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‘I can teach you that’: a study of musical interaction as a learning-generating practice in Swedish preschool everyday environments

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ABSTRACT
In this article, the first part of the research project ‘Musical interaction in preschool’ will be presented and analysed. The purpose of the study was to examine which musical interactive activities are expressed in everyday preschool environments and how these types of interactions can be related to children’s development and learning. Through observations of planned lessons and children’s free play in different milieus, the interactions have been mapped. Using Merleau-Ponty’s lifeworld phenomenology, various interactions reflect embodied education patterns as a part of preschool cultural canonisation. The result shows that the children in the study have a good ability to interact musically but that this resource is less utilised in the planned music teaching. The analyses were based on learning strategies in music with a child-first perspective which links back to lifeworld phenomenological perspectives of meaning.

Introduction

International research demonstrates that music teaching has a significant effect on child development. Singing, playing with sound and moving to music are seen to support the development of child language, motor skills and social skills (Adachi and Trehub 2012; Campbell 2010; Wilson Gillespie and Glider 2010; Hargreaves and Lamont 2017; Hargreaves and North 2002; Sundin 1995; Young 2016). Researchers also argue that the long-term effects of learning can entail changes at a societal level, primarily through increased empathetic ability and creativity (Bamford 2006; Hutchins 2018; Kioupkiolis 2019; Trehub, Weiss, and Cirelli 2019). From an evolutionary perspective, musical ability points to an understanding of a mother tongue that is innate in our neuro-physiological nature (Hodges 1989; Malloch and Trevarthen 2009; Mithen 2006). In summary, music is a path to knowledge that gives unique possibilities to interpret experiences and understand the world.

The present study examines how musical interaction in preschool can contribute to children’s development and learning. Within the research field, Wallerstedt, Lagerlòf and Pramling demonstrate in two large-scale Swedish studies on musical interaction that
traditionally dependent patterns risk undermining children’s development of knowledge. Inherited positions like sitting in a circle appear to consolidate a more passive form of participation that has negative effects on the interaction not only between children and teachers’. According to Wallerstedt, Lagerlöf, and Pramling (2014), the reason is that Western music teaching has grown from a very practical approach. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Still (2011) who points to how adult-controlled musical activities where the input of children is completely missing have become canonised. Ehrlin (2012) talks about an ‘exemplary’ culture that is governed by didactic what-and-how questions. According to Ehrlin, this role model culture has as its consequence a particular way of talking about music in professional contexts which entails that the function of music has been limited to a normalised culture that is practised while other cultures remain hidden.

One condition for children’s development and learning is the contact that is created between children and preschool personnel. Through breaking down interaction on a micro level, Holgersen (2002) has studied how improvised ‘musical dialogues’ with the child in everyday situations can be experienced as meaningful interaction. According to Holgersen, a more nuanced network of musical activities and teamwork can give a deeper insight into what children experience as meaningful.

While Holgersen breaks down interaction on a micro level, Liberg’s interactive focus is based on the wider macro level of the linguistic landscape. Liberg, who uses the preschool curriculum Lpfö 98/2010 as support, declares that the development of knowledge is affected by how social, multimodal and dialogue aspects can be promoted in the situated preschool environment (Liberg 2007).

What is of special importance is learning fostered by music, dance and movement. Liberg argues that these ‘languages’ are unique from the perspective of learning and cannot be replaced. Through meeting and experiencing interactive systems of signs, both physical and oral, experiences of cooperation, communication, reflection and thought are built in daily interaction between children and adults. In regular exercises where the body and voice are tested in interaction with others, their own norms are challenged. As Liberg (2007) points out, ‘children who are in rich linguistic environments increase their ability to understand and influence their own situation, environment and social development’.

From a broader area of research where preschool practice is problematised, the challenges of interactivity are exposed. Sensitivity to time, the time required to get a deeper dialogue, and the focus of preschool teachers on many things at the same time are thought to significantly reduce the quality of preschool practice. One source of worry is the lack of interaction which has been identified when a teacher deals with groups of children. The need to capture expressions, ideas and invitations to work together increases demands on teachers in situations when their attention is drawn in many directions and many interactions take place at the same time (Fredriksson 2019). Researchers warn of a teacher-led form of interaction which reduces the contribution of children. In her study, Bilton (2012) points to the trap of ‘situated interaction’. While this may give the appearance of interaction, it is by nature situated in factors based on traditions and contexts.

In Fredriksson’s (2019), our attention is drawn to the meeting between children and teachers. Based on Martin Buber’s philosophy of pedagogical dialogue, the relational dimensions are argued to be decisive for the possibility of children to develop
knowledge. Based on an empirically based understanding of preschool practice, the potential for teachers to contribute actively to the development of children’s knowledge is brought to light.

The view of the child as a worthy conversation partner is said to be decisive for active interaction on a level playing field. The view of children as worthy partners is pointed out in many studies as being a crucial precondition for trusting dialogue. Pramling Samuelsson, Sommer and Hundeide (2011) distinguish between the children’s perspective and the child perspective. The distinction is a marker of an approach to dialogue which builds on humanist grounds and existential conditions. Using the term empathic participation, the authors describe a perceptive process of communication based on mutual respect and a nuanced organisation where intersubjective spaces can be created through an inviting structure. This space is characterised by dialogical responses as answers to child-initiated expressions and an ability to approach children’s intimacy zone. Among other matters, researchers point to the significance of support and an encouragement of children taking the initiative, as a help to create optimism and joy (2011, 112–119).

Against the backdrop of the canonising process in preschools, there are signs that the pedagogical mission has not kept pace with the normalised patterns present in the environment. According to Josefsson (2018), one explanation can be found in an inherited tradition which lives on in collective hidden structures despite ambitions to professionalise preschools and their staff (Josefsson 2018). In Westberg’s (2017) analysis of the growth of Swedish preschools, a politically contingent idea of society can be found based on pragmatic grounds. Westberg argues that an explanation for this lies in the relation between the powerful expansion of preschools during the 1960s and 70s, the training of preschool personnel and the mission to develop children’s learning in the syllabus Lpfö 98. Westberg argues that there has to be a closer investigation in order to bring to light the structures which are taken for granted in preschools. This also seems to be true for music. At the boundary between the generic significance which music is said to have for the development of preschool children and the practices in schools, a gap becomes visible. Above all, this seems to have a didactic character and in broader terms, mirrors the practices of preschool pedagogy. Keeping in mind the conditions that have been identified, music teaching can be understood within a broader perspective.

Purpose and questions

The purpose of the study is to examine which musical interactive activities are expressed in the preschool environment, both indoors and outdoors, and how these types of interactions can be related to children’s development and learning.

In the definition of musical interaction which forms the basis for the project, we find interaction not only between children and teachers and among the children but also between children and the music itself. What has been interesting above all is how musical interaction takes shape when thinking of children’s development and learning. The study looks at interaction in detail, where oral activities (linguistic and vocal) join with silent interaction such as body language, as well as more internalised interaction with the music itself (Fejes and Thornberg 2014, 31). Our main interest is directed towards how children’s learning is mirrored in interactions during free play, in planned activities and in play with just music as the partner.
Method and material

The method used was non-participant observations. This means that you can see things that are taken for granted in your own everyday practice. Another advantage is the potential for moments of creative surprise in the field observed (Justesen and Mik-Meyer 2011).

Through 13 focused, non-participant observations in the project’s partner school, spectra have been created which shed light on musical interaction in (i) planned activities and (ii) free play in different environments. In the investigation, there were 26 children aged 4–5 years and 6 teachers. The observations took place at different times and in different places, both inside and outside. In total, 13 observations were carried out between 09.00 and 11.00 and 12.20 and 14.00 on varying days of the week over a period of eight weeks.

To capture various interactions, an observation schema was developed consisting of categories inspired by international studies on children and inspired by our own pilot observations. The observation schema was combined with how the interaction activities were proportionally distributed in (i) planned activities and (ii) free play in different environments and between adult–children, children–children and children–music. The categories are complete song, spontaneous song, sound play, song and movement, song and dance game, dramatised musical activity, rhythmical movement, movement to music, dance to music, dance without music, rhythmical chants and making music.

In order to strengthen the reliability of the study, both researchers in the project decided to observe all sessions independently of one another. After every finished observation was analysed, a comparison was made between the number of instances and also choices of categories, which made the observation protocol more trustworthy.

Ethical considerations

The project is entirely built on identified needs in the preschool. The project works with an inclusive pedagogy where the initiative to create meaning was mainly the responsibility of the preschool staff. In dialogue with researchers, time was spent in analysing the empirical data as the basis for developing practice in the school. The factors that contributed to raising the knowledge level included seminars and collegiate conversations as well as supervision.

Based on the Swedish Research Council’s (Vetenskapsrådet) ethical principles for education research (Vetenskapsrådet 2017), informed consent was obtained from the leadership of the preschool and the teachers and the children taking part in the project gave their assent. Beyond this, all parents or guardians were contacted and gave written consent. The project was approved by the Ethics Board in Uppsala (Westberg 2017/032).

Analysis

The aim of the analysis has been to identify interaction from the perspective of children through qualitative interpretation (Fejes and Thornberg 2014). The observations were analysed with the support of theories of children’s learning in music teaching (Holgersen 2002). Holgersen’s theory builds on strategies for children’s participation (2002, 143–160).
The strategies are based on a child-first perspective which links back to lifeworld phenomenological perspectives of meaning. Children’s attention and participation demand that the musical situation is experienced as meaningful.

(1) **Passive participation**: Participates in or is close to a group without actively participating with song or movement.

(2) **Supportive participation**: The child takes part with the support of other children or adults.

(3) **Imitation**: Shows an immediate interest in repeating what others are doing.

(4) **Identification**: Makes the music their own – finds their own form of expression.

(5) **Elaboration**: Surprises with ‘personal contributions’ which are different from adults’ expected reactions and pedagogical models.

(Freely in Holgersen 2002, 159)

The five strategies for analysis can bring to light not only how interaction varies from child to child, but also how the individual child’s reactions can change depending on interactive stimuli. Through widening the original model, we also see that a possible connection can be brought to light between the planned work on music, other teacher-led work and free play. Maybe the child finds their own form of expression only after the lesson. Regardless of the degree of participation, not all children react at the same time and in the same way. Overall, we argue that the model’s potential to bring to light variations in the quality of interactions is good for the project focus on child development and learning. Moreover, we see its use as a successful strategy to link the significance of interaction to design theory perspectives of learning. Selander and Kress (2010) give evidence for their theoretical view that multimodal learning processes are related to how the classroom space affords children opportunities for action. The variation in potential patterns of interaction that spaces offer is therefore another important resource (Holgersen 2002).

**Theoretical perspectives**

In a theoretical context, so-called ‘tacit knowledge’ (Polanyi 1958) is seen as being difficult to understand since it seems to be a frozen ideology compared with the more manifest, clearly expressed, ideological points of view that are seen to confirm that the actions carried out, and which agents are bearers of, are experienced in ways the field has agreed on. The frozen ideology has been embodied, so to say, and dominates practice (Liedman 1997). Its invisibility brings an extra challenge since practices are seen partly through individual actions but also through the consensus in teaching practice which works as the basis for a common space. This view has a lifeworld phenomenology approach which points to the embodied value of the lifeworld which the research field brings. In this case, it is an expression of ‘lived experience’, something which Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines as embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1999). What is central for this subjective self-experienced lifeworld is the communication that takes place between people. Through their communicative acts, people are co-creators of the lifeworld which is embodied
through experiencing it. Based on the unavoidable connection between lifeworlds and people, mutual influence is viewed methodologically as a precondition for human interaction (Holgersten 2002; Justesen and Mik-Meyer 2011).

In Design for learning – a multimodal perspective by Selander and Kress, children and young people’s learning comes under focus from communicative and interactive perspectives. Through the multimodal sign and signal system, our view of how learning processes and meaning-creation activities work together is deepened. Not least, the resources that exist for creating meaning can find a place in the social context where people agree on content and meaning. ‘Therefore, design relates to the question of the relation between stability and change, one of the fundamental questions in social science’ (Selander and Kress 2010, 26). Taking into account the modes of interaction that humans develop changes our perspective on learning towards considering how activities can be seen as meaning-making in different contexts. For example, adopting a spatial perspective plays a primary role in understanding how communication can take place in a learning community.

Selander and Kress (2010) claim that agency builds on an understanding of challenges in situations and of knowledge of different means of action. Most importantly, the ability to act is linked to social power relations, so children’s ability to act and learn must be understood in relation to a classification system for the current order and its exceptions (Selander and Kress 2010). With the aim of going deeper, researchers point to the agency of children in play contexts and how the same children become subordinate to someone else’s opinions, interests and suggestions in teaching contexts. ‘Learning is seen as a process of meaning-creation which includes both fantasy and creativity as a more systematic way of exploring the world and developing abilities and skills (Selander and Kress 2010, 102).

Results and analysis

The presentation that follows starts with an overview of the categories, followed by detailed examples and explanations.

The result of the investigation in general points to high levels of interaction. Analysis of the types of interaction observed, following the observation schedule (adult–children, children–children and children–music), shows how these kinds of interactions were proportionally distributed in (i) planned activities and (ii) free play in different environments.

Adult–Children

Regarding what happened between children and adults, there was a proportionally lower rate of interaction in planned music activities, while the proportion of interactive instances increased in other planned activities like assemblies and teaching in the gym hall. During assemblies and other planned activities, a greater degree of teachers’ attention to the children was noted, which contributed to the quality of interaction. For example, the teachers used spontaneous music dialogues and improvised group singing. The children’s contributions are seen to strengthen their own activity and their ability to develop knowledge. The planned music activities were characterised by a more teacher-led form of
teaching which does not leave so much room for children. The appearance of creativity is only confirmed to a low degree, which results in activities which take the form of reproduction of knowledge with the teacher at the center. The categories which dominate interactions between children and teachers in planned music activities are complete song, song and movement. The categories in other planned activities are dominated by song and movement, rhythmical movement, movement to music and dramatised musical activity.

**Children–Children**

Musical interaction among children appears more frequently during free play than in planned activities. The lowest frequency was noted during planned music teaching. Certain child–child related attempts to break out happen but these fade away due to a lack of teacher response.

During their own games, children seem to have good potential to interact with key musical practices. During free play, children use multimodal forms of expression. The interactive forms of musical expression emanate from different types of movements and social play and are examples of testing forms of play. Playful song accompanied the games and intensified them and developed into dialogue where the creation of new texts confirms the curious and creative nature of the game. Children’s playing with words represents the experienced competence of being able to handle language. The results demonstrate that interaction takes different forms in the different spaces observed; however, no difference was observed in the different time periods. Above all, the significance of different spaces in free play seems to offer room for various musical activities where child–child forms of interaction are more significant. One resource for musical interaction is the outside space. Here, abilities which are expressed at lower levels in the indoor environment can be explored more freely. At the same time, as children’s voices are expressed with more self-confidence than otherwise, the fragments of interactive song are characterised by a stronger joyful spontaneous and creative ‘in the moment’ character.

The categories which dominate in interactions between children in planned music are rhythmical movement, dance without music and spontaneous song. The dominant categories in interactions between children in free play are spontaneous song, sound play, rhythmical movement, rhythmical chants, song and dance game and dramatised music.

**Children–Music**

During free play, some children find support in music. Observations show children’s own interactions with music when a child playing alone created their own as-if worlds with the help of song and movement. One of the children accompanied their playing with continuous singing where their existing repertoire mixed with improvised play singing adapted to the structure of the game. Another child interacted more physically through dancing ballet in the drama room accompanied by their own song. The child had a ballet skirt which was combined with a punk hairstyle and tattoos on her arms.
The children make the music their own and are trying new forms of expression. The games have elements of elaboration that go beyond pedagogical models. The dominant categories were spontaneous song, complete song, dance to music and sound games.

**Example of planned work**

Morning assembly in the Fish room with 15 children and 2 teachers, of whom one was in the group of children.

The assembly was led by one teacher who interacted with the children through various cognitive and physical activities. The teacher kept an easy tempo and led different movement songs, which were sung without accompaniment, while carrying on a conversation in which the teacher asked different types of questions. For example, what is a match? A girl gives a detailed description of the characteristics of matches. A boy adds ‘you must be careful; it can become a fire!’ The teacher asks why; ‘You can burn yourself and the house can catch fire!’ The children show with bodily expression how to be careful and how quickly the fire can spread. The teacher captures the moment when the children act flames and turns this into a movement song. She continues with a calculation example that captures the children’s interest, and when they solve the task, she upgrades it with a more difficult problem. The mathematics gets an aesthetic form in a song that contains numbers, and the teacher asks them to express different numbers using their own fingers, bones and bodies. The concentration among the children was clear, and the teacher had eye contact with all children even though only one was speaking at a time.

*During the planned morning assembly, all children participate actively. During the observations, Holgersen’s strategic model for participation is identified at point 3: Imitation and point 4: Identification. The children are attracted to spontaneous movements to music. They pay attention and show an immediate interest in imitating what others are doing. Within the framework of the planned activity, the children find the space for their own forms of expression. Children’s interactive participation represents a rich learning opportunity. What is crucial is the teacher’s ability to interact with the children. The teacher challenges the children’s learning on both a collective and individual level.*

**Free play in the doll room with 5 children**

The furniture consists of a play kitchen and several doll’s beds with different dolls. One boy puts babies to bed and hums ‘mmm, mmm’. Another child plays with a whisk and moves his arm in time with the rhyme ‘Eenie, menie, miney, mo’. The child also plays on a tin can with strawberries and explores the sound that it makes. What is interesting is that the child tests the sound of another tin can with different contents. There were no teachers in the room. A child with physical disabilities was cleaning in the play kitchen. Silently, but in interaction with other activities going on in the room, he puts away saucepans and plates and puts objects on a high shelf which requires good motor skills.

*The children’s activities are supported through the participation of other children according to Holgersen’s second level, Supportive participation. The children do not imitate what the others are doing at that moment, but there is still interaction in the room. The children are communicating with one another at different wave lengths than verbal and are legitimating each other’s*
play and experimentation with a silent identification. Children’s ability to participate by ‘being themselves’ is an alternative basis for identification. By expressing one’s play in the presence of others while considering the needs of others, new knowledge can be achieved.

**Planned musical activity in the drama room with 14 children and 1 teacher**

This planned music lesson took the form of a traditional singing time built on a highly recognisable repertoire. A ‘good morning song’ was sung in both Swedish and English. During the assembly, there were a large number of complete songs. The children interacted through movement and looking, but mostly with one another. A suitcase of simple instruments was sent round for children to choose from. A child with a kazoo tried to break the code: “teacher, I don’t know what to do”. The teacher instructed: ‘sing in the kazoo!’ The child succeeded and put it down. Another child played a whole scale on a melodica, a feature that is left without any comment from the teacher. The children do not seem to be greatly inspired by what can be done with the instruments. Some of the children play air guitar and comment that they ‘want to play the guitar’. The teacher gives a non-committal response. The children want to sing ‘rock on’ again, something that the teacher misses. The children light up, and their gaze becomes active in the ‘snake-scream’ which belongs in the category of rhythmical movement.

During the lesson, children show a low level of interest in imitating what others are doing. According to Holgersen’s theory, there is a lack of meaning content that contributes to the children’s learning. The children’s attempts to make a contribution are not answered by the teacher. Some of the children express musical competence but the pedagogical opportunity to practice interaction with the instruments is not used. At one moment, we get to point 4: Identification. One reason is that the children themselves are given the possibility to shape the activity, which is the equivalent of Holgersen’s level ‘own expression’

**Planned play and movement in the gym hall with 12 children and 2 teachers**

Activities include an obstacle course and dramatised games with a music background in a space with good sound quality. The space clearly affects children’s movement and their interest in varying their movements and physical forms of expression. The well-used space stimulates children to bigger movements and movements at different paces. For example, the game; ‘vem har Pomperipossa förvandlat till en rutig sten?’ (‘who turned [the witch] Pomperipossa into a chequered stone’) makes the children very creative, and they contribute with spontaneous expression and voice play. During the game, the children’s voices develop in relation to the character they are playing. Above all, a greater range of registers is used and tested acoustically to a greater degree by sounding angry, afraid, crafty and kind. Interaction is tried each time the game is repeated. Among others, the children’s control of their own impulses gets better; they can wait for one another and wait for the end of the game. They also demonstrate greater care for one another and greater patience in letting others try the different roles that the game offers them. The obstacle course is a challenge for physical control, balance and ball sense, and one of the teachers guides the children when needed. One child with certain speech difficulties has problems with motor skills but with the help of the teacher makes a breakthrough at
various stations. The child lights up as she succeeds and takes on the next station with increasing enthusiasm. The teacher holds her hand and suddenly she dares to let go of his hand. The physically disabled child gets through the whole course with the help of the teacher and ‘runs’ back and forth overjoyed in the large room with her walking frame. Here, we clearly go beyond Holgersen’s five levels, and when the child waves to us, we see that she makes little jumps of joy.

During the planned activities, all children are actively participating. Two of the children get help with motor skills. We classify the support provided by the teacher as Holgersen’s second level, supported participation by other children or adults. During the lesson, a great degree of participation is identified at point 3: Imitation and point 4: Identification. The joy of being challenged and experiencing success develops dimensions where collective and individual learning work together. The children demonstrate empathy and self-control. Some of the children clearly go beyond their abilities. At this moment, we reach point 5: Elaboration. The children are experiencing their own musical forms of expression. They are crossing boundaries and are being creative.

Analysis of planned music lessons with 17 children and 1 teacher

The reception of the group of children must in general be seen as good. To a great extent, the children responded to the teacher’s pedagogical planning and leadership. The music lesson was almost completely based on singing to a guitar, and the repertoire offered was accepted with growing enthusiasm. That is, the children sang alternately with joy and with something that can best be classified as ‘learned’ enthusiasm. While the variable, Child–Teacher presupposes mutual interaction, this interaction needed to be limited during the planned music lesson. Many children made interactive attempts; one girl suggested a song from a more modern genre which was rejected with the explanation that ‘we don’t know that’. The girl then offered to teach it, an offer which was not responded to. One boy, half hidden from the teacher, spontaneously started to breakdance. With quite advanced poses, he inspired another child to join in, and in an intense moment, we saw child–child interaction outside the circle’s limits before it was stopped. Elaboration was clearly demonstrated, but the question is how was it encouraged? At a later moment, one child corrected another child who was ‘taking liberties’. On a meta level, Holgersen’s identification levels correspond with the assumption that, in a disciplinary act, the child imitates the teacher’s view of the planned content of the music lesson. This example creates questions about the preschool’s norms which are not limited to this specific moment. When the teacher is not present, children negotiate about norms and position themselves in relation to them. During these games, they recreate what is seen as correct behaviour which mirrors how norms are constructed and maintained in everyday environments. In these games, children negotiate their identities where creative forms of expression (which are not deemed appropriate) can mean that the child is seen as deviant. Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson (2009) argue that the teacher’s way of interacting can strengthen stereotypical patterns which can reduce boundary-crossing, something which in Holgersen’s model is equivalent to the ability to ‘find your own musical form of expression’. The ability to surprise with something which
'goes beyond pedagogical models’ is related to the child’s space to test and challenge norms through music as a tool to explore multimodal multilingualism, which is emphasised by Selander and Kress (2010) and also Liberg (2007).

Discussion

In summary, the analysis of the collected observational data provides examples of how variations in participation and musical interaction can together create learning situations. The analysis demonstrates that learning situations are created when children and adults interact with one another and children’s initiatives are met with interest and ‘empathic participation’. The results also demonstrate that children’s discursive interaction is limited when planned music lessons demand that they sit in a circle with a focus on the teacher’s instructions, while the context also offers opportunities for discursive interaction where the children can learn from one another. When interactive contributions from children do not receive a response, such contributions become less likely. With his theoretical model, Holgersen wants to shed light on the effectiveness of an interactive learning environment in relation to children’s meaning-making, joy, engagement and learning results (2002). Here, we argue that the meaning-making represented in child–child interactions mirrors an alternative type of interaction where children’s knowledge is advanced, adding to the preschool’s learning environment.

With a theoretical framework based on lifeworld phenomenology, the preschool has allowed itself to be studied as an arena where ‘lived knowledge’ becomes the focus. Conditions to do with the background history of the preschool have created a basis for understanding how the preschool as an institution has been canonised and how human interaction in the form of habitual actions, preconceptions and assumptions has become embodied knowledge. Based on the tension between manifest and latent knowledge, this canonisation can be observed from a larger ideological perspective. The relevance of the study’s links between research and preschool teaching practice lies in the significance of frozen ideologies being broken down in embodied everyday practice which can be developed by interactive awareness in both planned and unplanned lessons.

Holgersen’s theory (2002) of children’s attention and participation demands that the musical situation be experienced as meaningful. With a focus on the ‘child perspective’, Holgersen’s learning strategies point to the significance of encouragement and positive reinforcement of children’s contributions and communicative abilities (2002). Interaction in the everyday environment therefore mirrors the focus on meaning in the lifeworld perspective. The interaction which is measured can therefore be seen as a positive measure of meaningfulness and at the same time can be seen as a consequence where the extent of meaningful activities is to some degree limited by a lower level of awareness of their effects on learning. The consequence of this is that interaction does not always reach its full potential and is not valued in practice. The value of interaction must be defined based on its ability to contribute to learning, which brings with it the fact that knowledge and agreement about such a perspective can be made visible as a part of preschool pedagogical planning (Hundeide 2011). That is, musical interaction must be given meaning in terms of generic knowledge and must be linked to theories of how the
meeting in intersubjective space can form the basis of ‘an obedient communicative process’ and ‘guided participation in a world of meaning’ where the teacher confirms the child ‘as a communicative partner’ (2011, 114).

The strategies have been based on a child-first perspective which brings us back to the significance of meaning in the lifeworld perspective. Through putting children’s interaction in the center, the analysis has demonstrated that children’s interactive contributions are sensitive to the response they receive. From a theoretical standpoint, children’s unanswered contributions may not be recorded in the observed situations, but the experience of not being recognised leaves its mark on both the individual and the collective, informing future decisions about how to behave. In this way, the planned music lessons affect the children’s perception of their ability to affect future content, which is directly connected with their development and learning (Selander and Kress 2010). At the same time, the study demonstrates that more interactive teachers stimulate learning to a great extent whether the interaction has taken place in planned or spontaneous lessons. We argue that this is an important result which foregrounds teachers’ actions.

The way in which the morning assembly in the Fish room captures the children’s total attention affects their concentration and is theoretically operationalised through the children’s ability to participate. Concretely, the results point to how concentration and the need to express yourself work together and how the children increase their ability to ‘initiate, develop and transcend’ through switching between problem-solving (in spoken dialogue) and aesthetic forms of expression (Holgersen 2002).

In the observations, where preschool children are expected to develop their learning, the space for experiencing is important. In these situations, interaction has come in a permissive atmosphere whether it comes in planned or unplanned activities (Selander and Kress 2010). To the same degree, children’s interests and abilities are weakened when interaction is reduced between children and teachers. The lack of meaningful interaction, despite promising breakaway attempts, seems to point back to how inherited patterns and deep-rooted traditions are maintained, similar to the results in Wallerstedt, Lagerlöf, and Pramling’s (2014). The lack of opportunities for children’s competence to be acknowledged in teaching may be due to the preschool’s pedagogical canon (Josefsson 2018; Westberg 2017) and more specifically to how music education is expected to be conducted (Ehrin 2012; Still 2011). Pedagogical ‘surprises’ are observed when spontaneous creativity, by analogy with Holgersen’s elaborating phase, frees itself from educational templates and becomes ‘what does not fit in’. This should be interpreted as a powerful opportunity for meaning-creating and as evidence of the power of children to contribute to a balance between controlled and free activities.

In summary, the strong interaction contributions from children which have been observed, must be interpreted as challenging ‘current power structures’ (Selander and Kress 2010). The child who offers to teach the song that the teacher does not know and is brushed aside with a collectively loaded argument, ‘We don’t know that’, can be understood in terms of ‘the challenge of the situation’ and ‘knowledge of different forms of action’. In this way, the study gives good examples of how children can routinely explore the ‘exceptions’ that can be made to the current order and test how creativity can be used to take back pedagogical control in different multimodal forms. The ability of children (in
playful conditions) to interact with key musical practices confirms the capacity that exists in the environment and how it can be promoted through increased awareness (Selander and Kress 2010).

From a design-theoretic perspective of learning, the challenge is related to the balance between ‘stability and change’. The complexity dwells in learning in terms of meaning-making processes pointing to a deeper understanding of how children’s agency can be promoted in teaching where ‘the views, interests and expectations of teachers’ accommodate children’s creative ways of exploring the world and developing skills and abilities.

On a meta-theoretical level, one can see the potential for learning that is linked to children’s ability and native competence. In terms of evolutionary theory, this ability is inherited in our DNA. Musical forms of communication are basically a survival strategy and a natural driving force to develop skills and abilities.

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