

Music Education in Context: The Construction of the Teacher's Identity Within Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration in the Arts¹

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ABSTRACT

This study was part of a research project that examined innovative practices in a primary school with an integrated arts curriculum. While the school started an expansion of its curriculum, a music teacher was hired to become part of the arts learning area. Her commitment to the overall project determines that she works in collaboration with the other arts teachers, namely, Visual Arts and Drama. Baring in mind a theoretical background that traces the lines of a liberating, autonomy promoting, and collaborative education, the development of the identity process of the music teacher was analyzed through her diary, field notes, and other observational data, gathered by the research team. Findings indicate that, while significant gains were brought about by cross-disciplinary collaboration, some problems remain to solve, concerning the role of specific musical skills development. The implications for music education research are suggested, with reference to the relationship between music skills development and integrated art projects.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This project identifies innovative practices in a primary school that integrates the arts in a process where collaboration among the art teachers plays an important role. This paper focuses mainly on the development of the professional identity of the music teacher within the arts learning area, in a moment where in the school major changes are taking place.

Escola da Ponte is a primary school that goes back to 1976. In this institution, the traditional system of having a generalist teacher in charge of the whole curriculum is questioned, based on the assumption that it hinders the construction of educational projects, and “isolates the teachers in spaces where they are confined to themselves and to the belief in a ‘specialization’ in generalism” (Escola da Ponte, 1996, p. 2). In this context the school aims at the development of a culture of cooperation that fosters effective diversity in the learning processes, the promotion of autonomy and solidarity, and the intensification of collaborative work among all the educational agents. The work is developed in open spaces, and there is neither one teacher for one classroom nor a distribution of the pupils per school years. The children are involved in heterogeneous groups, also including the students with special needs, where autonomy is promoted and the emerging difficulties are solved in the encounter with one of the three or four teachers that are available in each working space. There is always a music CD playing, mostly classical or soft jazz music, either of the teacher or the children’s choice. Every Friday afternoon, all the children get together in an assembly, which is run by a small committee elected at the beginning of every school year, to discuss an agenda that might go from small individual problems to important issues for the whole school community.

In the beginning of the year 2000, the school board, together with the teachers, and with the support of the parents, decided to expand the curriculum from the 4th (6-9) to the 6th grade (10-11), and after a long period of negotiation with the Ministry of Education, a group of specialists was hired to cover all areas of the curriculum. Therefore, since September 2001, the *Escola da Ponte* has had a music specialist. She integrates the arts learning area together with the visual arts and drama teachers.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In light of the curricular change that the school is going through, the investigation identified three aims. To examine and discuss the (1) **school’s model of organization**, (2) process of **integration of the music teacher**; and (3) **musical development of the children**. This paper reports on one aspect of the whole research, the construction of the music teacher’s identity, focusing on cross-disciplinary collaboration in the arts.

A VIEW ON THE INTEGRATED ARTS CURRICULUM

In his recent book, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, Elliot Eisner (2002) gives an extensive account on diverse visions of arts education, at least from the early 90s to the present. In the context of our study this is particularly relevant since it raises issues related to curriculum orientations that should be part of the agenda of an innovative setting like *Escola da Ponte*.

Among different visions, Eisner (2002) describes the so-called *integrated arts* version. In his rationale, the integrated arts curriculum is presented as typically taking four

curricular structures. In the first one, students might be elicited to work on a particular historical period or culture where art, music, literature, and history will address the subject as illuminated from different angles, and therefore “broaden the means through which the student’s understanding is advanced” (pp. 39-40). In the second one, the integration is within the arts themselves, and aims at understanding what is common and distinctive across the arts, like experiencing the meaning of rhythm in music and visual arts. A third approach seeks to identify a certain theme and work it out from the perspective of an artistic or no artistic domain (i.e. explore different meanings for one concept). Finally, the fourth version relates to the practice of problem solving, and looks for multiple perspectives to address one issue, bearing in mind that these perspectives should be integrated in a coherent whole that “requires the integration of several disciplinary perspectives, including the arts” (p. 41).

In *Escola da Ponte*, there is an attempt to work according to this view, using distinctive practices both among teachers and students.

SOME IDEAS ON COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES IN ARTS EDUCATION

In the last decade, some authors have shown a particular attraction to the teacher education issue, with an emphasis on arts education, while setting the whole discussion on the level of the wider context of social and political conflicts (Greene, 1995; Jorgensen, 2003). In this perspective, the school community may prefigure a vast social freedom, and the arts have a special place in promoting imagination as a mean of creating alternatives to an oppressive *status quo*. This relevance is emphasized “because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (Greene, 1995, p. 3). Alternatively, arts encounters are never seen as end points, and could be the best route to fight boredom and the sense of futility that some young people feel towards learning, while having the power “to awaken them to their lived situations and enable them to make sense of and to name their worlds” (p. 150).

In intimate connection with these ideas appears to be the recent work by Estelle Jorgensen (2003), in which she calls for transformation in Music Education. One of her arguments for change builds upon a reexamination of traditions as “part of the ongoing process of transformation whereby people make beliefs and practices their own, and a group adapts to changing circumstances yet still preserves certain traditional perspectives and practices” (p. 19). In this sense, the vital processes of schooling, socialization, and enculturation constitute the core of group transformation across generations. Her dialectic approach to education is described as “consistent with dialogical education in which various points of view are analyzed, discussed, and debated in an ongoing conversation between members of an educational community” (p. 14). This perspective

raises the issue of empowerment as elaborated by authors like Freire (1973) and Greene (1988; 1995), where education values cultural difference and contributes for humanizing societies.

The notion of cross-disciplinary collaboration, as developed by Bresler (2003), seems to find its natural way through this line of thought. The disciplinary isolation in schools, with a special focus on music, as a curriculum subject, and the role of the music teacher in the school community, is the object of extensive elaboration. While stating that music teachers are usually the most isolated and least likely to participate in collaboration, she suggests that “the boundaries between music teachers and other school practitioners, as well as professional musicians, can be negotiated to create collaboration, that it can be a powerful experience that expands us intellectually, emotionally, and institutionally” (p. 32). Further, the benefits of collaboration for teachers are situated in three levels: *professional growth*, *change of self-image*, and *becoming central to the school* (p. 27), all of which contribute, in different ways, to address the isolation of specialists in elementary schools and fight effectively against their often marginalized position.

In this study, it was assumed that this problem could be successfully overcome through collaboration among the arts teachers, and between these and other domains and disciplines.

METHODOLOGY

This research, as an example of qualitative ethnography, attempts to produce descriptions, and explain phenomena (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993). The case study approach was used to gather information about the integration of a music teacher in the school environment, with emphasis on her diary which, according to the research orientations, should include both description of musical interactions and her own identity development in that particular context. With the main purpose of extracting meaning, a content analysis was carried out through a process of categorization, in order to contribute to the construction of a coherent narrative. Further, observational data, such as videos and field notes taken in the music classes, and in several other parts of the school life, were gathered to describe the school organization with a special emphasis on music within the arts.

FINDINGS

Music Education within the arts

When the decision to expand the curriculum from the 4th to the 6th grade was taken, the school went through a process of reorganization of its learning areas, and distribution of working spaces.

The arts learning area is located in the upper floor of the school, in a relatively big open space where the visual arts, drama, and music teachers work together with the children. Here, the methodology, rather than pursuing learning objectives, is centered on projects. In groups, the skills of the three art disciplines should be acquired simultaneously in the context of each project. In some cases, the project is broadly identified within the general working plan designed every two weeks by the children together with the teachers of all areas, and can take the form of a theme, a problem of the school or a celebration in the year (e.g. Christmas, Carnival). In others, it starts in the arts learning area, and is only related with the artistic domain, and its concepts.

The diary of M.

The music teacher, here designated as M., is an experienced professional with several years of practice as a music specialist in the Portuguese school system. She knew well the *Escola da Ponte*, and decided to accept the invitation to work in the school as the process of curriculum expansion started, facing the new situation as a possibility for personal growth.

As one of the main data sources of this study, her diary was analyzed for later categorization as: (a) projects, (b) children's musical development, and (c) Inter and Intrapersonal dimensions. While the intersections across categories are unavoidable, some of the core ideas, for each one, are:

a) Projects

During the school year there were three major projects.

The project 'Pashtun' had its origins on the terrorist attacks on the 11th September. The children asked questions about what they saw and heard on TV, which gave raise to discussions, invented texts, and drawings. They were curious about Afghanistan, and came across the Pashtun tribe through the investigations that were made.

"We started our journey to Afghanistan, particularly to meet the Pashtun. We found the music, the dance, the everyday life, the landscapes, the art, the tapestry...The children shared their interpretations of the 'waving voices', the 'moving' rhythms, the 'repetitions'...the dance was tried, the movements experienced...Through imitation of the rhythm, they arrived at a very simple ostinato that was shared in a musical dialogue. At the end there were some drawings representing the music, supported by gesture, which I oriented together with C. [Visual Arts teacher]" (Diary of M.)

And further on she comments:

"In the arts we are working together. But the management of the common physical spaces very often affects the work that is being developed by the specific areas. Everyday we tried to cope with the music 'pashtun'. It is not easy to articulate the groups that are listening with purposes of selection,

with those that are doing document research, than the visual arts work, and still the rhythms. Trying to articulate the whole is very demanding.” (Diary of M.)

The next project, ‘The Nutcracker’, was designed when the younger children listened to the music, saw the video, and heard the storytelling. They wanted to retell the story in their own way.

“The arts, in this project, discovered little by little how they could altogether re-tell ‘The Nutcracker’ by Tchaikovsky. We adjusted the gesture to the music, the pine trees were growing, the fair circulated from visual arts to drama and to music, and through her we perceived how the arts were already touching each other.” (Diary of M.)

This project was developed both with the youngest children, and with children with special educational needs, and therefore there were fewer moments where reflection took place. However, M. acknowledges positive gains in terms of rules and social skills.

The project ‘Sound landscapes – the sounds we see, the images we hear,’ took form through the work plan that every two weeks, all children in *Ponte* elaborate. Also, it was designed taking into account issues that were raised in the context of the previous projects.

“The ‘journey’ that took us to Afghanistan had left behind a sensation, among teachers and children, that it could have been more developed. We all thought that some problems could now be addressed giving the children a greater leading role” (Diary of M.)

The sounds heard in the school environment were the starting point. According to M. it required much organizational engagement, since it involved 5 groups of 4/5 elements each, and with ages between 7 and 10 years old children. Nevertheless, she seems to acknowledge the important musical gains for the children, and the advances in the arts integration work. At the end, the children drew a gigantic score so that everybody in school could not only *listen to* but also *see* the created ‘sound landscape’.

b) Children’s musical development

Throughout the diary there are several references to the musical development of the children. M. is not happy with the musical accomplishments in *Escola da Ponte*. She senses a very positive development but is aware of the fact that

“...‘knowing how to listen to music’ cannot be dissociated from ‘knowing how to produce music’...The artistic process has to be thought of, so that the children have significant learnings as much as possible in *performing*, *listening*, and *composing*...I need spaces to experiment, play together...work like musicians. For now, they are just listening to music, making documental research...” (Diary of M.)

In sum, not all children, because of the different projects, had the chance to be involved with music in the same way. Therefore, musical development happened somewhat unevenly, according to the specific role each child had in the process.

c) Inter- and Intrapersonal dimensions

M. values strongly the collaboration among the arts teachers:

“The rhythm in the first floor was unimaginable. We wanted that all children have significant experiences in the three artistic domains. We, adults, learned a lot from each other. We understood core processes in each artistic area. This happened because we were always together working and collaborating. We all ended up orienting the children in the three areas, and when we had doubts, we just called the ‘specialist’, as we used to call each other... (Diary of M.)

Conversely she states: “we continue fighting for our believes, and we do believe that the arts should never be subsidiary of the other knowledge domains but integrate the global learning of the children” (from the Diary of M.).

In another moment M. strongly senses the difficulties:

“I am not happy with the work in progress. My space to make music with the children is almost nonexistent. I do want to work in projects, but what I sense is that too much time is spent in document research, and so little in musical experimentation and practice.” (Diary of M.)

Nevertheless, the gains of collaboration in the arts are well documented in this conclusion:

“Now I know that our strong pedagogical believes, and cultural affinities, the empathy that was created, the mutual respect, and very much wanting to learn with each other, enabled, during one year, a healthy community, and this attempt to find a pathway for the artistic approach with an integrated perspective.” (Diary of M.)

DISCUSSION

The construction of a common ground for understanding in the artistic area, led M. to a strong engagement in the process of finding her identity as a music teacher within an integrated arts curriculum. The four curricular structures described by Eisner in *integrated arts* also seem to have been present in the development of the projects even though not explicitly conceptualized.

M. is aware of the positive aspects of collaboration, and seems to have found, together with the other arts teachers, a secure vehicle towards integration. This conclusion goes in the same direction of Bresler’s (2003) idea about the power of collaboration as an open-ended process where growth and meaningful relationship play an important part.

However, the fact that most of the time the children were engaged in project work, poses several problems in terms of skills development in the different artistic domains. It was made clear that, in many cases, the children should have needed separate moments to develop the necessary musical skills for the required performances. In several instances, a deeper involvement with sound was not possible for all children, given that they always worked physically in the same space. Also, not everyone was, in his/her project, committed to music on the same level. Though M. identifies at the end of the year a positive evolution in terms of the children's musical development, it does not seem to have attained the level she thought would be within the reach of the children, according to her own previous experience and expertise as a music teacher.

These preliminary conclusions raise the question of how the design of arts integrated curricula can meet the criteria of both quality in the development of skills-specific knowledge, and its concurrence to the integration area. In this sense, the contribution of this study to the discussion about the role of music within the arts and more broadly in the overall curriculum, taking into account the presented theoretical background, finds in this school a privileged place for questioning and comprehension.

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ENDNOTES

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