

'Fake it till you make it'.

How do kindergarten staff in kindergartens with a music profile talk about their musical identity?

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the musical identity among adults working in kindergartens with a music profile. The intention is to find aspects that might have transfer value towards other kindergartens and not the least the ECEC-education system when it comes to the music curriculum. The need for this study is based on a decrease in the presence of music both in the ECEC-education and in kindergartens. We interviewed 8 staff members in a well reputed music kindergarten in Norway and asked them about their musical identity. Results indicate that separately they – in terms of kindergarten staff – hold a quite average view on themselves as musically capable and thus have – as most kindergarten staff in Norway – a rather negative musical identity. However, together as a staff, their musical identity is quite the opposite. The adult companionship in the music making in this kindergarten is astonishing comprehensive and marks a pronounced distinction from the average kindergarten, where the refrain is that the adults are scared to sing in front of each other.

Introduction

According to a vast body of research, many kindergarten teachers feel a lack of confidence when it comes to sing and make music in kindergartens' everyday life (Ehrlin 2014, Ehrlin and Tivenius 2018, Ehrlin and Wallerstedt 2014, Stunell 2010, Hallam et al. 2009, Kim and Kemple 2011, Kulset 2016). The ECEC education system is offering music as a subject, but still there seems to be an ongoing decrease in music's place in kindergarten and the kindergarten staff's confidence within music making (Østrem 2009, p. 28). One might say that their *musical identity* is negative.

Considering the many positive outcomes that grow from music making and singing songs, such as language acquisition, empathy promotion and friendship building (Kulset 2018, RabinowitchCross and Burnard 2013, Kirschner and Tomasello 2010, Linnavalli et al. 2018), not to forget the emotional and aesthetic pleasure of music as an art form, one should think that music and singing songs would be an obvious part of everyday life in all kindergartens. However, the studies mentioned above tell us that this is not the case.

We have tried to turn the situation around, not only by teaching music in the kindergarten teacher education programme for almost twenty years but also by travelling around Norway to give talks and workshops on music in kindergartens. Yet, we observe that the situation remains somehow unchanged. Indeed, music as a subject in the kindergarten teacher education in Norway is minimised and even left out as a mandatory subject named 'music'. Instead, music is merged with the other aesthetic subjects and given the name '*Kunst, kultur og kreativitet*', 'art, culture and creativity'.¹

While music as a subject is decreasingly visible in the kindergarten teacher education, music making and singing songs are correspondingly less visible – and audible – in the Norwegian kindergartens. Since we are unable to change the curriculum for the kindergarten teacher education offhand, we decided to have a closer look at some of the kindergartens that *do* make music and sing songs on an everyday basis. Who are the adults working there? What has made them 'musically capable' to such an extent? How do they talk about their music making and how do they talk about themselves as musical subjects? What is their musical identity, and how did they achieve this identity? By asking these questions, maybe we could find a secret ingredient to improve the kindergarten teacher education programme when it comes to music.

Musical identity

We use the term *musical identity* as coined/defined by MacdonaldHargreaves and Miell (2017), MacdonaldHargreaves and Miell (2002), pointing towards how our view on ourselves as capable (or not capable) musical subjects influences several aspects of our self-perception and identity formation. Also Denora (2000) and Ruud (2013) argue that our musical identity is a vital part of our self-biography. Would I describe myself as a musical person? Am I someone who is able to join in when people are singing together? Do I feel the beat in a song and let my body show that I can feel that beat? Am I afraid to hit the wrong notes with my voice? Do I feel musically incapable because I don't play an instrument? To hold a *positive musical identity* means you consider yourself as a human being capable of using your innate musicality in an everyday life situation with other people. Opposite, to hold a *negative musical identity* refers to a feeling of insufficiency and incapability when it comes to everyday music making, often expressed by the presence of an overwhelming *voice shame* (Schei and Schei 2017).

¹ In Norway, we use the term 'kindergarten' for all pre-schools, crèches, or playgroup activities led by educated kindergarten teachers alongside child care and youth-workers and other care givers. Children start school at the age of 6.

The study

The starting point for the study is our proposed theory that 'understanding offers a more sustainable foundation (for incorporating more music making in kindergartens) than musical skills and knowledge of repertoire'. We believe that your musical identity, how you regard yourself as a musical human being, is detrimental to your capability and confidence in making music. Thus, we wanted to investigate how adults in kindergartens with a music profile talk about their musical identity.

We have individually interviewed eight staff members from one such kindergarten with a music profile. They were not aware of the aim of this study. We told them we just needed to hear a bit about everyday life in this particular kindergarten while we were developing a larger action research project that this study is a part of. In this way, we tried to minimise the researcher effect which of course was present all the time they are a part of a music kindergarten and they knew that we are music researchers.

The questions:

- (1) How did you feel when you started working in this kindergarten – how did you experience your role in music making situations, as a music maker?
- (2) What kind of role do you think music plays in the kindergarten?
- (3) What do you need know, or what kind of skills do you need to do music in kindergarten? Is there something particular that is good to have or that you think is necessary?
- (4) How dependent are you on other adults, some key person, being present in the kindergarten for you to be able to make music?

Results and discussion

Their hidden negative musical identity

First of all, we were astonished to find that most of the staff members expressed a feeling of insufficiency when it comes to music making – even in a music kindergarten. These informants are highly skilled in music making in the kindergarten. Nevertheless, we find the same sort of statements among the staff members when it comes to music making as in any other kindergarten. Considering these staff members are the peak of music making kindergarten worker, this gives rise to concerns. They are still bothered with voice shame and culturally given views on musicality and their own (lack of) capacity to make music. Once again, findings from previous studies are thus confirmed.

Interestingly, respondents' initial answers and statements seemingly displayed a positive musical identity. In fact, on the question 'What do you need to know, or what kind of skills do you need to do music in kindergarten? Is there something particular that is good to have or that you think is necessary?',

most respondents answered that there is nothing you need, other than to just do it.

A lot of people are concerned that they must be able to play an instrument, have a musical background, be able to read music and such. But for me it is not that you have to be able to do something specific, rather that you have an understanding of the effect music has. Many believe that they must be able to play an instrument to work here and be with the kids. That we have such a classic background and can play all instruments. Of course, it is very nice when someone can play an instrument or five, but that's not the most important. It's not the singing or playing instruments, but just being in the music. With dance and movement, feel the pulse. To be together in the group and have a joint experience of something. And even though there are ten people there and there may be ten different perceptions of what is going on, we still...(showing with hands that they are together)

Their own perception of their musical identity is clearly a positive one. 'We are the kindergarten that do music, and we know that everyone can sing and dance, and we do it!' However, when further elaborating on the initial answers, the presence of voice shame and a cultural given view on musicality, and their own (lack of) capacity to make music, emerged. One might say they have a hidden negative musical identity.

To play it by ear, as things happen in the everyday life, that's easy and fun. But if it turns into specific tasks - performing - then I get...then I think...I'm not musical! I can't do this!

I know I don't always hit the right notes, but it doesn't matter to me. I think the singing creates something anyway. I don't feel happy with all things I do musically, but it's not that I get annoyed about it afterwards. I do it because I notice that it has an effect on both myself and those I am with. It's not always completely successful.

N: What do you mean by successful?

I think of the quality of the singing or that I have not remembered the lyrics or ... but ... the companionship created by the singing counts the most. Nonetheless, I do self-judge myself a little, but less than I did before, and I do not put it on myself that 'I sang false or wrong'. It's just...yes.

In my childhood I did not listen to classical music. It's something I've discovered after I've started here. I wish I knew more about such things, and somehow helped the little ones also be a part of it. After all, it is an important thing to bring along, all the well-known classical music pieces.

K: What do you think is important about that?

Oh, it's really so important! It is our history, the whole world history, it is important that we know about it. The children hear this music all the time, just turn on the TV! But I wish they had known more about the songs, who the composer is and so on. I'm not good at that.

The latter statement is from a staff member who sings all day long, and who is what we would regard as an excellent role model in both communicative musicality and everyday music making to anyone else in the staff. Still, she talks about knowledge in western classical music history as an important feature she doesn't have, and that she should have had to *truly* be able to offer these young children a meaningful musical environment. Where does

these attitudes come from? Is it us, the musicians and music knowers who let these attitudes drizzle down on the 'non-musicians'? According to SlobodaDavidson and Howe (1999) , it is precisely our group, the 'officially musical ones', who establish and reinforce such misconceptions of musicality and of important musical knowledge.

There are so many students and parents staying with us who say: 'But I can't sing, I'm not musical!' Then I reply: 'No? What is it to be musical?', and then we start that discussion. And then they say: 'But it's so easy for you to say, because you just do it, it's so easy for you!', and I just: 'oh no, you are so mistaken, it is NOT easy for me'. And we are very clear on that, that it is scary. And then people get all: 'What? It is? But it doesn't look like that!' and I just 'fake it till you make it'. It's not just a piece of cake, that is so important.

'And we are very clear on that, that it is scary. Fake it till you make it'. These are pretty harsh statements. Are they faking their positive musical identity that make them also claim that everyone can sing, and that you don't need to know anything specific to make music? One of the staff members even told us that she is so scared to sing in front of other adults that she often starts to cry.

Moreover, several of the staff members talk about working alongside staff members that are confident in their music making as challenging.

So, when you come to a new place and people are much better than you, they play the guitar and they play instruments, then you immediately feel like 'oops' ... When I was working in another kindergarten, no one was neither singing nor playing. And here everyone is so incredibly skilled and forward that you actually lose a bit of your ... (makes an excusing face)

After all, you have all these musical talented people in this kindergarten that play both guitars and drums and have really good singing voices and all those things that make you feel like you are ... well ... like I don't know how to do these things.

So you just have to think that: my god you have to be able to contribute with ... and there is no one who will think that ... that I don't know how to do it ... but it is more your own feeling that: 'Gosh, you do it, you know this one so well'.

We are currently looking into how the staff members breaks this 'music making ice' and nonetheless make music together on such an extensive level in spite of experiences like these.

The guitar players as positive musical pathfinders

To make the children sing along during circle time I feel it's very good to have a guitar. It builds up so much more of that interaction than what we can do with just a voice. So, it's not that ... you can contribute to very much even if you don't have an instrument, but for me I feel it gives me a push when someone is playing the guitar, it creates a better atmosphere.

In short: if there's no guitar, it is much more difficult to sing and get the children to join you. 'It (the guitar) builds up so much more of that interaction than what we can do with *just a voice*'. Let us stop for a moment and have a short look at *the guitar*. We found that the guitar players – all male – hold central key positions for the music making in the kindergarten to happen. Knudsen et al. (2018) point to different musical pathfinders in kindergarten, where the male guitar player is one of them. The guitar players in this kindergarten, however, is different from the more normal character as outlined by Knudsen et al. (2018) (who makes music with his guitar through practicing his own guitar skills, often even on his own with no children present). The guitar players in this kindergarten, on the other hand, function both as supporters, initiative takers, motivators and role models. At the same time, the guitar players all expressed a high awareness in not always take the space and the lead with the guitar, but instead create a safe space where anyone can join, even without the guitar:

Personally, it is important that I don't always grab the guitar, but also give the other adults a chance so they learn to feel safe in the music making, such as singing without being accompanied by an instrument. The voice is an instrument as well, I experience that all the time, you can just use your voice, sing songs and do rhymes. It excites the children just as much. There are always some adults that are more self-confident than others, and if you observe the adults you can see that someone might want to do something, but then they back out. Well, then we have to do something about that. We simply have to make an opening, a space, we have to accommodate.

The guitar players are in short creating a safe music making space for other staff members. They function as musical pathfinders that spread a positive musical identity in the group as a whole. 'You can do it, I will help you do it'. Most staff members also talk about the head of the kindergarten in that same way: as someone who both inspires them and also in fact demand of them to make use of whatever musical capital they may have.

I think there are many ways in which one might be 'musical'. The head of the kindergarten has a way of being in her music making that is very kind and gentle, mild and inviting. It makes you feel confident in everything you do. Everything is accepted – it makes you feel free to simply try. I think that's important.

Their joint positive musical identity

It would seem that the central key persons, the musical pathfinders, are able to transfer their positive musical identity towards the entire staff. Individually, the staff members in this music kindergarten do not talk very differently about their musical identity or their musical skills than adults in other kindergartens that struggle with music making. They too talk about shortcomings, voice shame, and the wish for a supportive guitar to excite the children. What would have happened to their extensive music making if they were working in another kindergarten? They might not have made music in their everyday life at all.

The game changer is the word 'we' – the most used word in the interviews. It is *together* they achieve the positive musical identity that makes each one of them capable of using their innate musicality. It is *together* they become a music kindergarten where everyone sings, dances and plays all day long. The adult companionship in the music making is astonishingly comprehensive and marks a pronounced distinction from the average kindergarten, where the refrain is that the adults are scared to sing in front of each other. A vast body of research on the social benefits of singing together supports why doing it *together* is the key (see f.ex. Kreutz 2014, PearceLaunay and Dunbar 2015, Grape et al. 2002).

Conclusion

What kind of skills are needed? These findings represent a significant insight into how important *adult companionship* is for music making in kindergarten. This again points towards how fruitless it might be to solely focus on repertoire knowledge and other musical skills during the ECEC education, as long as the adult companionship is missing. This brings us back to our theory that 'understanding offers a more sustainable foundation (for incorporating more music making in kindergartens) than musical skills and knowledge of repertoire'. It is not the musical skills or knowledge of repertoire that make the musical pathfinders in this kindergarten able to include the rest of the staff in this joint positive musical identity. Rather, it is their understanding of what music might be to human beings, their understanding of human musicality as something everyone possesses. Moreover, it is their ability to invite the rest of the staff onboard and by this creating the joint positive musical identity that neutralises their individual negative (or culturally normal) musical identity.

Therefore, we hypothesise that by offering kindergarten teacher students theoretical knowledge on 'why music', their music making will strengthen. In this way, they will acquire both an attitude towards why music is important to human beings, and a language for 'why music' that stretches beyond the culturally given view on musicality as something only a few possess. In contrast, will learning new songs change their misconceptions of 'musicality'? Or will it simply add to the account 'fake it till you make it'?

Thus, theoretical knowledge may create an attitude towards music making and musicality that encourage kindergarten teachers to make use of their innate musicality. The consequence may be that we need to reconsider the present music curriculum for the kindergarten teacher education and find an appropriate balance between the development of practical skills and theoretical insight in the few music lessons that are offered. Moreover, it is also important to be critical of *what kind of* theoretical insight the students are presented to, as the purpose of the theory is to support and build each student's own musical confidence. And most important of all, these findings indicate that the presence of adult companionship in kindergarten music

making needs to be addressed. How can the newly graduated kindergarten teacher create such an adult companionship at his or her new working place? What skills are needed to be able to invite the other adults onboard and by this creating a joint positive musical identity that neutralises individual negative musical identity?

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