

# TOEVAL GEZICHT

## Jong geleerd...



Ivan (6 years 5 months) and Mara (6 years)

Music education for young children  
based on the competent child theory

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# Luna's journey of discovery

(OBS De Wagemaker, 22 March 2012)



Why are you taking that with you?  
- To hear the sound

crack, crack, crack



A large branch  
- I found it



This is the tree trunk, like a tree trunk



# Introduction

*Jong geleerd...*<sup>1</sup> is a three year music project run by TOEVAL GEZOCHT. In cooperation with various partners we are researching and developing an approach to in-school music education for young children (4 -7 years). This approach is based on the competent child theory and the principles of social constructivist learning. We see children as budding artists and scientists and protagonists of their own learning process. We give them the lead, always within the context of a specific project. We have confidence in the potential of the children and try to be guided by their ideas, research, plans, their 'provisional theories' and expressions. We observe how they develop these when interacting both with each other and with adults and with all aspects of their environment. In this way we aim to create the conditions and context needed for a profound and versatile form of musical learning and musical development, of musical expression and communication.

The first year (2010-2011) was largely spent researching literature, methodologies and practices at home and abroad, which could become the building blocks for a method to be used in schools, based on the competent child theory and a social constructivist view of learning. This research was conducted by Ellen van Hoek, Suzan Lutke and Christiane Nieuwmeijer and was supervised by Dr. Karin Hoogeveen, lecturer in Art Education at the Utrecht School of Arts. The findings of this research were presented in June 2011 at the international MERYC conference in Helsinki and at the research conference of Cultuurnetwerk Netherlands.

We are now engaged in the second year of the project (2011-2012) during which TOEVAL GEZOCHT, together with music teachers Emma Rekers, Debby Korfmacher and Iris Oltheten, have been developing an approach to music education which has been put into practice in a pilot project at three primary schools in Landsmeer. During the preparation period teams consisting of a music teacher, a classroom teacher and a trainee were formed and trained. In January 2012 the period of practical research effectively began. The music teachers are at the schools with their teams working with the reception classes (children aged between four and six years old) and developing a method based on documentation and reflection, in close cooperation with TOEVAL GEZOCHT and with the management of the schools involved.

During the third year of *Jong geleerd ...* (2012-2013) we will be dedicating ourselves to the practical application and the transferability of the method and to the training and coaching of teachers and music teachers who wish to work with this approach.

We are working on this project together with various partners: the music association Amicitia Landsmeer, Amsterdam Sinfonietta (professional string orchestra), Evert Josemanders (puppeteer, musician, composer), Leonard van Goudoever (composer, conductor, arranger) and het Fort van de Verbeelding (community music). A partly international consultative group is also involved in the project. One of them, Dr. Susan Young (UK), a specialist in the field of music education for young children, advises on a regular basis.

In this paper, the following question is central: How can music education for young children be developed and then be implemented within schools on the basis of the competent child theory and principles of social constructivism? We are gathering information which we hope will help us to answer this question through active research which we are currently implementing in the pilot project. In this paper we wish to set out clearly our methods and initial results with the help of descriptions and images. We only have room for a very small portion of our extensive documentation here. More can be found on our website: [www.toevalgezocht.nl/projecten](http://www.toevalgezocht.nl/projecten).

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<sup>1</sup> Jong geleerd ... literally means "learned young", it is a phrase in Dutch which has no English equivalent. In Dutch the sentence does not need to be finished, the implication hangs in the air for all to hear. It captures something of the idea of how crucial the early years of a child's life are for forming the future adult.



# Theoretical background

## The competent child theory

We have approached this research project *Jong geleerd ...* from the premise of the theory of the competent child. That is to say a child is born with the potential to explore and to interpret the world around it, a child can learn to speak every language it needs in order to express itself and to communicate. Children can express themselves using verbal language but also in poetic and scientific language. They can communicate in the language of images, movement, sound, logic, metaphor, in short 'the Hundred Languages of Children'.

We see children as budding artists and scientists. It is striking that young children - just like artists and inquisitive scientists - are constantly exploring, developing plots, plans and ideas and that they have no fear of the unknown. They explore and discover everything. If they come up against something unexpected, something other than that which they were looking for, then that turns out to be exactly what they need and what allows them to continue. Children can switch with ease from image to logical thought, from object to movement, from hypothesis to story telling or role play.

In this research project, we try to see the children as the protagonists of their own musical learning ("from them we can best learn about things related to children", Loris Malaguzzi, founder of Reggio Emilia in: Edwards e.a., 1998). If we truly believe that all children are born with their full potential then we must try to discover ways to give children the lead in their own learning and then keenly observe and listen to what they come up with (Huisingh, 2009).

## Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is an important source of inspiration for TOEVAL GEZOCHT. Great thinkers such as Dewey, Vygotsky and Bruner have developed insight into 'learning' that we consider to be of great importance. In recent years there has been a lot of attention given to the principles of social constructivism in education. The constructivist theory assumes that the acquisition of knowledge and skills are not so much the results of a direct transfer of knowledge from the teacher, but rather the result of mental activities of the students themselves: we learn by drawing connections between new information with that which we already know (Witteman, 2001). Constructivism emphasises the active role of the student in processing information and the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Social constructivism assumes that the student actively shapes his or her own learning, stimulated by his or her (learning) context (Kanselaar, 2002).

A second important theme common to all constructivist learning approaches is that learning takes place in a realistic environment. Through multiple representations of reality, the complexity of realistic problems becomes clear. The chosen methods and assignments place more emphasis on knowledge construction than on (knowledge) reproduction. This is done by, amongst other things, emphasising authentic tasks in a meaningful context rather than abstract situations taken out of context (Jonassen, 1994).

Finally, learning takes place together with other people, rather than alone (Kanselaar, et al, 2001). One of the most important figures associated with social constructivism was a Russian developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934), who only really became known in the western world in the 1960s. In his view, knowledge is not only individually constructed, but also increasingly mirroring the views of others. Vygotsky suggests that the interaction of a child with his environment is essential for development. This environment consists of peers and adults. An important concept within Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory is that of the 'zone of proximal development' which is formed by the difference between a child's actual level of cognitive development and its potential level of cognitive development. Cognitive change or learning takes place in the zone of proximal development or the construction zone. The construction zone is, as it were, 'the workshop of learning'. Here, the students,

with their development history, and the teacher, with its support structure, come together to work on the cognitive growth of students. In this 'cognitive workshop' the role of the teacher is to ensure that students do not receive any more aid than is strictly necessary (Witteman, 2001). Not only do students learn from their interaction with teachers, but they also learn from interaction with each other. Many constructivists emphasise the role of social interactions, they are held to have great influence on what is learned (Van Hoek, Lutke, Nieuwmeijer, 2011).

## **Creativity**

Learning can therefore be seen as a form of interactive knowledge construction or rather co-construction. Learning is seen as a creative process in which the initiative lies with the learner, rather than as a transfer-model from adults to children. The people who are growing up now will build other knowledge and will need to find other solutions to those of the adults who are educating them. Hence it is essential that children from a very young age onwards do not lose their powers of initiative, curiosity and creativity but, indeed, enhance them. The concept of creativity has many definitions. TOEVAL GEZOCHT sees creativity as the freedom to always be able to see something from a different angle. This definition, therefore, sees creativity as a broad concept, which does not belong exclusively to the field of the arts, but is equally important in the world of science. The arts are certainly the area where there is a high degree of creativity, the process of making art is eminently a creative process. Following this line of reasoning, it is of great importance to explore and define the role of the arts and artists in the learning process of young children. This is the assignment that TOEVAL GEZOCHT has set itself. Art is not seen as a fringe activity or next to/along side learning, but as an essential part of the learning experience itself, as a strategy of learning.

Another important aspect of creativity in the light of interactive knowledge co-construction is that it appreciates and encourages differences in insight, differences of opinion and differences between people. We see these as positive constructive building blocks in the learning process of children.

## **Play**

The concept of 'play' has an important role in social constructivist learning. Play is defined in many different ways: free, enjoyable and voluntarily, trivial, unproductive, spontaneous, aimless and amusing. It seems the freedom of action, the apparently aimless nature of the action, the voluntariness of the activity and that there are rules to how the play is conducted (Van Hoek, Lutke, New Meijer, 2011) are also important elements. For Vygotsky (1978) play is the way in which we step outside reality and experiment. During play children can reach beyond themselves. Distinction is often made between playing alone and playing together. Kohnstamm (1980) emphasises that play was originally socially oriented. Playing together is the primary form of playing. Solitary play has derived from this.

## **Brain research**

Recent research into the brain emphasises the importance of art for young children. Music, dance, drama, visual arts and literature all support important brain functions such as listening, watching and storytelling, which are essential to learning in general. The development of the brain follows a scheme whereby at more or less fixed ages time windows can be opened and closed in the sections of the brain and connections can be developed. For the development of the musical centers for example, seven years old appears to be an important threshold, after which the development of certain musical skills can no longer be taken for granted. Children who have been introduced to art and music from a very young age develop key skills in their brains that are not so easy to influence later on (Mieras, 2008).

# Music education

## Conventional music education

Current methods of music education for reception years children (aged between 4 and 6 years) reflect very few of the principles of the competent child theory, of social constructivism or the most recent research into the development of the human brain. A specialist teacher often gives an half hour music lesson to an entire class at the same time. The children sing songs that are written specifically for them (Bresler, 1998). Sometimes the children themselves play on Orff instruments. Very occasionally they are taken out of the classroom to visit a concert (Bremmer, 2006). The basic assumption of this type of music education seems to be that young children need to be introduced to music via a simplified musical world because we do not credit them with a great deal of musicality. Day to day music education for young children often involves working with so-called 'school music' which out of didactic motives has been greatly simplified to simple time bars and a major key. This music is quite different to everyday and professional musical reality which is seen as being "too difficult". Music education also tends to be reproductive, for example with the teacher singing something and the children copying that. According to Strobbe and Van Regenmortel (2010) contemporary (music) education, is especially experiential, structured and measurable. This system, the authors conclude, "ignores the way our brain works. It causes misconceptions about talent, imitation, method, learning, study, evaluation and creativity".

## Music education in accordance with the competent child theory

But what if we assume that from birth children have a sense of rhythm and melody, a feel for exploring music and experimenting with it? What form should music education then take? Research shows that "musicality is to a large extent based on skills that everyone has from birth" (Honing, 2009). Children are born with a sense of rhythm and a certain feel for pitch, making rhythms and melodies instantly recognisable. We must take as our starting point the innate creativity of each and every individual. Instead of teaching children to read music and then choosing appropriate musical instruments for them to learn, it would be better if we were to let children improvise and via "brain-friendly" self-reflection discover all the different aspects of music. Music is not a gift from the gods, but is innate - just as language is (Strobbe & Van Regenmortel, 2010).

And what if we take an approach where the active student plays a role; where learning takes place in a realistic and meaningful environment and the importance of interaction is emphasised? What form does music education then take? Infants then draw out their own musical ideas and skills through improvisation and composition. In addition, they take on a variety of other musical roles, such as listener/audience, performer and conductor. Children then also sing and listen to music that has a connection with an existing music culture. They may explore objects and instruments associated with a musical culture, hold conversations with musicians and experience concerts outside the school walls (De Jong & Van der Heijden, 2005). The inner world of the school is then connected to the music world outside. Children have the right to experience music in the multitude of different tonal systems, rhythms, styles and sounds and also in the various roles which adults distinguish between, such as performer, improviser, composer, listener/audience, etc. These roles are often experienced by children not as distinct things but as a whole (Glover, 2001). Young children are still open to everything and can often appreciate more complex music than adults assume. When you offer children complex music, without pushing it on them, they have the freedom to create whatever feels best suited to their potential, whatever they can relate to or do something with. What is important here is to support, and fit in with, the initiative of the child.

How can we create the optimal conditions for children to learn music? Strobbe and Van Regenmortel (2010) give examples of how children deal with music using their sound-imagination. Their experience taught them that children can feel the subdominant, dominant and tonic character of music. They can “via improvisation connect notes to tones and auditory-insights transpose and write down”. How to transpose auditory insights into music is learned through play, preferably through active and daily involvement with music.

Free musical play takes place in a teacher-prepared environment that stimulates the child to experiment with and explore the musical properties of sounds. The initiative for this play lies with the child. In the literature that we have studied several different approaches have been taken, experimenting with the role of the teacher and the setup of the environment/location.

### **Pedagogical building blocks**

Our goal is to develop an approach to music education for young children. We have described above certain aspects of the theories that underlie our vision. To make the step of turning the theory into practical music education we have brought together a number of pedagogical building blocks which we have then used as guidance in the practical research of *Jong geleerd...*

- Children get to take the lead in their own musical learning. To do this, a system of observing, documenting and reflection is necessary. By consistently applying this method in practice it is possible to gain some understanding of what the children themselves come up with and to keep track of the content of their learning process.
- The experiences and environment of the children form the basis of what they take into their musical learning. Subjects from their daily lives, the context in which they live, provide the material and content of their musical exploration and expression.
- Learning takes place in interaction with the other children (first educationalist), that means the musical communication between the children is facilitated and encouraged. Where possible, smaller groups are encouraged that can discuss, learn from and use each other's ideas, listen to each other and build cooperation.
- Learning takes place in interaction with adults (second educationalist), teachers and music teachers establish themselves as researchers of the musical exploration process of the children. The adults are not only facilitators, they approach the day with substantially the same curiosity and interest as that which they encourage in the children.
- Musical learning takes place in interaction with the environment (third educationalist), therefore a great deal of attention is paid to how this is set up. Within school this means how the room is set up, the choice of materials, instruments. The environment of the “real world” outside school is equally essential (see below).
- Music in school is associated with music at home and music in the community. If music is part of a child's normal daily life then the child automatically gets that which is most important for his musical development. Parents are actively engaged and the same goes for existing musical institutions within the community.
- Children come into contact with the professional adult music world and the artefacts that go with it. Connections are sought with musicians, public music spaces, cultural habits and artefacts of musical life.
- Children can take on different musical roles, such as composer, conductor, performer and listener/audience.
- The concepts of time and continuity are very important and deserve a great deal of attention. It is preferable for lessons to take up an entire morning: a topic is then explored from various different angles, time is taken over it and it can really be gone into in depth. The work of the children is shown back to them in both image and sound so that they can then take it even further.
- Such a method is sometimes also called a pedagogy of listening, a beautiful and appropriate concept when it comes to musical development.

# Research method: action research

Action research is an appropriate form of research when trying to discover what strategies children use to build up their knowledge and with what hypotheses, ideas and observations they approach the complex world around them. Through action research we can do justice to the fact that all children are different and that every context is different. As Veia Vecchi, one of the first pioneers in Reggio Emilia, puts it: “Mental images, perceptions, theories and products never remain unchanged and frozen in time, but live and evolve within different contexts.” (Vecchi, 2010).

A key feature of action research is that the researcher is not outside the system which is to be explored, but actually right there inside it. It is through their influence on the object of their research, for example by intervening in something, that the researcher obtains new knowledge and gain answers to various questions. This kind of study is characterised by trying out a number of possibilities to see what effect these interventions may have. There is thus a direct engagement between the researcher and the object of the research (Van der Zee, 2004). The researcher observes the children whilst also taking part and maintaining contact with them. We do not set ourselves up as a detached observer, but instead as a researcher who is actively participating and focusing attention on what the children are doing.

Action research only becomes real research once it has been reported upon. Reporting ensures the deepening of the (scientific) knowledge (Van der Zee, 2004). In our methodology ‘reporting’ is very broad. By it we mean not only producing a written report of what happened, but also documenting and archiving as literally and with as much detail as possible all the information gathered. We collect the information by keenly observing and listening to the children and by daily documentation in words and pictures of what the children undertake, invent, create, their communication, how they respond to the intervention of adults, what thoughts, assumptions, feelings and images they have. We summarise this whole process under the term “documenting”.

## Documenting

By documenting we mean as accurately and literally as possible capturing the ideas, processes and decisions of the children. The starting point is close observation whereby we attempt to find out how children develop their plans and strategies and what shape their thinking and creative processes take. These are made observable through documentation in the form of photographs, audio recordings of conversations between children, notes, sketches and short films.

The documentation serves different purposes:

- Photographs, audio recordings, notes and short films make it possible for the team members to reflect upon, discuss and illustrate what everyone has seen and heard on the basis of concrete material. Reflections on the basis of concrete documentation enable us to follow and visualise how children construct their knowledge and find solutions. On the basis of these reflections, different interpretations and understandings are then exchanged.
- New work plans and ideas emerge on the basis of the reflections on the documented material.
- For children, the documentation (whether or not in conjunction with their work) is an invitation to again delve into a particular question, topic or process. They can take things further, or come up with new associations. The documentation can act as both reminder and inspiration for them.
- Documentation collected over a longer period can trigger, with the benefit of hindsight, an unexpected story, a new perspective or make a surprising connection apparent.
- A selection of the documentation can be used to present a project’s progress to third parties: other students, teachers, parents and other interested parties. It can act as an invitation to others to join in, to share ideas and to enter into the discussion.
- The documentation can be used as a means of communication between different teams.
- A selection of the documentation is displayed on the central website([www.toevalgezocht.nl/projecten](http://www.toevalgezocht.nl/projecten) ). This enables communication between the different projects.

- The documentation may serve as a substantial resource for other research projects into the potential of young children.
- The documentation aims to inspire those who see it to share in the richness and potential of young children. The documentation can offer a compelling insight into the thinking and experiences of the children.

In the making of the documentation we use various media: photos, photo series and short films of children doing something: playing, singing, dancing, exploring something, sounding something out, engaged in conversation, and so on; notes of quotations and statements by children; audio recordings of conversations between the children, dialogues and monologues; notes or sketches based on our own observations of situations or processes; all for the purpose of following the development of a child, or a group, over a longer period.

We always work on our projects in teams. The team members have different responsibilities. Because the documentation plays such a central role in our projects, all team members are as involved as possible in the documentation so that the gathering of information is as varied and extensive as it can possibly be.

### **Reflecting and interpreting**

Against the background of our conception of learning in which the inquisitive and creative abilities of the children themselves are central, the method demands the careful following of the plans, ideas, hypotheses and expressions of the children and that these are supported and encouraged. The team members can be considered as researchers into the exploration process of the children. It is a process in which each team member is personally challenged again to actively observe the children and to recognise and appreciate their strength and creativity. The documentation of the children's work processes is of inestimable value as a basis for reflection and interpretation.

Afterwards, each session is extensively reflected upon by the entire team. Plenty of time is allowed for this. And since not everyone will have seen and heard the same things, we discuss the work of the children from different points of view. We do this as much as possible on the basis of actual documentation. The documentation enables us to communicate about what we have seen.

First of all each team member gives a short description of their own experience. The other team members listen and the only questions are for clarification; at this stage there is no debate or discussion. After each team member has spoken there is time for discussion and interpretation. The following questions can be used as guidelines:

- What was the essence of the session?
- Which musical concepts were addressed?
- How did we experience the musicality?
- Was the research question and focus of this session clear? For you? For the children?
- Which interventions did team members chose and what were the results?
- What significance/impact did the suggested instruments and materials have?
- What photos, short films and audio recordings were made? Do they capture the essence of the day?
- Is it clear from the documentation what the children were engaged with?
- What conversations were recorded? What information do they give us?
- Was the division of roles and responsibilities satisfactory? Where was everyone, when?
- Was the work satisfactory? Why?
- What could be done differently in the next session?
- How are we going to begin the next time? What is the focus? What shall we offer the children? Which intervention could strengthen their exploration process? Are we offering them something new? What do we expect from the next session?

# Progress of the pilot project

This chapter describes the progress of the second year of the project Jong geleerd..., the pilot year that coincided with the school year 2011/2012.

## Preparations

In the autumn of 2011 we started preparing the pilot schools in Landsmeer, the Netherlands. Together with the three music teachers, Emma Rekers, Iris Oltheten and Debby Korfmacher, we have worked intensively on the method and the principles of the project. We did this through the study of relevant literature, reflection and exchange of ideas. TOEVAL GEZOCHT together with the three music teachers visited the employees of childcare centers in Birmingham, Bristol and Bath, in the UK, where new initiatives are being put into practice with young children. Some of them form part of the team lead by Dr. Susan Young, of the University of Exeter, author of several books on music and young children. In particular it was essential to us that we attended music education practices. The visit was the source of many fruitful discussions about how the principles of the method can be translated into practice. Two members of the TOEVAL GEZOCHT team also travelled up to Newcastle to visit the Sightlines Initiative, the UK reference for Reggio Children, which presented new music projects. Contact was also made with the child psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen, who is a very important pioneer in this field in England and author of *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*.

The pilot project took place in three primary schools in Landsmeer. Landsmeer is a self-contained community to the north of Amsterdam, which in recent years has failed to develop very many new cultural initiatives. By working together with three primary schools it was possible to involve the whole village in this musical project. The relevant councillors were excited about the momentum that the project brought to their village and were fully supportive of the initiative. We have also benefitted hugely from finding an enthusiastic partner in the Landsmeer music association Amicitia. In April 2011 this partnership resulted in a large musical event in the town square in which 800 school children took part.

The schools that are participating are OBS De Wagemaker, OBS De Stap and the Montessorischool Landsmeer. All three schools, whilst approaching the project from different backgrounds, share a vision of allowing the children the most freedom possible for their own initiative and independence. The three schools came together to agree to join TOEVAL GEZOCHT and the many proposed music partners on this music education development course and all appreciate the value of cooperation between the three schools and the support of the Landsmeer local council. Together with the management of the schools, we regularly discuss the course that the project is taking and the pedagogical vision of each of the three schools to ensure that they complement each other and that we do not lose sight of the pedagogical climate of each school.

## **Teams**

All of TOEVAL GEZOCHT's projects are a team effort. The team consists of an artist (in this case a musician/music teacher), a teacher and a volunteer/trainee. The team members have different areas of responsibility for which they are the first point of contact or reference, but all team members supervise the children, share their own findings and interpretations, document the sessions and are actively involved in education. The music teacher is ultimately responsible for the artistic, musical process. The teacher has ultimate didactic responsibility. The volunteer has ultimate responsibility for the documentation: taking photographs, making short films and audio recordings, but also for the organisation involved and the processing of it all. Because the documentation plays such a central role in our projects, all team members are as involved as possible in the documenting so that the gathering of information is as varied and extensive as it can possibly be. This team collaboration is an important point, because it is through this that the development of music education with input from all important perspectives can be achieved. Moreover, through the discussions and shared experiences a natural transfer of knowledge and skills takes place and bridges are built between the worlds of music and education. And discussions also take place regularly with the management of the schools about how the music sessions can best fit in with, and strengthen, the educational vision of the schools.

## **Partners**

Besides the schools and the music association Amicitia we are working together with a number of other partners on this project. Amsterdam Sinfonietta, a professional string orchestra is involved in the project in two separate ways: both as professional musicians who perform their own music and as artists in the classroom, working with the children. Evert Josemanders, puppeteer, musician and composer gives wind instrument workshops to the year groups 3 and 4 of the participating schools. Finally, we work together with Leonard Goudoever, composer, conductor and arranger. He was responsible for the final presentations which took place in Landsmeer Town Hall in July, with the motto "Landsmeer, Village of Music". For each school he composed a piece in which each of the various components (the youngest children, parents, children from year groups 3 and 4, Amsterdam Sinfonietta and Amicitia) were all brought together.

## **Re-adjustments**

In January 2012 we organised a training session with all the teams from all the schools, which served as a sort of launch for the active pilot project. Following on from this, the music sessions with nursery years groups actually started. At both the Montessori School and De Stap infant school, we initially started with three groups, and at De Wagemaker infant school with two groups. After a few intensive weeks it became clear that it was not possible for the teams to work with the new method effectively with multiple groups at the same time. This method, based as it is on documentation and reflection with the whole team, is extremely intensive and was felt to be compromised. In consultation with the teachers we decided to proceed with the method with just one group from each school. This allowed the team to better perform the processing and interpretation of the documentation and to remain true to the project's basic aims and principles. The remaining groups were offered more mainstream music lessons. This had the advantage of enabling us to compare the two different approaches at the end of the second year of the project.

# Action-research in practice

The extensive documenting and interpreting during this pilot year has yielded the first, preliminary findings. Because it is a work in progress (at the time of writing, the school summer holidays have not yet started), these findings will further crystallise during the remainder of the project.

The central research question is: How can music education for young children be developed and then be implemented within schools, on the basis of the competent child theory and principles of social constructivism? In this paper we wish to discuss two of the questions which we have asked ourselves during this action-research:

1. How can we give children the lead in music lessons?
2. How can we establish a link between music in school, in the home, in the community and the professional music world?

## How can we give children the lead in music lessons?

To give the child the lead in a music lesson is not as easy as it sounds. Gradually, during the first lessons we came to realise that we would have to drastically change the starting point for the sessions. In the first music sessions we had taken musical instruments, musical concepts and musical roles as our starting point. In fact the focus ended up being on abstract musical concepts. These concepts are to music what grammar and spelling are to verbal language. Children explored, for example, what it is to conduct, what you can do with different musical instruments and what in musical terms is meant by high and low, hard and soft, the beginning and the end.

We soon noticed that the children showed a great need to make music, but that an intrinsic motivation for this was not present. There was no rationale or need for the children to address these concepts. The result being that the children could not flesh out the content of the concepts and therefore, essentially, could not incorporate them. We came to the conclusion that we were inadvertently still effectively teaching them skills. The music teachers remained in the role of teacher rather than researcher and unwillingly there was nothing to differentiate ours with the 'transfer' model. It was difficult to interact with the children. That meant that the children often quite randomly tried out the various musical instruments during the sessions. Sometimes this resulted in quite wonderful moments and a couple of fantastic individual explorations, for example by a child who became very occupied with the arrangement of the sounds on the sound bars, but it did not result in a bigger whole. The noise level entailed in this sort of exploration was felt to be distracting both by the teams leading the sessions and by the children themselves. It also led to despair on the part of the teachers, who found it difficult to tolerate the chaos and noise, and who saw this as a discipline issue. The situation was also unsatisfactory for the music teachers and the TOEVAL GEZOCHT team. Technical teaching was leading the sessions rather than interaction and self-expression.

The need to introduce a 'subject' became increasingly palpable. We wanted a subject that really spoke to the children. A subject which you can build on, form a relationship with, develop feelings for, form an opinion about, look at, feel and smell, something which you can develop physical and profound knowledge of, something you can really adopt and always return to. A subject that could be explored musically and expressed and on the basis of which you could enter into a musical conversation. We went back to the drawing board with the teams to try to agree upon suitable subjects.

In the Montessori group the children were very busy with stories and fairy tales and the expression of stories in music. We decided to look for a book that could be read aloud in the class and which we could explore further during the music lesson. The chosen book was '*Lied voor de maan*' ('A song for the moon') by Toon Tellegen. What was striking in this group was that the children immediately picked up on the fact that a song, or music in general, could be made for someone. The fact that you can show your love for someone or something with a song was something that really spoke to the children.

At the Wagemaker School the teacher immediately suggested *het Ratteneiland* (*Rat Island*) as something which would really spark the imagination. The name alone made our team curious and enthusiastic. We

immediately went to look and proceeded with the first preparatory research with the camera and sound-recording equipment.

At De Stap infant school the children were particularly fascinated by animals of all shapes and sizes. Close to the school is the local park with its chicken runs and lots of ducks. It struck the team that the setup of the park had lots of musical potential, such as the metal fences and a beautiful bridge. To strengthen the childrens' feeling of identification with the park the music teacher gave it our own name: *Ons Luisterpark* (*Our Listen Park*).

In the next paragraph we describe some of our experiences in Our Listen Park with De Stap infant school. By taking one school as an example we can explain in more detail what methods we applied. We have done this in the form of a photo-reportage, like those used on the TOEVAL GEZOCHT website. A daily report consists, in principle, of starting point, observation and reflection.

### **We call the local park Our Listen Park**

An introduction on many different levels



On our way through the local park which we call Our Listen Park.

First of all we needed to allow a physical and mental exploration of the subject. We gave the children plenty of time and space to really engage with the Listen Park making use of all their senses. We decided to return regularly to the Listen Park. We invited the children initially to really listen. It was immediately apparent that the slide would play an important role in the musical exploration of the children.

## The sound of the slide and what does sliding sound like?

(27 March 2012)



Rens (5 years 5 months)

**Starting point:** "... Last time in the Listen Park, the children investigated the sound of the slide. An audio recording was made. During the group discussion at the start of the music session Debby, the music teacher, played a fragment of this recording for the children to listen to. Debby then asked the children what the sound made them think of. A number of the children shouted out "the slide". Aron said: "A timpani!". One of the other children said, "I think about a drum".

**Observation:** Once in the park, the slide again attracted the attention of a group of children. We followed the children during their investigations.



Rutger (4 years 8 months), Janna S. (4 years 9 months), Sam (5 years), Anouk (6 years 5 months), Janna L. (5 years 1 month), Evelien (5 years 9 months), Senna (4 years 7 months), Stan (6 years)



The sound of sliding. Aron (6 years 2 months): "I'm investigating sounds, that's why I'm allowed down the slide".

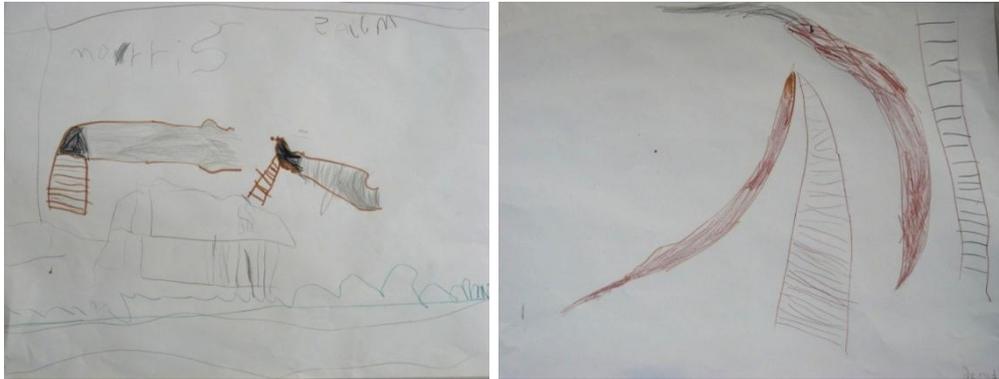
**Observation:** The children again used the slide as a drum. They used their hands, fists, elbows and feet, but also a metal coin, pebbles, sand and various sticks. They discovered that the thickness of the sticks can influence the sound made. In addition, they explored "the sound of sliding". To do this the children threw sticks and sand onto the slide, which then slid off. The children were not allowed to play on the slide themselves. Aron came up with a solution of his own: "I'm investigating sounds, that's why I'm allowed down the slide".

**Reflection:** During the reflection session José, the teacher, described the development of the children as follows: "Last week the children examined what they encountered along the way. This week they provided the material. They took the reins in their own hands. The slide became a musical instrument."

## The image of the slide

(3 April 2012)

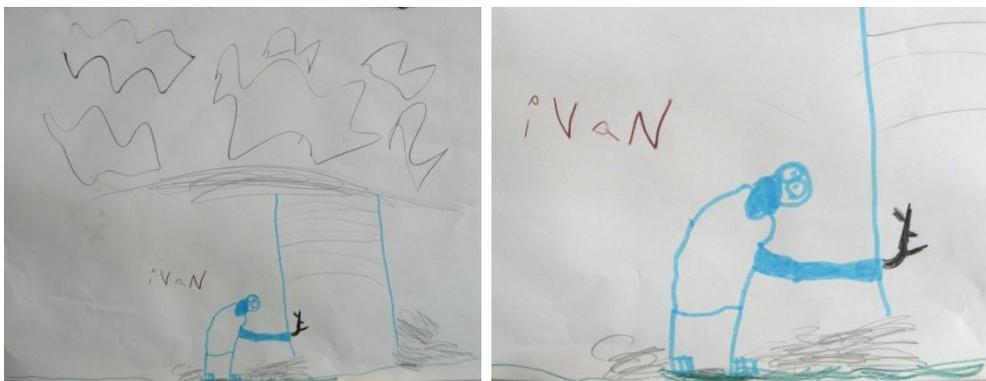
**Starting point:** The children experienced the Listen Park with their whole body. Therefore we encouraged them to also describe, draw, perform, discuss and fantasize about the Listen Park. We decided to make other materials available in the music studio, such as brown, black, light blue and green felt-tip pens, pencils and relatively large sheets of drawing paper. Today the children drew the slide.



In the drawings above Morris (5 years 10 months) and Sam (5 years) have drawn the slide. In their drawings they make a clear distinction between the slide itself and the rungs of the ladder used to climb up. The slide is drawn using long, flowing lines, unlike the rhythmic part of the ladder.



Above is a subsequent drawing by Morris (who also drew the slide shown above-right). This drawing is more expressive, more personal. The size of the slide in this drawing is much greater than in the previous drawing. The ladders in both of the drawings seem to go right up into the clouds. The slide itself is again very flowing. It is as if the slides are dancers moving across the drawing paper in total harmony with the surrounding landscape.



In his drawing Ivan (6 years 5 months) has focused on a person (himself?) who is hitting the slide with a stick. The arm that holds the stick is, together with the head, much more emphatically drawn than the rest of the body. Ivan has only drawn the ladder; the rest of the slide disappears in the horizontal lines hovering above the ladder. At the top of the drawing he has drawn six cloud-like shapes. We began the day by playing the sound-collage to the children and we can see its expressive nature reflected back in Ivan's drawing..



In Bièl's drawing (4 years 11 months) people (children?) are playing on the slide which is surrounded by spiders and insects. This shows the slide as part of a larger whole (the Listen Park), where a lot of insects can be found. What is also striking is that in contrast to the other drawings the ladder is coloured in whilst the slide itself is left open.

**Reflection:** It is striking how personal the childrens' drawings of the slide are.

## The sound of the slide; no - lightning and thunder

(8 May 2012)

**Starting point:** The children who were especially focussed on the slide surprised us. They investigated and discovered the abundance and variety of dishes, tin cans and tubes on the sounds-table. They tried out the various sounds that could be made with each item, stacked them up in different ways, tested the sounds again, stacked them again and listened again. They filled the tubes with other materials from the sounds-table and listened again. Later on this group made drawings of their sounds research with just as much energy.



Aron (6 years 2 months) and Eveline (5 years 9 months) testing the sounds. Thijmen (6 years 7 months): a keen observer.



Guys, what do you prefer? Eveline, I've got an even bigger tub! No, no, no! Watch, you shouldn't bash it like that! There! Let's shake it! Ohhh - can I have a go?



Jochem (5 years 9 months), Aron and Eveline make a drawing of their sound. Thijmen is again a keen observer. It's falling down! Ohh no, no, no! Wow, boom. More lightning.

(15 May 2012)

**Starting point:** During the previous session a number of the dishes on the sounds-table got broken or damaged. During the group discussion we made clear that that was not meant to happen.

**Discussion:** Thijmen: Thijmen: But did we have something that we were allowed to hit really hard?

Aron: What is strong enough to take a large stick? What is actually the strongest material? Metal?

Another child: On the wall. On the pavement.

Aron (to Debby): But can you bring a brick with you?

**Observation:** Before we invited the children to get started, Debby played the audio-recording from the research session described above. Energetic percussion sounds could be heard. One child covered its ears. Two boys mimed playing the drums. One girl clapped. Debby asked what it sounded like? What did it remind them of?

Thijmen: An explosion.

Eveline: The slide!

Aron: No - thunder and lightning!



Fortunately we happened to have bricks with us, precisely the material the children asked for.



Thijmen, Aron and Jochem formed a striking group. They entered into a musical discussion with each other. Two children tapped rhythmically on the bricks with sticks from the Listen Park. In his turn the third child played the violin. They took turns to play, sometimes alternately but mainly together.

## That's the sound of the slide!



*Yes that's it! That's the sound of the slide. Rens (5 years, 5 months)*

**Observation:** Rens was also looking for the sound of the slide. He walked passed the sounds-table and kept saying, "I can't find it". He walked around the room, still looking for it. After a while he picked up a mbira and played it: "Yes, that's it! That's the sound of the slide".

## The music studio

At the same time as introducing the subject we decided to work on creating the right atmosphere in the location where we were making the music. The school gym, where the music sessions took place, was transformed each week into a music studio. Naturally the gym has associations with running, climbing, etc. We removed these by changing the setup. With the use of cushions, panels and documentation-walls we created a more peaceful atmosphere. A nice side effect was that the decorations also reduced the echo in the gym.

## Summary of initial findings

What we have described above is just one example taken from the many that came out of the three project groups. For more examples please visit our website: [www.toevalgezocht.nl/projecten](http://www.toevalgezocht.nl/projecten). So what does such a concrete example teach us?

- The children were very eager to explore and get to know the Listen Park; it became "their" Listen Park.
- The intensive listening in the Listen Park and the experimenting on the slide stimulated in each of the children their own ideas, how they could make these sounds with their own materials and instruments.
- Being asked to make drawings of the Listen Park also stimulated how they identified with it.
- The energy and fun with which the children work is striking. They could concentrate for long periods (one and a half hours), they were extremely engaged and motivated and continued to talk about the sessions once they were over.
- Listening is essential and this can be seen even more clearly when working with the children.
- The children discussed with each other how something sounded, which were the best materials to use, how they could play together (e.g., alternately or simultaneously), how you decide when to stop or how to start at the same time.
- The adults did not label anything as "good" or "wrong", and this meant the children grew in confidence and felt the freedom to experiment themselves.
- There were the beginnings of compositions, longer pieces of music that the children wanted to "keep" or remember.

## Taking the lead

We want to finish our examination of the first question, about how we can give children the lead, with a couple of observations about the concept of taking or being given "the lead", because this is often a

subject of debate within our method. The concepts of 'leadership' and 'initiative' are often process-conceived: Are we doing what the children want to do? Have the children come up with this or did we? Are we, the adults, directing things too much or too little? As John Dewey said as long ago as the first half of the last century (Berding, 2011): "Content and method are both parts of integrated learning". Look at how a child learns to walk: in doing it he encounters problems and develops strategies to improve his walking. Dewey advocates always choosing to start with a subject which is non-school, something from everyday life, whereby the 'doing' and the 'thinking about' remain connected.

Our approach is also to try to keep content and process (method) together. So when we talk about "the lead", we mean that the children themselves 'do' the content and that in doing so they try everything and think about everything. The lead means that the subject belongs to the children, a part of their daily lives. They go and do something (in this case they physically examine the Listen Park, especially its sounds and noises) whereby they encounter various problems and surprises. As a result they are challenged, they ask themselves questions which throw up the opportunity to give their own meanings to things, to give structure to their own ideas and to come up with plans as to how they can take things further, what else they can explore or experiment with, and express (in this case, musically).

As adults, we offer them these opportunities. We offer not only the subject, but also the conditions and instruments to explore this with and to conduct experiments. We match this to the content that the children themselves come up with. Us adults are anything but passive: Actively listening to the children and offering them a rich context is a lot of work!

## How can we establish a link between music in school, in the home, in the community and the professional music world?

The second question is about connecting different musical worlds: school, home, the community and the professional music world?

The first important connection is between school and home. We involved parents in the project in various ways. First of all we informed each of them by letter about the project and explained our underlying vision. We drew their attention to the TOEVAL GEZOCHT website where the project could be closely monitored. We placed the day-reports, including photos, videos and descriptions of what happened during the music sessions, on the website. We also had some of this documentation printed and displayed it in the school entrance halls so that not only parents but also fellow pupils and teachers were able to see it. Debby, the music teacher at De Stap, made a CD of all the sounds from Our Listen Park, together with recordings of the children reproducing these sounds and the welcome song which they sing together at the beginning of each lesson. Each of the children took a copy of the CD home, together with a postcard which the children had made with the message “Greetings from Landsmeer’s Listen Park”.



The children sent home the postcard “Greetings from Landmeer’s Listen Park” together with a CD.

To help us understand better the musical culture of the children at home we asked the parents a number of questions about what instruments were played at home, was music listened to, was there any singing and what sort of music was listened to at home. The parents were also offered the chance to take part in a workshop where they, together with the children, would experience a music session and be given an active role. This workshop was preparation for the active musical role that parents could play in the final presentations to be held in Landsmeer’s town hall in July. Approximately one third of parents responded enthusiastically, and we intend to offer a sequel. In addition, the parents (and teachers) were invited to a concert by the Amsterdam Sinfonietta in Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ (a famous concert hall in Amsterdam).

We believe connection to music within the community is equally important. A collaboration with the music association Amicitia had been established in the first year of the project. Amicitia is the place in Landsmeer for children of their age who wish to take music lessons and learn an instrument (especially wind instruments and percussion, but in the future string instruments may also be possible) and Amicitia is very active in organising musical activities in the community. In April 2011 this collaboration resulted in “The big Town Square Orchestra”, a musical festival which Amicitia took part in, together with 800 primary school students.



The big Town Square Orchestra, Landsmeer, April 2011

In this last school year members of the Amicitia youth orchestra gave wind instrument workshops to year groups 3 and 4, led by Evert Josemanders. Children between the ages of 7-9 years became acquainted with Amicitia and were given the opportunity to have a go at playing an instrument themselves. In this way we continue to strengthen this partnership and hope to realise the dream of “Landsmeer, Village of Music”.

Finally, the connection to the professional music world. This is being forged in several different ways. In the first place, at the beginning of the project the music teachers introduced the children to their own instruments: vocals, mbira and horn. These instruments were frequently used during the music sessions. An important introduction to the professional music world came about when members of the Amsterdam Sinfonietta visited the schools. They came in different sized groups (i.e., alone, in pairs or as a trio) to attend some of the music sessions, to make music for and with the children. In some groups they played complex music from famous and lesser-known composers, for example compositions about the moon at the Montessori school. The musicians brought the children into contact with their own instruments (violin, viola, cello), showing them how you use and look after the instruments and also showing them other musical equipment (a music stand, the score). The musicians explained all about their profession, their orchestra, their own musical background and their delicate, expensive instruments. The musicians also joined the children in their musical investigations. When with the groups from De Wagemaker and De Stap the musicians interpreted the drawings the the children had made of Rat’s Island and the Listen Park and made music inspired by them. At the Montessori school the musicians did the same using the drawings the children had made of the moon. In addition, some musicians accompanied the children to Het Ratteneiland and the Listen Park and showed the children how (for example) the wind sounds on the cello. This introduced the children to a whole new way of experiencing how the sounds of their day to day environment can inspire music. The musicians formed a bond with the children which was to play an important role in the final presentations.

Finally, a number of violins were made available to the groups so that they could play them themselves. Via the initiative “Klassiek geeft” where listeners of Radio 4 handed in any unused musical instruments they had, TOEVAL GEZOCHT was able to get hold of some violins for the children and a musician also made a present of one more violin to the children of the Montessori school. The children can use these violins to explore and express their own musicality.

(15 May 2012)

"... Today Diet and Nicoline, two violinists from the Amsterdam Sinfonietta came to visit. They accompanied us to the Listen Park and gave a small concert there. In the pictures you can see how attentively the children listened "...



The music association Amicitia is symbolic of music in the community. Members of the youth orchestra gave wind instrument workshops to the children in year groups 3 and 4, led by Evert Josemanders. In this way Amicitia encouraged the children to become acquainted with wind instruments and their music and to inspire their enthusiasm for the organisation itself. This is another example of how we are building up partnerships for musical activities within the community.

# Preliminary conclusions

Based upon our experiences so far in this research project, we can say that the outlines are emerging of a form of in-school music education for young children which will give them a broad foundation for a musical career, on the basis of the competent child theory and principles of social constructivism. Such a form of music education requires a lot of perseverance with regards to the intensive documenting, reflecting and interpreting that is needed to gain insight into the strategies of the children, how they build their musical knowledge and how they explore their musical world and musical expression. By revealing the processes used by the children, by valuing and strengthening these, we can see how children can take the lead in their own musical learning processes; that they actively learn through interaction with the other children and with adults and with their environment, both within school and outside school. We realise that this approach to music education will subsequently require a special form of hand-over. Hand-over to parents, to schools, to music teachers, to music courses, to professional musicians, to amateur musicians etc. We suspect that besides clear publication there also needs to be a range of coaching and training developed. We are literally in the middle of it at the moment.

We are encouraged by the answers that we have so far to the two questions presented in this paper to continue with our research. We believe that the choice of subject from the children's own immediate environment as a basis for musical exploration and expression has been very fruitful. The transition from researching sounds and making sounds to making music, in all its many facets, will occupy the coming two months and we find this very exciting. Have we made the right interventions so as to equip the children to make this step? It certainly is not a question of whether or not they have the potential, but rather whether we as adults sufficiently recognise what the children have to offer and whether we have been able to create the best possible conditions for them to develop further. We believe that our system of documenting and reflecting will show us the way.

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