all share the principle of a pupil who *actively* gives shape to his own learning, while being stimulated to do this by his (learning) context. (Kanselaar, 2002).

A second important correspondence between all social-constructivist learning environments is that learning should take place within a *realistic environment*. The complexity of realistic problems is revealed by various representations of reality. Moreover, the methods and assignments that are employed emphasize the construction of knowledge as opposed to the reproduction of knowledge. One means of achieving this is by preferring authentic tasks within a meaningful context above abstract situations that have been removed from their context. (Jonassen, 1994).

After all, learning is undertaken *together with others* rather than in isolation (Kanselaar, de Jong, Andriessen & Goodyear, 2001). Vygotsky (1978) proposes that the interaction of a child with its environment is essential to its development. The environment consists of peers and adults. This brings us to *social*-constructivism, of which Vygotsky is an important proponent. An important concept within the social-constructivist learning theory of Vygotsky is the "zone of proximal development". This zone is the difference between a child's actual and potential level of cognitive development.

2.2 Development based on play and the role of the arts

According to Vygotsky, play is the most important source of development (1933/1976). A child can realise its personal aspirations by means of play. As these are not yet attainable in reality, a child uses its powers of imagination and fantasy to express its desires. Two important aspects that distinguish play from other activities are, according to Vygotsky, in the first place that children play out 'imaginary situations' in games, and in the second place that games are always based on rules: "There is no such thing as play without Rules".

Vygotsky (1933) goes on to assert that the meaning of things can be detached within a game, and then assigned a new meaning. Play develops the child's powers of imagination and thus opens up a new world of possibilities.

The arts also serve to develop powers of imagination. Vygotsky describes these roles of the arts in his Psychology of Art:

> *"...Art ... introduces the effect of passion, violates inner equilibrium, changes will in a new sense, and stirs feelings, emotions, passions and vices without which society would remain in an inert and emotionless state" (1925/1971, page 246)*

Thus, both play and the arts stimulate the powers of imagination that are so vital to Vygotsky; the sense of fantasy that allows the child to enter the zone of proximal development and to free itself from the 'limitations of the actual context'.

3. Play

We can conclude that play is an essential part of social-constructivist learning. The social-constructivist view of Vygotsky focuses largely on role-play. Young children show a development in roleplay from simple, symbolic roleplay to more interactive roleplay (Janssen-Vos, 2004). Also there is development from solitary play, to parallel play and eventually cooperative play where the child is interacting with

others. This chapter focuses on play and the function it can fulfil in a child's development.

3.1 Concepts of play

The various studies concerning play and children approach the role of play in the development of 3-6 year-olds from a number of different angles.

The psychoanalytical tradition as developed by Freud (1961) views play as a valuable tool that children use to cope with the pressures of their environment. Erikson (1963) asserts that while adults use play to escape from reality, children use play in order to reach a new level of development. Piaget (1962) views play as the ideal way for children to develop mentally, while being a pleasurable, relatively unorganised activity. To Vygotsky (1978) play is a way of stepping outside of reality and to experiment. Children can reach beyond themselves at play. Vygotsky is clear about his standpoint on where this play takes place: firstly, in relationship to others and only then on the individual level.

3.2 Characteristics of play

The literature that was studied emphasizes the importance of play, but also makes clear that the concept of play is a phenomenon that is difficult to fathom and to describe (Gilmore, 1971; Niland, 2009). Play is defined in various ways: free, pleasurable and voluntary, without meaning, unproductive, spontaneous, aimless and amusing. It would appear that important aspects include freedom of action; the apparent aimlessness of one's actions; the voluntary nature of the activity and that one knows the rules of the game. Moreover, the child initiates the activity of playing and determines its course (Smith & Montgomery, 2005; Vygotsky, 1933; Janssen-Vos, 2004; Kohnstamm, 1993).

4. Musical development and play

Social constructivism is based on the premise that the child attempts to understand the world around it. Music is a part of that world. This dictates how music education should be developed: a child-centric approach that lays more emphasis on expression, feelings and involvement.

Smith & Montgomery (2005) mention that although play is generally accepted as a valuable didactic concept for teachers who work with young children, it is not yet very evident in musical activities at infant schools. Traditionally, teachers approach musical activities in the form of a teacher-orientated method with large groups of children (Andress, 1998; Morin, 2001). Free musical play is seldom part of the curriculum for 3-6 year-olds (Smith & Montgomery, 2005). The reasons would appear to be that teachers are uncomfortable when they are unable to influence the musical learning process, that there are concerns about potential noise problems and about the challenges of organising free musical activities (Smith & Montgomery, 2005).

Nonetheless, research has been conducted worldwide into free musical play for young children. The most immediately apparent feature of these studies is the distinction that is drawn between informal and free play. The studies that are concerned with the informal musical behaviour of (young) children do not involve a context wherein preparations have been made to ensure the stimulation of musical activity. These studies concentrate on the musical behaviour of children during everyday activities and events. The studies that have included free musical play, in contrast, do include environments that have been prepared in such a way as to stimulate the child to experiment with sound. However, the intention is that the child should initiate the musical play itself. The role of the teacher varies from purely facilitating (equipping the environment, offering security, giving

compliments and stimulation) to higher levels of intervention. (Smith & Montgomery, 2005)

4.1 Informal musical play

Informal musical play means: spontaneous musical activities performed by children in unconditional, informal settings, without an educational objective. This spontaneous musical activity (vocal, instrumental) is also termed 'musicking' (Small, 1987).

Taking the innate musical potential of children as a starting point, it is interesting to look at what informal musical activity may be observed in the children, without the context of a formal educational setting.

Trehub (2006) describes her studies on babies in this field. The listening skills of babies already involve an enormous degree of nuance; they can distinguish semitones, absolute tonal intervals and deviations from existing melodies. Campbell (1998) performed an experiment in which she observed children in the age range of 3 to 18 years old during their informal 'musicking'. Campbell described a broad range of musical expression during the study. One remarkable aspect is the relationship between the activities which children undertake and the music they make: for example, children think up suitable songs when they are playing with the sand in the sandpit. Forrester (2010) calls this 'pretend play singing' and agrees with Young (2006) that children combine play, telling stories and expressing these stories by singing. Music is directly related to the young child's perception of its environment, and as a child gets older, also to communication with others.

Forrester's research recognises this increase in musical communication. Young (2006) warns us about the adult reaction in such a situation. The strong interpersonal aspect entails that adult intervention is more likely to interrupt the free music than to improve it.

These studies reveal that children augment their play with musicking; the musical accompaniment to their own games. We can see here a development of musicking from solitary/symbolic play towards musicking that accompanies extended interactive role-play. (Janssen-Vos, 2004).

4.2 Free musical play

Free musical play takes place in an environment that has been prepared by the teacher, which stimulates the child to experiment with and to explore the musical properties of sound. The initiative for playing is taken by the child itself. The literature that has been studied offers various forms of approach where experiments have been undertaken concerning the role of the teacher and the design of the environment. The degree of involvement on the part of the teacher may be placed on a sliding scale from facilitation to intervention.

Gluschankov (2008) has studied the free musical play of children between 4 and 5 years old. She reports on how the children in two different crèches react to freely available musical instruments. The level of involvement or 'intervention' on the part of the teacher is restricted to the choice of available instruments: a very limited form of intervention. The child initiates the musical activity. The children at both crèches reveal similar forms of musical play: musical and extramusical play. Musical play involves the exploration by the children of sound characteristics. Gluschankov also mentions so-called 'extramusical play', where children play with instruments (solitary, parallel and cooperative) and use them in role-play, construction play and movement games as an auditory accompaniment to the game.

Niland (2009) is at the other end of the sliding scale described above. She creates a musical situation that is compatible with the interests and experiences of children (in this case, cars). Her musical input is based on song, as she says:

"...the voices of children are at the heart of a child centred curriculum".
(Niland, 2009)

The song, chosen by the teacher, is the starting point for activities that are initiated by the children through play. They think up new words for the song, create musical accompaniment with instruments and dream up movement games to go with it. The teacher offers new impulses where necessary. Observing the musical and play behaviour of the children lends insight into their interests, perceptions and their social interaction. These observations may form a trigger to introduce new elements into the musical play.

Niland's approach to the child-orientated curriculum initially involves a large degree of intervention by the teacher, but this is reduced once the children take more initiative within the play.

A final example of free play is the Action Research by Page Smith (2011) which was conducted at two schools in New York, utilising the Reggio principles and initiating musical play with groups of children of 3,5 to 4 years old and children of 4 and 5 years old. Here the point of departure is the game that the children are currently involved in. Page Smith links in by both joining in the game and adding objects to the game on the basis of observation, such as Orff instruments, a shadow curtain and video equipment. These additions create new impulses within the learning environment, which allow the children to discover new elements in their games and to reach deeper levels of musical play. This research gives an exact opposite role to the teacher when compared to Niland: the children's play is the basis, and only then is there a role for the teacher to play, that of observer, initiator and facilitator.

These examples, while not attempting to be comprehensive, are nonetheless indicative of the sliding scale. Gluschankov describes the musical activities that are initiated by the children when the teacher has merely prepared the environment. In the case of both Niland and Page Smith we can see that the teacher intervenes. Niland determines

the context to a great extent whereas Page Smith allows the activities of the children to lead.

Conclusion

This literature study has uncovered a number of important building blocks on which to base the development of a music educational method for young children. Based on the innate musical potential of the child, the free musical play that is initiated by children themselves plays a crucial role in the musical development of the young child. This musical potential is visible in the informal musical behaviour of young children. During informal musical activities, the child combines the activities it is involved in with making its own music to accompany them. This involves a development from solitary towards more interactive play. A music educational method can develop this musical potential. This means that the newly developed method must facilitate free musical play. This article offers some points of departure by describing the attributes of play: freedom of action, acting without apparent goals, the voluntary nature of the activity and the gradually increasing role of rules. It is important that the child initiates and gives form to the play. These attributes of play determine the design of the environment and the role of the teacher.

Discussion

The central question to the next phase of this research principally concerns the role of the teacher. Where will he place himself on the sliding scale from facilitation to intervention? Do you allow children to play and become involved only when the game seems to be losing momentum and needs new impulses (Page Smith, 2011)? Do you start with a musical building block such as a song and then leave the initiative to the children (Niland, 2009)? Do you simply prepare an environment and then observe (Gluschankov, 2008)? A second

question is what form a possible intervention should take. Which interventions allow the initiative to remain in the children's hands and safeguard the sensation of 'freedom of action' and 'acting without apparent goals'? This sliding scale will be explored during the second phase of this research, in the daily practice of the first two years of a Dutch primary school (age 4-6).

References

Alkema, E. e.a. (2006). *Meer dan onderwijs*. Assen: Van Gorcum

Andress, B. (1998). *Music for young children,* Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace

Bremmer, M., Huisingh A. (2009) *Muziek is als geluiden heel mooi door elkaar gaan,* Amsterdam: Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten

Brouwers, H. (2010). *Kiezen voor het jonge kind, Bussum: Coutinho*

Campbell P.S. (1998). *Songs in their heads*, Oxford: University Press

Edwards, C. Gandini, L. & Forman, G. (1998). *De honderd talen van kinderen.* Utrecht: SWP

Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and society,*New York: Norton

Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principal,* New York: Norton

Forrester (2010), Emerging musicality during the pre-school years: a case study of one child, *Psychology of Music, 38*, 131–158

Gluschankof, C. (2004) Music and Play: Diverse Aspects of 4-6 Year Olds' Self-initiated Musical Play. *Questions of Quality, international Conference CECDE (2004*)

Gluschankof, C. (2008). Musical Expressions in Kindergarten: an intercultural study? *Contempory Isues in Early Childhood, 9/4,* 317-327

Janssen-Vos, F. (*2004). Spel en ontwikkeling, Assen: Van Gorcum*

Jong de L., Heijden van der A. , (2005). *Gevangen in een schelp*, Assen: Van Gorcum

Jonassen, D. (1994). Thinking technology. *Educational Technology, 34/4,* 34-37

Kanselaar, G., Jong, T. de, Andriessen, J., & Goodyear P. (2000). New Technologies. In: Robert-Jan Simons, Jos van der Linden, and Tom Duffy (eds.): *New Learning*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 55-83.

Kanselaar, G. (2002) *Constructivism and Socio-Constructivism*. Utrecht University

Kohnstamm, R. (1993). *Kleine ontwikkelingspsychologie I, Houten: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum*

Matthews, C. L. (2000). No known destination: Pre-primary music and Reggio Emilia. Spotlight on Early Childhood Music Education. Reston, VA: MENC: The National Association for Music Education. 20 – 22.

Morin, F. (2001). Cultivating musical play: the need for changed teaching practise, *General Music Today, 14,* 24-30

Niland, A. (2009). The power of musical play: the value of play-beased, child-centered curriculum in

early childhood music education, *General Music Today, 23/1,* 17-21.

Rinaldi, C. (2006). *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia.* New York: Routledge

Page Smith, A. (2011). The Incorporation of Principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach in
North American Pre-school Music Curriculum: An Action Research. *Visions of research in
Music Education*, 17. Downloaded from http://users.rider.edu/~vrme/v17n1/index.htm op
26/04/2011

Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams and imitations in childhood,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

Small, C. (1987). *Music of the common tongue: survival and celebration in afro-american music.*
London: Calder ltd., Press

Smith, K.M. Montgomery, P. (2007) Free musical Play & Socially Mediated Learning. Musings for
Early Childhood Education. *Listen to their voices : research and practice in early childhood
music.* Waterloo: CMEA

Trehub S.E. (2006). Infants as musical connoisseurs, In McPherson G. (ed.). *The child as a musician*
(blz. 33-50). Oxford: University Press

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes.*
Cambridge, MA; MIT Press

Vygotsky, L.S. (1933/1976). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. In J.S. Bruner,
A. Jolly & K.Sylva (eds.), *Play Its role in development and evolution* (blz. 537-554)
New York: Penguin Books.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1925/1971). *The psychology of art.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Young, S. (2006). Seen but not heard: Young children, improvised singing and educational practice.
Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 7(3), 270–280.