

THE METHOD OF INVOLVING YOUNG CHILDREN IN GROUP MUSICAL ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

The possibilities and specific features of enhancing the efficiency of the educational interaction that penetrates the whole educational process by involving children in active musical activities as early as possible have been poorly explored in Lithuania so far. The aim of the research is to highlight educational preconditions of involving 3–4-year-old children in group musical activities by implementation Batia Strauss's Method of Active Listening to Music in practice with a group of children in early childhood music education. The participants included fifteen children from a kindergarten in Kaunas district (Lithuania). The conducted qualitative case research help to distinguish the following educational preconditions of involving 3–4-year-old children in group musical activities using Strauss's Method of Active Listening to Music: to feel and express contrasting rhythms through simulated, emotional body movements while listening to music; to conceive and demonstrate spontaneous body movements while listening to music; and to listen to music and express it through artistic expression and language. The aforesaid preconditions are considered as generalised and conceptualised research findings and enrich the didactics of early childhood music education based on reflective thinking, mediation, meta-comments and co-learning principles.

Keywords: *early childhood music education, educational preconditions of involvement children in group musical activities, the method of active listening to music.*

Introduction

Relevance of the research. Research on early childhood music education is extensively analysed in the studies of Lithuanian and foreign researchers (Hjälmeskog et al., 2020; Kubayeva, 2022; Pramling et al., 2019; Žitkevičienė & Monkevičienė, 2021). These empirical studies provide a reconceptualised concept of the didactics of early childhood music education, distinguish the object of didactics, i.e. the child learning, and highlight the importance of proactive interaction between the teacher and the child. The teacher, as an active moderator of learning situations in an engaging context, encourages children to involve in musical educational activities and the pathway for the development of the children's evoked initiatives is revealed through their spontaneous, creative, inquiry-based,

engaging music learning situations. Having envisaged the importance of spontaneous and child-initiated activities (Akyol & Erdem, 2021; Robson & Rowe, 2012), the researchers present the most common way of visual attention engagement of infants in musical theatre performances through gaze (Barbosa et al., 2021) and show the field of exploration of the music learning object and its critical aspects through the use of different voice intonations, words, singing, sensations, bodily movements representing sound qualities and naming other musical qualities and experiences. Žitkevičienė and Monkevičienė (2021) analyse the way in which children are involved in discovering the object of music learning and its critical aspects (the sound qualities of the music) while listening to music. Researchers present reactions to active music listening activities expressed by preschool children through visual expression, verbal communication and body percussion.

One of the special approaches (methods) for modelling children's music learning, which is based on Batia Strauss's Method of Active Listening (Isaacson, 2023) highlights the relevance of the ways in which children are engaged with music. Education that relies on this approach becomes a visual tool for listening to music allowing children to listen to the music themselves and encouraging them to feel, experience and try it out through spontaneous body movements and artistic expression. Pedagogical situations for children's musical development purposely modelled and considered in advance by a proactive teacher, involve children in music activities in which they demonstrate their perceived meanings through verbal and non-verbal means and synaesthesia, develop their understanding and show the dynamics of changes in their musical understanding.

However, there are not relatively many studies on music didactics in early childhood music education that analyse the ways in which children are involved in group music activities using Strauss's Method of Active Listening. The problem of active listening and participation of young children in group musical activities has not been extensively investigated empirically. Articles by foreign music education researchers characterise only separate aspects of this problem (Hjälmeskog et al., 2020; Kubayeva, 2022; Pramling et al., 2019). The works of Lithuanian music education researchers actualise the impact of the musical activity on the development of learners' personality at the theoretical-methodological level: development of the way of action (Balčytis, 2006), musical abilities and musical expression (Jucevičiūtė-Bartkevičienė, 2015; Šečkuvienė, 2004), creativity (Girdzijauskienė, 2017), moral values (Girdzijauskas, 2016; Navickienė, 2012). However, empirical studies analysing the specific ways in which children are involved in group music activities have been conducted so far (Rauduvaitė & Lasauskienė, 2015). The description of pedagogical communication strategies (directions) applied by music teachers in musical activities lacks not only a conceptual theoretical framework, but also examples of more widely applied research methodology and practice. Therefore it can be stated that peculiarities of stimulating active listening and involving young children in group music activities have not yet been explored.

The aim of this article is to highlight educational preconditions in which children in early childhood music education can be involved in group music activities by applying Strauss's Method of Active Music Listening.

The research question guiding our interest is: In what ways and what impact can music listening activities exert on artistic expression of young children?

Methodology

The qualitative case research carried out in the present study (Harrison et al., 2017; Yin, 2018) provides opportunities to reveal the ways in which children involve in music activities by encouraging them to listen to music and express it through body movements, artistic expression and language. Imitative, emotional, spontaneous body movements, artistic expression and language (in group musical activities) become a mediator between children and the music they listen to. The activity using the Strauss's Method of Active Listening (Isaacson, 2023) was delivered by a teacher working in the children's group. In each activity, the children demonstrated imitation, emotional, and spontaneous body movements that served as mediators between the child and the music that was listened to. These ways of involvement were designed to encourage children to feel, experience, conceive and express the music they were listening to.

Participants. Fifteen children aged 3–4 years were selected and participated in the study. The research was conducted by Norkutė (2022), a Bachelor of Arts programme student of Vytautas Magnus University and both authors of this article as research coordinators and music educators. The participants were selected applying non-probability selective sampling. Such a sampling was predetermined by the following arguments: (1) a teacher who is one of the authors of the study works in this kindergarten; this is an important aspect that can facilitate the design and implementation of the study; (2) the researchers of this study knows the parents of the children in the kindergarten group well, and this situation can help the children to become more involved in the activities when they see a familiar face; (3) the educational institution has large premises where activities take place.

The research is based on the implementation of Strauss's Method of Active Listening in practice with a group of children music lessons during which the Method of Active Listening was put into practice once a week in the kindergarten "Ažuolėlis" located in Kaunas district (Lithuania) from December 2021 to May 2022. Twenty music lessons were held in total. A voluntary decision and confidentiality were a necessary condition. Consent was received from children's parents to record the group musical activities in the audio format as well as to use the material in the research.

Data collection and data analysis. Data from the group's musical activities in the case research were collected by observing, analysing situations and musical activities, filling in the observation protocols. Subsequently, the textual content of the observation protocols and reflections of the participants was analysed by researchers applying qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Empirical data were reduced into categories, sub-categories and themes. An advance list of preconditions of children's involvement in group musical activities was made. Each participant was given a code, their body movements and speech were accurately recorded, and the actions accompanying the speech were

presented in square brackets. The analysis of the data focused on the ways in which children were encouraged to engage with the music by demonstrating their feelings through body movements, language and artistic expression.

Results and discussion

The obtained research data enabled to distinguish the following educational preconditions for the involving young children in group musical activities. The main results were found to centre on the following four themes:

- 1) application of the method of active listening (the use of practical possibilities);
- 2) encouragement of children to listen to music and express contrasting rhythms through body movements (e.g. feeling and expressing the contrasting rhythm of the listened musical work through the simulated body movements; emotional expression of body movements by feeling and expressing contrasting rhythms while listening to music);
- 3) encouragement of children to listen to music and to demonstrate it with spontaneous body movements (e.g. the listened musical work is demonstrated by spontaneous body movements; emotional expression of spontaneous body movements and commenting on the listened musical work); and
- 4) encouragement of children to listen to music and convey it through artistic expression and language (e.g. listening to musical works and their conveyance through drawing and commenting).

Analysing the data, a key focus was on the ways in which the children were involved in the group musical activities by encouraging them to listen to music and to express it through simulated, emotional, spontaneous body movements, artistic expression and language.

Application of the method of active listening (the use of practical possibilities).

A special approach (method) known as “active listening” was developed by Batia Strauss, a music teacher and mentor (Levinsky College for Teachers in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem Music Academy). Isaacson (2023) mentions that Batia Strauss introduced this unique approach to experimental listening. Beginning in the 1980s, Strauss organized multiple “active listening” workshops across various European countries. She selected pieces from various musical styles and identified a prominent feature, such as an inviting melody, a captivating rhythm, or a repeating harmonic pattern. Before listening to the piece, she isolated its’ main element and engaged the children in various activities such as moving, drawing, singing, accompanying with percussion instruments, or dancing – all while identifying the musical element. B. Strauss believed that in the early stages of learning, children lack the necessary listening experience and sensitivity to independently discover the unique meaning of a piece of music. Furthermore, they lack the tools of expression (such as vocabulary or coordination) to verbalise their interpretation of the music. The primary objective of the teacher is to perform a comprehensive assessment, acting as a channel for cultural awareness. Her educational and musical principles and techniques

are designed to capture and stimulate the cognitive and emotional growth of each individual learner.

Encouragement of children to listen to music and express contrasting rhythms through body movements. This precondition describes the teacher's aspiration to involve children in group musical activities by encouraging them to listen to a musical work via a multimedia display. The musical work listened to is a piece of contrasting rhythmic motifs embodied by a mouse and a bear. Based on the principle of contrast, the teacher challenges the children to feel, experience, practise, and demonstrate contrasting musical rhythms understood through different body movements. Simulative, emotional body movements serve as a mediator between the child and the listened to musical work.

Children express their involvement in the musical activity through simulated body movements in the following ways: contrasting rhythmic motifs consisting of short and long musical sounds, children demonstrate associations with short and long rhythmic motifs through the characters of a little mouse and a little bear. A musical picture of the little mouse is created by quick, short movements, silent clapping, a (thin) voice and short sounds (*"Imitating a little mouse, children clap softly with short and quick hand movements, squeaking in a thin voice like little mice"*), while wide arm swings, swaying from side to side, curling up a body in a ball, clasping the hands together at the chest, legs bent over the knees were employed to imitate the bear (*"With slow, wide arm swings children sway from side to side like bears"*). Children show their interest in the musical activity by focusing their attention, getting serious and using different facial expressions – eyebrows furrowed, lips pursed, eyes closed, mouth open (*"Some children prick up their ears, get serious, and other children frown, wrinkle their eyebrows, bite their lips [children respond to contrasting rhythms in this way]"*), a joyful mood – laughter, shouting, smiling (*"When the little mouse appears, the rhythms of children are accompanied by laughter, squeals, and smiles"*) and cheerful intonation of the voice (*"Well, oh my, it's even more fun here! [the girl says that in a cheerful voice]"*) show that the children are involved in the educational activity through their evoked emotions.

The findings show that children directly involve in the activity through contrasting body movements, e.g. short, quick hand movements, silent clapping and wide arm movements, and loud clapping. The ways of children's participation in the activity are also supplemented by the onomatopoeic words and voice intonations: squeaks and thin-voiced intonations evoked associations with short rhythmic motifs, while slow side-to-side body swaying, clasping the palms to the chest, and bending the legs over the knees evoked the long rhythmic formations associated with the music. Expressive facial expressions, strong emotions, and cheerful exclamations also show the interest and satisfaction felt while listening to the musical work.

Encouragement of children to listen to music and to demonstrate it with spontaneous body movements. The teacher encourages the children to listen to a musical composition (a song) and asks them to think of and spontaneously create movements that correspond to the piece of music they are listening to. Spontaneously conceived and created body movements become a mediator between the child and the musical work.

Children demonstrate their involvement in the activity by using conceived and created spontaneous body movements in the following ways: more by imitating driving a train (“*Children imitate driving a train with their hands in the air*”), pointing with both hands to the roof of a house (“*They raise their left and right arms above their heads and clasp them together to imitate the roof of a house*”), lifting the legs high (“*They march in one place with their legs held high*”), swaying the head and moving their whole body in both directions (“*The children bob their heads, they waddle like ducks to the sides*”) and imitating the sun with the arms outstretched and fingers spread (“*Children show the rolling of the sun with their arms raised and fingers spread*”). Meanwhile, the following ways of children’s involvement in the activity are revealed through emotional body movements: by shouting and jumping up and down from their seats (“*It’s cheerful*” [says a child who jumps up suddenly from his seat]), they show that they like and know the piece of music (“*I know this song*”, “*I hear it at home*”), and they show the initiative to sing it at home too (“*I’m going to sing this song at home*”). When involving in the activity, children feel and express satisfaction by demonstrating emotions through their body movements: jumping up and down, striking turning side to side, lifting their legs with energy (“*The child starts clapping and jumping at the end of the song*”, “*Children run, jump, spin, lift their legs vigorously*”). The willingness to repeat a musical work because the activity does not bore them (“*Ask to sing it again later*”) and the intention to prolong the activity by inviting the other children in the group (“*Wave their hands to invite the other children in the group to form a circle*”) are clear indications of the children’s involvement in the activity.

The findings indicate that children spontaneously conceived and created movements as they listen to music. Children boldly create their own imaginary “pictures” with their hands in the air, such as driving a train, a picturesque roof of a house, a sun by raising their hands and waving their hands. The spontaneous movements are also complemented by energetic, active, sudden body movements that show more immediate than usual response and active involvement of children in the activity. Their emotional exclamations and requests to repeat the activity show not only their emotional awareness of the song they are listening to, the initiative they have shown, but also their persistence in involving in the activity.

Encouragement of children to listen to music and convey it through artistic expression and language. The teacher suggests listening to two different musical works (songs) and expressing evoked associations, images and moods through their drawings and language. A drawing and the language become a mediator between the works being listened to and the children. The way of children’s involvement in the group activities is revealed through their drawings, where their attention focused only on the artistic activity (“*Here, I’ve finished it*”), and how the children felt after the drawing activity can be seen in their posture (“*I’m tired, already*”). Ways of involving children in group activities by encouraging them to listen to music and comment on it include: verbal comments made by the child allow us to assume whether the artistic activity was sufficiently engaging and interesting (“*I have drawn such Lithuania. There is sun, tree, flower, and water there*”); children express their views on the different images they have conceived or “discovered”

(“These are monsters”, “They come at night and sometimes frighten”, “This is my yard, [...] it’s fun to play there”), associations (“Light, soft colours, happy faces, balloons prevail in the drawings”) and the prevailing moods when drawing them (“It is fun”).

Our study also highlights the ways in which children involve in feeling, perceiving, understanding and expressing the music they are listening to by drawing and speaking. Their attention is focused solely on the drawing activity and verbal comments indicate that the activity was not boring but engaging. However, the posture of the body revealed that physical strength was also required of the child. Meanwhile, vivid images and associations presented by the other children, as well as their cheerful mood, showed that the children were interested and involved in the drawing activity.

Conclusions

The results indicated that engaging children in meaningful musical activities at an early age, through active participation and the joy of exploration and discovery, should be encouraged. The conducted qualitative case research help to distinguish the following educational preconditions of involving 3–4-year-old children in group musical activities using Strauss’s Method of Active Listening to Music: to feel and express contrasting rhythms through simulated, emotional body movements while listening to music; to conceive and demonstrate spontaneous body movements while listening to music; and to listen to music and express it through artistic expression and language. The development of these abilities is likely to have an impact on a deeper expression of musicianship among young children.

The aforesaid preconditions are considered as generalised and conceptualised research findings and enrich the didactics of early childhood music education based on reflective thinking, mediation, meta-comments and co-learning principles. In terms of scientific novelty of the topic, the chosen strategy of collecting and analysing qualitative data is important as is the qualitative interpretation model.

The main limitation of the present study is the size of its sample. This means that the results cannot be generalized. The results therefore concern the very specific context of the kindergarten included and should not be interpreted as overall. Educational preconditions of involving young children in group music activities need to be further examined and confirmed in larger samples or studies. Despite these limitations, the analysis tool developed seems promising to capture and analyse how ideas of active listening to music are received and integrated by music teachers in group activities.

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