

Musical expression and communication as the basis for musical development of young children

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Introduction

*Jong geleerd*¹.. is a three-year music education project devised and run by TOEVAL GEZOCHT. It aims to offer young children opportunities to develop their own musicality in creative ways.

TOEVAL GEZOCHT's objective is to explore, develop and strengthen the relationship between art and learning through projects, research and the

¹ "*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.

exchange of knowledge. Our starting points are certain principles of social constructivism and we take inspiration from the Reggio Emilia Approach which has taken these principles and put them into practice in a special and inspiring way.

In this paper TOEVAL GEZOCHT explores the essence of expression and communication as fundamental dynamics within which the development and learning of young children takes place, focusing on music as a language. We are convinced that musical expression and communication in all their diversity and complexity form the most fruitful basis for the musical development of each and every child.

This musical development contributes in turn to a child's emotional intelligence and the development of connections in the brain. (Mieras, 2010)

Expression and Communication: necessary conditions for the survival of the species

From the moment of birth, everyone possesses the potential to express themselves and to communicate. Human beings have developed these capabilities, through the long process of their evolution, in order to survive as a species.

After World War II Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, worked with severely traumatised young people and discovered that the best way in which he could help them was to offer them opportunities to express themselves freely and openly and to communicate their experiences and feelings to each other. He discovered however that the emphasis on the

verbal language was a hindrance to this process. Together with these young people, he explored many other forms of expression (e.g. theatrical, musical, imagery) and became convinced that human beings have hundreds of languages which they can use to express themselves and to communicate. This concept is an important theme underlying the method of education which he subsequently developed for young children.

Hundred languages

It is important to offer some explanation about what we mean when we speak about an hundred languages, because we could be referring to some of the more than two thousand verbal languages that are used around the world to allow each culture to express its own values, beliefs and experiences. But once we grasp the richness of the concept of “the hundred languages” we can go much further: we can use it to explain our ability to express ourselves and communicate to others using imagery or sound, or the “language” of logical reasoning, of metaphor, of mathematical formulae, of gestures or other movements of the body. All these ways of expressing ourselves and communicating are part of being human and can be developed as rich languages.

Emotions, thoughts, ideas, feelings, experiences and many other aspects of what it is to be human, which need to be expressed and communicated, are encaptured in this concept. And it is essential to understand that some people are far better at expressing themselves in words than others, but that another person may be able to express him or herself far better using imagery,

and yet another through music. And that all of these different languages can influence and strengthen each other.

Music

Music has a special role to play in this context. It is believed that at an early stage in human development people communicated with each other using sounds, well before words were developed. Our potential for music is located in a primal part of the brain, close to the emotions, a part which evolved very early on. Oliver Sacks (2009) has described wonderful examples of people who had suffered serious brain damage, but whose musical ability and memories remained intact.

We can readily observe how music triggers the first attempts at communication in the individual development of every human being. Henk Jan Honing (2009) describes how babies and their parents begin to communicate through 'babbling musically': communication characterised by melody, sound and rhythm. The expression "C'est le ton qui fait la musique ..." captures the essence of how the musicality of language is vital in conveying the emotional meaning of spoken words.

Mark Mieras (2010) explains how the thalamus, the central part of the brain, serves as a distribution centre: music and the intonation of the spoken language is sent to the right and words are sent to the left. These areas are mirrored in the brain and work together to enable the understanding of language.

The meaning of speech is therefore to a large degree understood through the “music” of the spoken language, the intonation. And what is crucial about the language of music is that it is so close to the ever present emotional component of human communication.

The relationship between the different languages

If we observe young children carefully, we can see how little pressure they feel to restrict themselves to a single language when they are playing or exploring. From moment to moment they switch from imagery to theory, from movement to storytelling, from singing to materials, from experimenting in order to understand something to experiments which flow from wonder, from the languages of “truth” to the languages of “beauty”. Children are acknowledged as budding artists and scientists and they use all languages to develop themselves. Examples from science teach us that often the greatest discoveries in, for example, mathematics or physics originally manifested themselves as images. (Think for instance of Richard Feynman and his world famous visualisations and drawings). American psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) suggests that many scientific and mathematical hypotheses begin as small stories or metaphors.

The switching from one perspective to another, the easily established connections between the different “languages”, can be seen as the manifestation of children’s creative potential to develop themselves in a rich and versatile way.

If we look specifically at music, it is striking how intertwined movement and music are. Sarah Verhulst, a Belgian musical education specialist who works with very young children says: *The movement a child makes is often a precursor of his or her musical expression.*

And W. Gruhn (2009) argues that every experience a young child has is accompanied by movement of the body and that every movement produces a stimulus in the brain that is stored as a mental representation. The human brain does not therefore function autonomously but is always connected with the body from which it gets sensorial input and the environment which is necessary to stimulate the growth of the internal networks.

Hundred languages and creativity

The definition of creativity that we use was formulated by Carlina Rinaldi (President of Reggio Children) as *the freedom at any moment to look at something from a different point of view.*

She says: *From a very young age, children seek to produce interpretive theories to give answers ... There is the intention to produce questions and search for answers, which is one of the most extraordinary aspects of creativity* (Rinaldi, 2005).

Languages are opportunities for individuals to express themselves and to communicate. But such languages are much more than that: they are also the many different perspectives from which to view something. When we look at the view from our window with a geometric eye we see something very

different from when we want to know whether or not it is cold outside. In each case we let our eyes wander over what we see outside, but in each case we see something different. And in both cases our feelings influence what we see, as will the previous images and memories we have from looking out of the window before: context, feelings, moment of the day, the light, sounds. To judge whether or not we need to put a coat on or for forming an opinion about the geometrical proportions of the street therefore many more aspects come into play than we are always conscious of. And it is those very connections between all those different aspects (even unconscious ones), the complexity of the connections that are made in our brains, that make it possible for us to continue developing and enable us to intensify our understanding of a given subject.

The concept of “creativity” and the idea of “the hundred languages” are therefore inextricably linked. We are always able to look at things in a new way and then to give expression to what we have seen because we have so many languages at our disposal. Moreover: the cross-fertilisation between different perspectives, and different languages makes the learning process rich and fruitful, even in very young children.

Pedagogy

What we have said above presents an image of the child which encompasses all the capacities that children are born with. We have called them “budding artists and scientists”. We have also set-out the essential

concepts of creativity and the hundred languages in the context of (musical) expression and communication.

The next issue is: how can we best design musical education for children so that they can use all their creative potential to express themselves and communicate musically? We cannot however take this step to the practical application of the above concepts without first considering the pedagogical principles upon which we base our theories. These are essential and indispensable. They form the link between theory and practice.

We have therefore chosen to explain briefly two important pedagogical concepts which underpin the way we proceed:

- 1 Children take the lead
- 2 "The Three Pedagogues"

1. Children take the lead

We recognise in children the potential for the same strategies as those used by mature artists and scientists by which we mean: research, experimentation, careful investigation leading to something totally unexpected, which turns out to be just what was needed. Robbert Dijkgraaf (2012) chose as the title for his book the phrase coined by education expert Abraham Flexner (1921), "The usefulness of useless research", in an attempt to defend the value of the free, wandering, creative spirit. He argues not to divorce wonderment from understanding (2009). If we wish to honour such capabilities in our children then we must let them take the lead. In other words: we should see learning

as a creative process where it is not the information or instruction which adults give to children that is paramount, but the initiative, the curiosity and the motivation of the children themselves. In this way we can see a child as the protagonist in his or her own learning.

Children are perfectly well able to compose, improvise, conduct and play music together and to listen to complex music in different tonalities; all the roles that are part of the lifetime experience of a musical adult. (Bremmer and Huisingsh, 2009).

The role of adults as supporters and followers of the processes of children involves observing, documenting and reflecting. By recording in words and pictures which musical strategies and concepts the children use, which initiatives they take and what arouses their curiosity, adults can then decide what interventions they should make in order to help the children progress further.

It is important for each child to know their own musical "voice" and to have the skill and confidence to develop it.

Only by making contact with children's musical thinking and imagination as it comes through their own improvising and composing, and taking this seriously, can the details of planning for composing as part of the class and school curriculum take shape. (Glover, 2002)

2. "The Three Pedagogues"

Just as adults do, children are constantly reconstructing their knowledge. And this reconstruction is always co-constructive, i.e. in interaction with other children, adults and their environment.

These three are what we call "The Three Pedagogues": firstly, children learn from and with each other, secondly from and with adults (by whom we mean everyone: teachers, parents, neighbours, shopkeepers, etc.) and thirdly, equally importantly, from and through interaction with their environment. And here we mean both their immediate physical environment and in a broader sense the world around them, the total context in which they grow up.

Ideally music is seen as a form of communication which has a uniting effect: music is made with others, music plays a part in all the important moments experienced by a community. When emotions are shared music plays a role and is everywhere, at home, on the street, in public spaces. In this way "the third pedagogue" is of the utmost importance when it comes to music.

Today's children have to become adept at managing transitions between the different places where they are cared for and educated. So many shifts mean that it is particularly important that we think of music in the context of their whole lives, childhoods lived at home and within distinctive localities.

(Young, 2009)

Before we move on, it is valuable to notice that these ideas of learning through communicative music, of the dialogue being a musical one, also line up with recent theoretical perspectives on music itself. From studies of music in diverse cultures, from popular, folk and jazz music studies, music has increasingly been understood as made in social processes of people playing

together, or listening and dancing together. Conventional music theory casts music as a solitary, academic pursuit concerned with the inner rhythms, analysis of structure and so on. (Young, 2009)

Creative music education for young children in school - a practical example

On the basis of the theoretical reasoning and pedagogical concepts described above, TOEVAL GEZOCHT has developed an own method for teaching children music. (See also the paper *Jong geleerd ... creative music education for young children* elsewhere in this volume.)

For the purposes of illustration and inspiration we have set out an example below taken from one of a series of lessons that we have conducted:

“I hear the wind!”

The children from De Wagemaker primary school are the musicians of Rat Island, a nature reserve within walking distance of the school which they visit frequently.

15th March

Evi (4.4 yrs.) hears the wind today. She whispers softly: “I hear the wind, I hear the wind!” The music teacher whispers back, “Remember it!” Evi closes her eyes, listens and absorbs the sound of the wind.

Back in the music studio, whilst sitting with the entire group, we invite the children to let each other hear the sounds of Rat Island. Evi makes the sound of the wind with her mouth. She makes soft blowing sounds. It is not long before the entire class reproduces the sound. The children then vary the sound and some of them progress from blowing to soft whistling.

2nd April

The wind becomes the focus for a number of children. We invite them to produce images as well. Liv (4.5 yrs.) draws wind-flowers. Liv: "This is from Rat Island, because there's a bit of brightness and there's my name and there are clouds and a puppet and the sun as well. And this is a toadstool ... Those are the wind-flowers. I saw those, didn't I? They're in the water, but this (points to the drawing of the wind-flowers) is grassy".

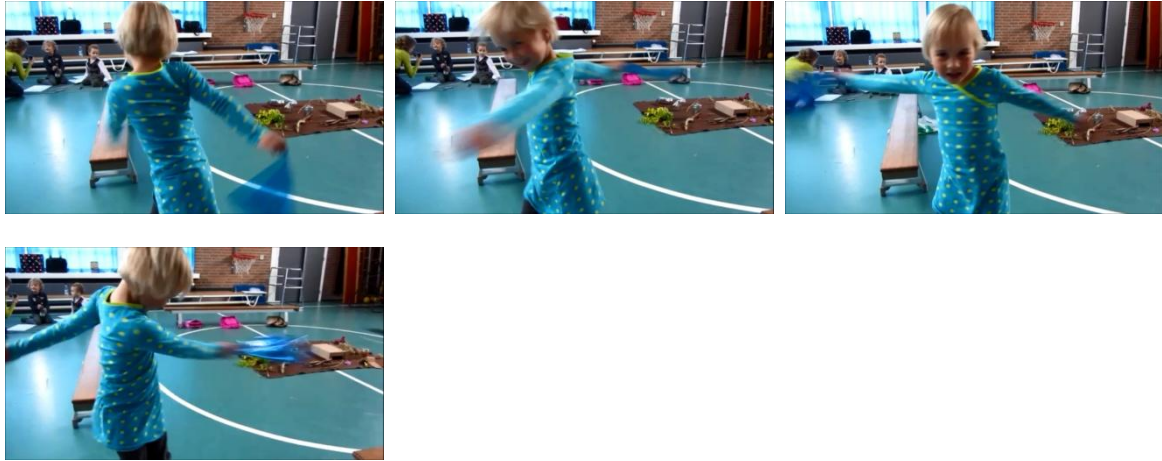
19th April

To encourage further exploration the music teacher collected various natural materials and instruments (twigs, leaves, sticks, hay, aluminum foil, sheets of coloured transparent plastic, a cardboard box, a violin, tin cans, shakers and a pellet drum). This collection is laid out on a large cloth in the middle of the music studio.



Liv performs the sound of the wind for the other children. She blows on a piece of aluminum foil. The other children lie all around her with their eyes closed. Later on they say what they had heard. Anna (4.3 yrs.): "blowing" another child "a bell!" Liv makes her sound of the wind one more time. This time she sweeps the aluminum foil through the air.

Later on the music teacher asks Liv whether the wind-flowers in her drawing can also make a noise. Liv: "Yes, the wind can blow through them. That makes them wave". Liv demonstrates. She gets onto her hands and feet and swings her head up and down between her outstretched arms. We invite Liv to choose materials or instruments with which to make the sounds of the wind-flowers. She takes a deep breath and blows in the music teacher's face. Her arms follow with a powerful gesture. Liv: "Your hair is fluttering!" Then Liv grabs a sheet of transparent blue plastic and swings it with powerful strokes back and forth with her outstretched arms. Jalila (5.2 yrs.) stands next to her. She has in her hand a small bag filled with plastic balls and begins jumping in rhythm with Liv. This was the first joint wind composition.



26th April



Michiel, a cellist from the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, is visiting; he plays a piece from the repertoire of Sinfonietta for the children and also participates in the children's musical exploration. The children show him Rat Island and Michiel says: "Shall I try to make wind?" A child: "I know how you do that!" Lisa: "Yeah, play very slowly". Michiel plays his interpretation of wind on his cello. The children have taken materials and small instruments with them to Rat Island. Together with Michiel they make music in the open air of Rat Island.

21st June



The “wind-group” forms a small band that makes music inspired by the wind. They have made special instruments for this purpose. They have hung various chains, metal plates, a triangle and wooden rattles on a small climbing frame. During play two of the girls climb onto the frame. The other girls have different instruments: various shakers, a pellet drum, a rain-maker and a violin. Liv has chosen the violin. One girl is the conductor and gives strict instructions as to when it is each individual's turn to play. First they play in turn and then as tutti.

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