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## The Importance of Music in Preschool Teacher Education

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*Abstract: At a few universities in Sweden students can chose a preschool teacher education programme with a music profile. At one of these universities, a study was undertaken that aimed to explore student teachers' understanding of self as musician, their future professional role as a preschool teacher and how the education equips for that. Sixteen students participated in focus group interviews, and thirty students answered a questionnaire. The study shows that almost three-quarters of the students did not choose the music profile for the sake of the specific profile in music. Instead, it happened that this was the programme they managed to get into or they found the location of the education suitable. How, then, to develop the design of a music profile that prepares preschool teacher students to become skilled leaders and a source of inspiration for music in preschools?*

### Introduction

Preschool teacher education in Sweden has been a three-and-a-half-year academic education since 2011. Besides pedagogical and didactic issues, the programme focuses on content areas such as language, mathematics, technology, and science, as well as on documentation and evaluation. A preschool teacher needs a limited but interdisciplinary knowledge in these different content areas (Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg & Vourinen, 2011). The arts historically have played a prominent role in Swedish preschools and preschool-teacher education programmes in Sweden (Tellgren, 2008; Vallberg Roth, 2001) but today only a few credit points are dedicated to music and other forms of the arts. The learning outcomes are most focused on the theoretical understanding of childrens' esthetic learning processes. For example a learning outcome for the course "Esthetics and esthetical learning processes in preschool" states that the student should be able to *explain* how aesthetic forms of expression can stimulate childrens' imagination, self-discovery and development.

At a few universities in Sweden students can chose a preschool teacher education programme with a music profile. At one of these universities, a study was undertaken that aimed to explore student teachers understanding of self as musician, their future professional role as a preschool teacher and how the education equips for that. In the overall context the study seeks to uncover knowledge that could be useful in the development process of a music profile. As there are no musical criteria for entry students have a very broad range of abilities and interests in every cohort. The first group of students studying in the programme with a music profile at the current university participated in focus group interviews, and the second group of students that chose the profile at the same university participated in answering a questionnaire. In total 16 of 25 students participated in focus group interviews, and 30 of 32 answered the questionnaire. The study shows that almost three-quarters of the students did

not choose the music profile for the sake of the specific profile in music. Instead, it happened that this was the programme they managed to get into or they found the location of the education suitable.

The research interest in the described study is an action research orientation (Mattsson, 2004). In accordance with triangulation (Patton, 2002) the study is based on focus group discussions and a complementary questionnaire. The aim of the study is to explore student teachers understanding of self as musician and their future professional role as a preschool teacher. The research questions are: (a) Why choose a preschool teacher education with a music profile? (b) What do students think they need to develop to become leaders and sources of inspiration for music in a preschool setting?

## Background

The Swedish preschool has had a national curriculum since 1998. Subject areas emphasized in the curriculum are mathematics, technology, science, and language development as well as other forms of expression; pictures, song and music, drama, rhythm, dance, and movement are pointed out as important areas. The Swedish national curriculum (Lpfö-98/10) states that music, art and drama should serve as both content and method in preschools' activities.

Creating and communicating by means of different forms of expression, such as pictures, song and music, drama, rhythm, dance and movement, as well as spoken and written language provide both the contents and methods to be used by the preschool in promoting the development and learning of the child (National agency of Education, 2010, p.6).

However, only a few credit points at the preschool teacher education programme are dedicated to music and other forms of art, and the learning outcomes are most focused on the theoretical understanding of childrens' aesthetic learning processes. The importance of developing knowledge and skills in music—for example, singing and playing—are restricted in the preschool teacher education programme of today. This can be understood in light of the examination regulation for the preschool education (SFS 2010:541). Out of 25 learning outcomes, only one is related to music, “- demonstrate knowledge of practical and aesthetic learning processes” (SFS 2010:541, p.4).

At the preschool teacher programme in focus for the described research, students have music education a fifth of the time scheduled in a course. In all courses, the music component is connected to other goals in the course. The learning outcomes in the music profile are the same as in the regular preschool teacher programme, with the difference that for some of the goals music serves as a tool for students learning. There also has been an emphasis on students developing their knowledge and skills in music as a goal in itself. Students are supposed to develop skills in singing and playing, mostly drums and percussion, and to become leaders and sources of inspiration for music in preschool.

Previous research, both national and international, shows that many preschool teachers lack confidence in music and skills in singing and playing in the preschool setting (Sundin, 1995; Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Ehrlin, 2012). It is therefore important that the preschool teacher education can meet the need and offer students education in music in the program. Research has shown that if the expectations are to improve teaching skills in music or other forms of the arts, students must be offered opportunities to engage in different arts learning in their education (Garvis and Pendergast, 2010; Heyning, 2011; Russell-Bowie, 2012). The preschool teacher education consequently must entail both theoretical and practical content. Swedish music teacher students express that both theoretical and practical

knowledge are important in becoming a skilled music teacher (Georgii-Hemming, 2013). Jank and Meyer (1997a) emphasize the importance of teachers having both theoretical and practical didactic knowledge. Students can acquire theoretical knowledge in their studies, which provide tools to describe and illustrate didactic problems in a comprehensive plan. Practical knowledge is acquired in turn by the teachers' own teaching experiences and meetings and dialogues with colleagues, and enables goal-oriented work, including solving unpredictable problem situations that may arise. These two forms of knowledge complement each other in a dialectic process (Jank & Meyer, 1997b, p. 41). This is an assumption Ferm Thorgersen (2012) argues also goes for preschool teachers teaching music. She points out that it is important that preschool teachers have both theoretical and practical didactic competence in music so they can describe, argue for, teach in, and evaluate music in the preschool setting.

### Theoretical assumptions

The study is based on a sociocultural perspective. A central starting point is Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning and how the situated learning takes place in a community of practice. Learning and development are understood as the novices' gradual development from a peripheral participant to a full member, as they become part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

To define and operationalize the development from peripheral participation to a full membership—that is, being part of a community of practice—we use *competence* as a valuable complementary concept, with the meaning given in theoretical perspectives on workplace learning. Competence is here described as the ability to act in relation to a particular task, situation, relationship, interaction, and the like (Ellström 1992, p. 21).

A further complementary concept, taken from the field of adult education, which we see as valuable for understanding and describing the development of a peripheral to a legitimate participation in a community of practice is the concept of *opportunity horizon* (Hill, 1997). The movement from the periphery to membership and participation in a community of practice involves the widening of the individual's opportunity horizon.

As part of the development from unexperienced to experienced, there is a dimension that involves a change in self-image and identity. Trent (2010) describes a teacher education programme as an identity construction. Going from the periphery to increasing participation in a community of practice can be understood as more and more being able to identify with and see oneself as part of and belonging to the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

With reference to the purpose of the study, another central theoretical focus is how the development of a peripheral participation to a full participation in a musical pre-school community of practice can be promoted within the framework of preschool teacher education. How can competence, opportunity horizon, and self-image connected to music be promoted and widened?

The sociocultural assumption that learning and development of competence are situated in communities of practice gives rise to problematizing education in relation to the future professional role. In light of the idea of learning, knowledge and development as situated a person can experience her/himself as competent and the participation as central in one community of practice but experience her/himself as incompetent and the participation as peripheral in another. It leads to an understanding of the importance of learning linked to practical situations. This is an educational perspective that has been current for a long time and goes back to John Dewey's ideas about learning by doing (Dewey, 1916/1999). Within the fields of work-life educational studies, adult education and adult learning the value of

learning through and from experience is emphasized and underlined. A learning linked to one's own experiences is described as deeper and more rooted than what is referred to as 'school learning' (Molander, 1996; Härnsten, 2006). Another frequently used concept is 'experiential learning' (Kolb, 1984). In teacher education research, students' opportunities to link theory to practice are highlighted as important in the process of being a teacher and learning to teach (Beattie, 2000; Sutherland, Scanlon and Sperring, 2004; Joseph and Heading, 2010).

The basic sociocultural idea of learning as situated highlights the limitations in learning situations and individuals' learning within the frame work of a school's four walls. Learning based on experience from organized shared learning-by-doing-oriented situations in a community of practice in terms of course sessions in an educational setting does not automatically mean that this knowledge and these experiences can be transformed to be used in a future professional situation. In terms of music in a context of preschool teacher education the limitations related to children not being included in course sessions, workshops, and the like, are obvious. It is possible to develop some aspects of competence in teaching. Other aspects bring to mind the importance of rich possibilities to experience music and develop music teaching competence in field studies within the clinical training in the programme. Research has shown the importance of students having the chance to reflect with classroom generalists at their clinical training on their music teaching in terms of what to improve (Joseph and Heading, 2010).

## Method

The research project can be understood as action research with a participatory approach (Mattsson, 2004). In the light of the aim of the study and the knowledge of interest we found focus groups (Wibeck, 2000) an appropriate method of data collection. As part of triangulation (Patton, 2002), we also implemented a questionnaire study. We saw the questionnaire as supplementary material that gave us an opportunity to recognize whether experiences and perceptions in the focus groups also were shared by students in another course group.

In autumn 2013, four focus group discussions and a questionnaire were carried out with students in two course groups who had chosen a music profile in their pre-school teacher education. The students had reached different stages in their education. Those who participated in the focus group discussions were in their fourth semester, and those who participated in the questionnaire studied in their second semester. The criterion for our sample was all students studying at the music profile. The two groups were unequal in numbers because of drop outs.

In all, 16 of 25 students participated in focus group discussions, and 30 of 32 students answered the questionnaire. In the programme, students are divided into course groups of 5-6 students; these groups functioned as focus groups in the study. Our study includes three focus group discussions with 4-5 participants and a focus group with only two participants and one of us as moderator. It was important that all students had their say as far as was possible, but sometimes it was hard to find a time when all could take part. Thus, for various personal reasons, some students could not participate at the time of the focus group.

The focus group interviews took place in one of the study rooms at the university and lasted approximately one hour each. At two of the focus group discussions we both participated as moderators, and in two of the focus groups just one of us was there. We tried to stay in the background during the focus group discussions. Our intervention consisted of initiating questions and asking follow-up questions. The focus group discussions had a clear

content focus based on a number of questions. These concerned how the participants experienced them self when it comes to singing and playing with preschool children, and what the music profile had contributed. It was clear that the interaction in the different groups affected what came to be the focus in the discussions. It was also clear that the group members recalled things with the help of each other's stories that they might not have raised otherwise in a single interview.

All focus group discussions were recorded with the permission of the participants. We have followed the Research Council's ethical principles (The Swedish Research Council, 2011). The students were informed about the aim of the study and that it would not be possible to identify any individual at presentations of the study. We have also made clear to all the informants that because there are not a large number of preschool education programmes with a music profile in the country, it may still be relatively easy to guess which university was in focus. All the focus group discussions were transcribed. In the transcription we focused on the content and tried to reproduce as carefully as possible what the different informants said. However, we did not focus on reproducing *how* they said things, but rather on *what* was said.

The questionnaire consisted of 4 open questions. The first concerned why the participant choose a preschool education with emphasis on music. The following questions focused on the contribution of the education, for example: "What do you think you need to develop in order to take responsibility for singing and playing with children in preschool?"

## **Analytical Method**

The material was analysed with a qualitative content analytical method (Kvale, 1997; Bergström & Boréus, 2000); both of us repeatedly read through the transcribed focus group discussions and highlighted various content-related categories by comments in the text or by marking with different colors. The categories that emerged have been analysed separately but also in relation to the material as a whole.

The questionnaire has been analysed in parallel with the focus group discussions and mainly served to broaden the basis for our analysis. We met several times and talked about the interpretation of the material we made separately; these meetings can be seen as a common analysis that has brought the individual analysis forward. Through an abductive process, the theoretical concepts we used helped us to interpret and understand the material.

In the presentation of the results there are some quotes from the focus groups which have been edited carefully without compromising the significance of the content but to maintain participants' confidentiality. The quotes are included to illustrate parts of the material which form the basis of our interpretations.

## **Method Discussion**

Focus group interviews are useful when one is interested in collecting data for an understanding of a current situation or to find possible pathways for the development of a specific organization (Wennberg, 2010; Lundgren, 2000). Because the purpose of our study is to achieve a better understanding of a preschool programme with a profile in music we, as course managers and researchers contributing to the development of the programme, found focus groups to be an appropriate method of data collection. We also conducted a questionnaire study to complement the focus group discussions. If we instead had used individual interviews there is a possibility that the discussions could have been further

deepened. However, in accordance with a sociocultural perspective, our experience has been that the focus group discussions provided an opportunity for those involved to find and articulate their thoughts in interaction within the group. Choosing the questionnaire as a supplement provided a complementary and valuable input that gave us the opportunity to briefly reconcile experiences or perceptions shared by other students in another group.

## Results and Analysis

Despite the fact that the majority of students studying preschool teacher education with a music profile did not select the education because it had a music profile, most of them said music is an important part in their lives. When asked what the students feel they have developed for themselves in relation to music while studying at a preschool programme with a music profile, two areas stand out clearly. From a didactic perspective, students feel that they got a better understanding of *why* music should be a part of the preschool agenda. This is linked to the fact that they feel that they have an understanding that they can use music as a tool in preschool. Music is promoted as a tool to work with in language stimulation, math comprehension, motor skills, or as a tool to bring in different cultural elements in the preschool. Someone said, 'You understand that you can use music in the work to achieve certain goals in the curriculum' (student 1, focus group A). Only a few stated that music also has an important intrinsic value in preschool. This intrinsic value is linked to the importance of letting children have musical experiences and finding joy in singing and playing. One student says: 'Children need to feel the joy of music. It does not always have to be a learning process' (student 1, focus group C).

These statements show that the students understand why music can have a place in activities in different ways. On the one hand, music is described in accordance with what has been found in previous research, as a tool for the development of competence in fields other than music, or an activity just for joy (Pramling-Samuelsson et al, 2008; Ehrlin, 2012; Lindgren & Ericsson, 2013) On the other hand, the interpretation is that music also is seen as important in bringing a joyful music experience to the children. A didactically oriented interpretation of this description is that it demonstrates a relatively unarticulated didactic knowledge in music only referring to *why* music is taught in preschool. This knowledge is based on common assumptions that singing and musical activities automatically develop other areas and bring joy to everyone. Our interpretation is that the students so far still are peripheral participators in a musically didactic community of practice.

A second area in our findings is the students' experience of having developed their voices. This feeling is both in terms of using voice and chest support for speech but also on vocals. Someone expresses herself: 'You dare to use your voice and use more of it' (student 2, focus group A). Someone else says, 'I have always enjoyed singing but always have had the feeling that I cannot sing but I have another feeling now' (student 2, focus group B). The opportunity to develop the singing voice brought confidence in not only singing but also in speaking out and for personal growth, a result reported in previous research (Heyning, 2011). Many of the students feel that both the music lessons and the other students in the group have been a good support in developing confidence in their speaking and singing voices. Unlike the students' relatively unaware didactic reflections on why music should have a place in preschool, there is a greater awareness related to their own musical development. This can be seen in the light of the research of Lave and Wenger (1991) stating that the changing participation in a community of practice also contributes a changed self-image. The changed self-image widened the individual's opportunity horizon when it came to singing. The feeling of competence in singing is one part of the competence needed for a teacher to feel confident

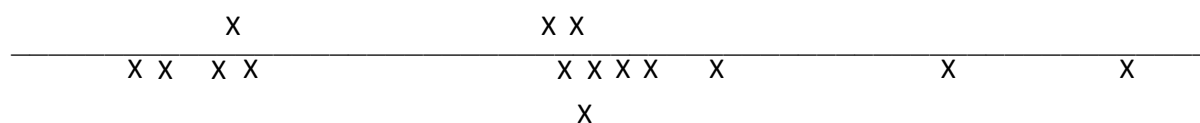
in teaching music, and the didactic competence is another. Our interpretation is that practical competence in singing and playing widens the opportunity horizon, and the next step in this competence makes it possible to develop the didactic competence in deciding *what* to sing and play, *when* and *how*.

Only a few students in the fourth semester of their education say they have confidence in their own ability to take responsibility for singing and playing in preschools. Someone says: 'It is my fear that when I come out I do not know if I dare to say that I have a musical profile in my education. I do not feel ready to come out. I do not feel I have the knowledge' (student 4, focus group C). Most of them, however, are optimistic about the opportunity to develop their competence in relation to music, and a few express this when they say: 'It feels a little scary, but hopefully when you're done you've got some more meat on the bones' (student 4, focus group C), or 'A little more secure in the professional role' (student 4, focus group C) or 'I really hope that during these years I have got time to reach the knowledge you feel that you need so you can come out and say you completed an education with a music profile' (student 2, focus group B).

In summary, the responses from the 15 of the 16 students who answered the question *How do you see yourself as a teacher when it comes to being a leader of singing and playing in preschool* show that only two of the 15 students in their fourth semester feel confident in the role of being a leader in singing and playing in a group of preschool children. Five of the 15 students still perceive themselves as novices.

**Novice**

**Confident**



**Figure 1: Students' perceptions of themselves when it comes to lead singing and playing in preschool.**

As previously seen, the individual's opportunity horizon is widened, but it appears that many students still perceive themselves as peripheral when it comes to being a leader of singing and playing in preschool.

When asked what the preschool students feel they need more of in their education in order to take charge of singing and playing in preschool, they wish for plenty of time both during lessons but also during the clinical training to practice singing and playing and developing their didactic thinking in relation to music. Someone says: 'It is important to do it together with the kids in practice' (student 1, focus group D). Many also want to expand their repertoire of songs and other music activities. From a didactic perspective they want more of both *how* to and *what* to do? The clinical training is obviously important for the students' ability to 'test in practice' as someone says; however most of the students felt that music had a limited place at the preschools where they did their clinical training.

The music activities at the clinical training often are described as an occasional song sung at circle time or before lunch. At some preschools they play soft music on CD players when children are going to rest, and some preschools used to have a singing circle time once a week. It is possible, of course, for students to take responsibility for bringing in singing and other music activities to the preschools and in some educational assignments linked to other courses they are expected to do so. But it is clear that most students do not have to any great extent the opportunity to get any didactic inspiration or reflection connected to the existing music activities on their clinical training.



This brings to mind what Jank and Meyer (1997a) highlight about theoretical didactic knowledge and didactic practical skills and the importance of experiential learning and learning by doing (Dewey, 1916/1999; Kolb, 1984). The students expressed that they needed to develop didactic awareness, a repertoire, experience-based knowledge, and the opportunity of learning linked to authentic situations. Based on students' descriptions our interpretation is that such authentic situations involving experiential learning are possible to reach to a certain degree at course sessions, but not for all at clinical training.

## Conclusions

Given that the vast majority of students who participated in the study had not chosen the education on the grounds that it was a music profile, it appears that music lessons in different courses have been successful in terms of generating interest in working with music in preschool. What can be seen as central is the importance is additional opportunities for students, in the context of courses and clinical training, to sing and play to enhance their didactic competence and repertoire. To increase the opportunity for a preschool teacher education with a music profile to equip preschool teachers to become leaders and sources of inspiration for music in preschool settings a number of issues have emerged as central. What the sociocultural basic idea of learning as situated highlights are the limitations that learning situations within the frame of the school's four walls cause. Learning based on experience from organized 'learning-by-doing-oriented' situations in course sessions do not automatically lead to those experiences being transformed into a future professional situation. Theoretically, the students can express why music should be a part of the preschool agenda, for example, as a tool for learning in other areas and to bringing joy to the preschool. But these assumptions are grounded not in a practical didactic knowledge but rather in theoretical expectations. Students need more practical experiences to be able to build up practical didactic knowledge that also involve questions as *how to* and *what to* do.

## Discussion

In light of the described study it is of interest to discuss the extent to which the design of the current preschool teacher programme with a music profile contributes to educate preschool teachers as leaders and sources of inspiration for music in a preschool setting, and how the design of the programme can be developed to further contribute to the music profile. The study highlights how a variety of aspects need to be considered in order to design a music profile that prepares preschool teacher students studying to become skilled leaders and sources of inspiration for music in preschools. Learning and developing competence in a different community of practice than where knowledge and competence are supposed to be used raises questions about the extent in which it is possible to build the knowledge, competence, attitude, and confidence outside the community of practice where it should be practiced. In terms of music in a context of preschool teacher education, the limitations related to children not being included in course sessions, workshop, and so forth, is obvious. Our study indicates that some aspects can be developed in course sessions. For example, singing, playing, and conducting music activities at course sessions are important. Within the framework of the course sessions, students have expanded their repertoire, gained a greater awareness of their voices, and strengthened their self-confidence in singing. This has strengthened the students' musical competence. Another aspect is the importance of getting the opportunity to experiment and develop music teaching competence in the clinical training

part of the education. In light of what has emerged in the study we see it as important to emphasize that in a profession-oriented educational context, it is important that students have opportunities to develop knowledge both in course sessions and during the clinical training as a part of being a full participant in their future profession.

Results from the study also show the importance in music education to find ways to meet student groups with a wide variety of previous experiences of singing and playing. It is something that also applies to the regular preschool teacher education. Because the Swedish national curriculum (Lpfö-98/10) states that music, art, and drama should serve as both content and method in preschools' agenda, preschool teacher education must equip students for this mission. Our study, although localized to a small cohort, implies that the preschool education programme cannot rely on the clinical training providing students with confidence to be leaders and inspiration for music in preschools. Music lessons in practice at courses are necessary. At the same time the university must communicate to mentors at the placement preschools the importance of giving students opportunities to reflect on ongoing music activities at the clinical training as well the opportunity to practice their own teaching skills in music.

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