

Closing the gap Connecting Practice and Research in Early Childhood Music Education with parent-child groups in the Netherlands

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“Researchers in music education need practitioners.
Without practitioners there would be no area to explore”.
Hultberg (2005)

This paper will look at a research process appropriate for early childhood music education, within an interpretative paradigm, focusing on an investigation currently in progress, concerning the use of movements in Dutch Preschool Music Education (PME): the Music is Movement (MiM) project. The general aim of this research project is to further the early childhood music education practice and especially the role of movement in the musical learning process.

Introduction

Case study research - being a method mostly used in the interpretative paradigm and the method of research in the present investigation - has for a long time been regarded as the step- daughter of scientific method. Presently case study research has gained considerably in status within the scientific community in the last 10 years. Authors like Yin (2003) and Gerring (2002) are justifying the use of case studies by carefully pulling them towards a mixture of paradigms, instead of a pure interpretative approach in order to arrive at some form of generalisation to solidify case study research. These approaches can be of benefit to interpretative music education research in the light of the desired music education research rigor as expressed by Burnard (2006). Her view is that research in music education needs more awareness “of the importance for researchers to be explicit about the assumptions and theories that underpin their work, and of being articulate about the research process in achieving research rigour” (Burnard, 2006). Similar sounds came from Bowman (2005), who urges the music education profession to engage in theoretical enquiry and to start valuing the “potential significance of philosophical or theoretical inquiry to its (music education) instructional, curricular, and research efforts” (Bowman, 2005). To add to Burnard, according to Bowman, “philosophy’s most fundamental values to the profession, lie in the kind of uses: in its potential to develop habits of mind and dispositions to act”. Research according to Bowman without this kind of reflection “atrophies into mere method: the description of what is, divorced from considerations of what should be or might be” (Bowman, 2005), resulting in un-theorized musical practice. In striving to close the gap between research and practice in early childhood music education, openness, communication and rigour in method and theoretical underpinning should be a first step in the research process. Theoretical generalisations (Yin, 2003) are needed so that results can be applicable to a wider range of educational practices than the setting under investigation.

The Music Educational Setting

Early childhood music education courses for parents and children in The Netherlands are usually called “Music on the lap” (MoL) courses. During the last 18 years, starting with the still very actual efforts of Annie Langelaar, a team of early childhood music teacher trainers is the motor behind the development of these music courses and teacher training. By this team the need for new scientifically solid information was expressed resulting in the current research project.

Teacher training

During a one year training musicians are educated to give music lessons for the under fours in music schools (with parents) or day care centres. In the end they have a thorough knowledge of child development and are capable linking music and songs to the specific needs and development of young children.

Every PME teacher should stay interested and curious and show an active strategy in life long learning. One of the conditions for life long learning and development in PME teaching is to observe, reflect and implement new knowledge. Reflecting on what we have done (on action) as well as while we doing something (in action) (Gestel,2007; Hultberg, 2005) are elementary skills for teachers. To analyse child behaviour and what music does for children during lessons as well as immediately reacting on what is observed needs an open mind and training. Each teacher should also develop the will to search, find and read literature. Although general prerequisites for teachers, these conditions also apply in the participation in research in order to be able to implement new information into practice. PME teachers than are involved in formative action research. Bassey considers action research a “subset of educational case study research” in which teachers are trying to make beneficial change within their own workplace” (Bassey, 1999). Considering that teachers already do involve in research processes and have “expectations regarding clear indications on how to implement research findings” (Huntberg,2005), collaboration between the researcher and the teacher is vital.

Practice

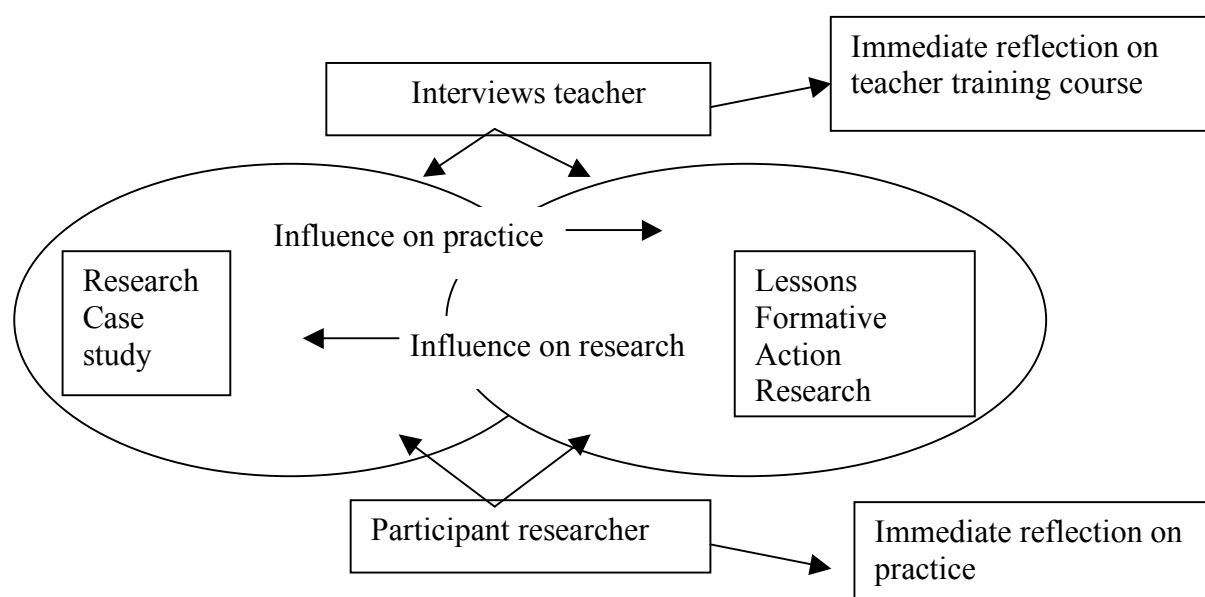
A basic pedagogical structure for PME has been developed. Each lesson has a fixed structure starting with a ‘Hallo song’ followed by a choice of activities for instance: culture related songs, movement songs, rhymes and chants, playing with instruments and toys, motor activities with music, free play, and a ‘goodbye song’. This structure was incorporated in the research in order to create a naturalistic setting and to realise “applied practice-related research” (Huntberg,2005). The complexity of decision making in preparing music lessons for under fours and the complexity of teaching music to young children can be roughly described in the lesson plan. Preparing a lesson or course needs deliberative thinking and decision-making beforehand. Through a process of evaluation, a self critical way of viewing to the given music lessons, teachers improve their teaching. In fact the elements as are advocated by Burnard and Bowman (see above) can also be applied to teacher practice, advancing the closing of the gap from a teacher’s point of perspective.

The MiM project

The purpose of the study is to investigate the development of movement representation of musical activities for children aged 18 months to 36 months that occur during a regular Dutch early childhood music education course. The body is considered in this investigation to be a very important tool in the understanding, storing and retrieving of musical information. The analysis of the preliminary study generated a framework for the movement responses of the children: movement types and movement functions as well as conditions for the bringing about of movement reactions to music (Retra, 2006). This framework provided a firm theoretical

underpinning of the data collection process of the main study.

The research process as it unfolded can be depicted in two overlapping circles.



Participating in a research project: viewpoint of the practitioner

One of the conditions for collaboration was that no obstructions arose when giving the MoL courses. Other important elements were that the researcher was familiar with the MoL practice and the environment was safe and respectful. Also the discussions and information beforehand – papers, results of the preliminary study - through which the teacher obtained a thorough pre-understanding of the research topic and the conviction that knowledge gained could be valuable for practice, were very important. On top of this the teacher could reflect on and give suggestions about activities in the activity set for the data collection of the main study. Consequently a combination of free and fixed contents of the lessons – prescribed and free musical activity sets - allowed the teacher to operate within a realistic setting.

Prescribed tempi conditions for the fixed activities could be performed freely within the evolving structure of the lessons to allow the teacher to reflect immediately on the actual responses of the children. By means of interviews after each lesson, reflections on the teaching process were linked to the research questions. The triangulation of data collection provided the necessary research rigor to create a mutual stream of information and communication which proved to be crucial for the motivation of the teacher to participate fully and the genuineness of the prescribed activity sets.

Participant researcher

In the present study the researcher also acted as a participant teacher of two of the 5 courses that were observed. This proved to be a very challenging undertaking. In terms of McIntyre: “teachers have to depend on tacit thinking and on giving priority to the fluency of their decision-making rather than on the rigour of the underlying arguments” while the researcher “depends heavily on explicitness and on demonstrably rigorous rational argument” (McIntyre,2005). These two different processes – “holistic recognition and conscious deliberation” (McIntyre, 2005) - cannot and should not be addressed at the same time by the same person.

Especially in the beginning of the data collection it was seen that for the researcher to be also the teacher was not ideal. However, as an experienced PME teacher, the researcher could communicate with the participating teacher, children and parents on a clear level of understanding and was able to approach the subject from a practice related research base. Secondly it was possible to engage in small experiments during the data collection in cooperation with the participating teacher to enhance practice, which in turn reflected highly on the outcome of the investigation. During the data collection period the exchange of information and feedback was provided by interviews between the teacher and the researcher after almost each lesson. These interviews have been videotaped. Besides the rich information they provided about the research itself and the PME practice, it also became clear that observing PME classes in action – during the teaching process - is a multilayered undertaking. This complexity is described by McIntyre (2005) in terms of multidimensionality, simultaneity, immediacy and unpredictability. According to McIntyre “For researchers, the challenge is to find simplifying patterns that might help teachers to deal with this immense complexity” (McIntyre, 2005).

The triangulation of the data collection – video recordings, interviews, dairies, parent group interviews – created an environment in which all participants could engage with the research, understand the research and reflect on it. This even resulted in parents starting serious discussions among each other about their children’s musical education and education in general.

Results

To close the gap it is found necessary that

- * researchers have extensive knowledge of PME teaching
- * researchers should be aware of the fact that reflective thinking, formative action
- * research and evaluation of teaching are standard qualities of experienced PME teachers
- * teachers should have an active part in the preparation of the data collection and during the data collection
- * important in the collaboration between the practitioner and the researcher is the clarity of justification: detailed explanation and description provided by the researcher allows judgments of validity to be made by the PME teachers
- * research should be accessible and connected to practice.

After the research a ‘translation’ of the review and research findings and conclusions should be written and published in ways that make them easily accessible to teachers: non-scientific reports/ articles, teacher training course materials, and books. In this way research data can be helpful in improving the quality of teaching (Improving the quality of teaching can directly improve the quality of the musical learning process of the children (and parents).)

Elements needed to build a solid bridge between research and PME education (in The Netherlands) are:

- * the research process and findings should be made more public.
- * the conclusions of research should be disseminated into practical proposals for teaching.
- * to prepare teachers to take part in research and understand research, research elements should be incorporated in the education. After graduation study days, lectures and workshops with research elements should be provided, to keep the life long learning process and the dialogue between practitioners and research going on.

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