Room for Improvisation in the Music Classroom?

Challenges for practice and research

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General description

Improvisation is a distinguished feature of many music practices. Many researchers have argued that music education in schools should provide more improvisation activities (e.g. Burnard, 2012; Sawyer, 2003). Also current national curricula highlight the need to advance inventive and creative tasks in the learning environment (English National Curriculum: music programmes of study 2013, ACARA, 2012; Skolverket, 2011). Yet existing international literature (Whitcomb, 2007; Ferm & Zandén, 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).

In the National Curriculum in England; music programmes of study (2013) improvisation and creative tasks are emphasised as well as in the Australian Curriculum: The Arts (2013). In the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011) improvisation is designated “obligatory content”. On the other hand, it is not one of the stated knowledge requirements for a passing grade. Music teachers shall include improvisation tasks, but they are not expected to assess or grade the students’ improvisational skills. More knowledge is needed about how music educators deal with this situation, why improvisation is neglected in music education and how educators’ practices in teaching improvisation can be developed and empowered.

Improvisation in the general music classroom is an overlooked phenomenon in music education research. Existing research on improvisation features fairly prominently in academic scholarship in anglophone countries (Burnard, 2012; Tomlinson, 2013) but has attracted little attention in continental Europe and Scandinavia (Larsson & Georgii-Hemming, in progress). Current research focuses on improvisation as an initial stage of composition and to facilitate the scholarly study of improvisation, researchers orchestrate projects that take place in school but outside of regular music lessons (Burnard, 2000; Nilsson, 2002). Existing research centre on children and students and their creative competence (Tomlinson, 2011: Whitcomb, 2013) while so far, however, there has been little discussion about teachers didactic competences and beliefs concerning improvisation.

The overall purpose for this study is to investigate what conceptions of improvisation there are to be found amongst music educators and how these conceptions affect their educational practice. Also what hinders improvisation and what possibilities do music educators see? What needs to be done to overcome those hindrances and to develop those possibilities? In
this paper I will discuss the empirical and methodological challenges for researching improvisation in the general music classroom. An observation study would probably not be useful since, put simply, there seem to be few sufficient improvisation activities to investigate. I therefore suggest a collaborative action research method, Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Herr & Anderson, 2004), in combination with a practical epistemological analysis method based on the pragmatism of John Dewey and developed by Wickman and Östman (2002).

The pragmatic standpoint formulated by John Dewey, with its emphasis on process and change, will be used as theoretical framework. Dewey’s concept of experience, habit and continuity are important in this paper for understanding learning and meaning making. In focus is the relational process in people’s encounters with the social, historical and cultural environment. Meaning is not understood as a mental process that is invisible but on the contrary meaning is visible in action. The transactional theory 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).

**Methodology**

This study makes use of a Participatory Action Research method (PAR) (Herr & Anderson, 2004). It is set in three different compulsory schools and will be pursued over a period of one semester in collaboration with three music teachers and their teaching in grade 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. In PAR the ”negotiation of access” is a key to the collaborative work. This means that the researcher introduces a certain problem (in this case concerning improvisation in music classrooms) and seeks to engage teachers in a collaborative research project. The researcher as ”outsider” cooperates with teachers as ”insiders” and both parties have useful knowledge needed to drive the process forward, that is, to develop accommodated and scholarly based improvisation tools.

Methodological starting points and methods of analysis, of the process and the meaning making the teachers in the study undergo, are based on a transactional approach drawing from the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey and developed within the SMED group (Studies of meaning-Making in Educational Discourses). With a transactional approach development and learning are understood as processes that include individual, social and institutional dimensions where all participators affect one another. This approach enables analysis of meaning making and learning in action in a continuous educational practice and of the relation between the music teachers’ actions and childrens’ learning. Video observations of music lessons will be analysed with a practical epistemological analysis tool (Wickman & Östman, 2002) which defines four concepts in the analysis: encounter, gap, relation and stand fast. Until now there are no existing studies in music education employing this transactional approach and these specific methods of analysis.

**Expected outcomes/results**

The intention of this paper is expected to contribute to better understanding of the educational prerequisites and didactic challenges for improvisation practice in the general music
classroom. Accordingly, this paper will address challenges for improvisation practice in ordinary classroom settings. The contribution of this project is that it will discuss the empirical and methodological challenges for researching improvisation in the general music classroom and complement existing music education research in two aspects: (i) teachers didactic reflections and considerations concerning hindrances and possibilities for, 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 in order to facilitate improvisation and possibly also empower educators self confidence concerning teaching improvisation.

References


