Room for Improvisation in the Music Classroom?

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Improvisation is a distinguished feature of many music practices. But is there room for improvisation in the classroom? Researchers have argued that music education in schools should provide more improvisation activities (see e.g. Burnard, 2012; Sawyer, 2003). Current national curricula in the Scandinavian countries as well as in England and Australia highlight the need to advance inventive and creative tasks in the learning environment (see e.g. English National Curriculum: music programmes of study 2013, ACARA, 2012; The Swedish National Agency for Education/Skolverket, 2011). In the Swedish curriculum for the compulsory school (The Swedish National Agency for Education/Skolverket, 2011) improvisation is designated mandatory content in the Core content of the syllabus for the subject music, from year one to year nine. Yet existing international literature (Whitcomb, 2007; Ferm & Zandén, 2014, Gruenhagen & Whitcomb, 2014) shows that improvisation tend to be an overlooked activity in general music classrooms. Music teachers find improvisation challenging and they say they are uncomfortable teaching it, are not well educated in improvisation practices and have neither time nor space for improvisation activities in the classroom (Whitcomb 2013, Ferm & Zandén, 2014, Gruenhagen & Whitcomb, 2014).

With the overall purpose to elucidate didactical, educational and musical conditions for improvisation in the music classroom the aim is to explore: (i) how improvisation is conceived and how these conceptions are expressed in music educational practices (ii) what hindrances and/or possibilities for improvisation that music educators experience. (iii) how didactical conditions for improvisation can be elaborated and improvisation tools can be developed, accommodated and employed in music education (iv) what role improvisation might have in a goal and result-driven school (v) the empirical and methodological challenges for researching improvisation in the general music classroom.

An observation study would probably not be useful since, according to previous research there seem to be few improvisation activities going on in music classrooms. I therefor suggest a collaborative action research method, Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Herr & Anderson, 2015), in combination with a practical epistemological analysis method based on the pragmatism of John Dewey and developed by Wickman and Östman (2002). The study is set in three different compulsory schools and will be pursued over a period of two semesters in collaboration with three music teachers and their teaching in year four. In the collaborative process with music teachers, where models and methods for improvisation in the music classroom will be discussed, tested, accommodated and developed, the PAR perspective will be combined with a pragmatic perspective.

The transactional theory based on Dewey, is here used in order to explore music educators’ experiences and meaning making in the process of developing and implementing methods for improvisation in music educational settings. Experience in a transactional perspective is about the continuous process where people are facing the consequences of their own actions (Wickman, 2006). Gert Biesta (2009) discusses the purpose of education and highlights the question of what is educationally desirable by emphasising three functions of education.
These functions are described as qualification, socialisation and subjectification and they will be the foundation for analyses of education policies and the role of improvisation in music education. This will include discussions on potential conflicts of aesthetic subjects in a goal- and result driven schooling system.

The study offers critical discussions and insights on empirical and methodological challenges for researching improvisation in the general music classroom and complement existing music education research in some aspects: (i) teachers didactic reflections on, and development of, improvisation teaching practice will be elucidated, and (ii) show how scholarly based improvisation tools can be developed, accommodated and employed in general music classrooms to facilitate improvisation and empower educators self confidence concerning teaching improvisation (iii) elucidate improvisation as a room for subjectification (Hasslöf, 2015).

References


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