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**LEARNING MUSICAL THEORY IN INITIAL TEACHER
EDUCATION FOR THE PRESCHOOL LEVEL**

Loredana Muntean (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a)) University of Oradea, Venue: Universităţii, nr.5, 410087, Oradea, Romania, mt.loredana@gmail.com

Abstract

Over the years, the role assigned to the notions of music theory in the process of musical education has sparked countless controversies and outlined different approaches and visions. The starting point of this paper is the question: *Why do pre-service kindergarten teachers need to know music theory, as long as they do not teach it in kindergarten?* From the literature review and our professional experience, we propose a multiple perspective approach on the topic: that of preschool-teacher, that of a student, that of children, that of the faculty teachers, respectively that of the researcher. The paper is structured on six parts, preceded by Part I, Introduction. In the second part we discuss the place and the role of the musical theory in the initial musical training of the teachers for the preschool cycle. The third part presents the research problem. Fourth part of the paper sets out the objectives of the research. Part Five describes research methods and tools, and in sixth part the research results are synthesized. The paper ends with the conclusions. They do not intend to give an explicit answer to the question asked, but to open up new horizons in approaching the notions of music theory to those who are involved in musical education of pre-schoolers.

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1. Introduction

Nearly a hundred years ago, music education specialists from all over Europe "have openly and publicly displayed their envy for the Romanian school, which was possessing an unanimously praised educational system" (Vasile, 2012, p. 160). Where do we currently find ourselves as an educational system in relation to other systems on the old continent? Responses are innumerable, diverse, and largely depend on age, education, culture, and the concerns of everyone. That is why the sum of the affirmations regarding the subject cannot draw a full and synthetic picture of it.

From the point of view of the music educator, the musical identity is important not only for his/her own musical development, but also for the future work with the children. Musical identity is the result of a personal way to combine vocal identity, musical skills and musical knowledge. As Hargreaves, MacDonald and Miell, (2011) state, "The ways in which we view ourselves, and evaluate our own skills and competencies, form a key part of the development of our identities, and these self-assessments influence our development in general (Bandura, 1986) as well as in musical terms." (p. 8)

In this article, we aim to reflect on a matter that over time, on the one hand has generated musical education systems based on clearly conceived teaching beliefs and, on the other hand, contradictory points of view: the importance of acquiring knowledge of musical theory in the initial preparation of teachers for the preschool cycle.

2. Problem Statement

The treatment of this topic proves to be both current and necessary not only because the music education is in a continuous process of reconfiguration and refreshment, but also because initial teacher education for the primary and preschool cycle involves understanding the mechanisms that ensure the proper functioning of musical education which they are going to do to the children.

What does music theory mean?

Music theory is hard to delimit as a concept. Of course, for musicians, the theory of music is the synthesis of the rules and principles that govern the art of sounds. For music educators, the concept varies according to the recipients of the education act. For most children, music theory is a conglomerate of hard to understand and assimilate information.

Thus, questions about the usefulness of knowledge of basic notions of musical theory by preschool teachers are fully justified.

According to some of the current guidelines, for example, „to continue on the right path of music „training”, children might not necessarily need a professional education in this matter, but rather a correct approach from their peers” (Simion, 2015, p. 485).

At the opposite of this statement, we find that music should be taught to children of all ages exclusively by specialized music teachers, meaning persons with advanced musical skills and solid theoretical knowledge.

However, the perspective on musical education is not limited to the two diametrically opposed views.

From a sociocultural perspective, more important than music theory knowledges can be “how the development of a peripheral participation to a full participation in a musical pre-school community of

practice can be promoted within the framework of preschool teacher education. How can competence, opportunity horizon, and self-image connected to music be promoted and widened?" (Ehrlin & Gustavsson, 2015, p. 34)

In order to find the best answers to these questions, we must have as a starting point the student's self-image in relation to music. In this regard, some studies show that "most of the student teachers belittle their real competence in music. In most of the cases, they have not recognized their existing informal and non-formal knowledge and skills in music" (Hietanen, Ruokonen, Ruismäki, & Enbuska, 2016, p. 258).

Regarding the daily reality of Romanian education, we aim to set some benchmarks that can adjust initial teacher education for the preschool cycle in terms of the relationship between their musical skills and knowledge.

The specificity of pre-school age requires an approach to musical education through singing, playing and movement. Kindergarten children discover intuitively the universe of sounds. They produce and reproduce different noises and sounds both spontaneously and in easy, accessible sound organizations (songs and musical games); children assign meaning to the sounds, always showing an overwhelming curiosity for the new. From the perspective of preschoolers, music is an inexhaustible source of joy. The fact that the art of sounds is governed by a series of rules and principles, at this age is not even an element of curiosity. However, the easy handling of musical language is a necessity for making teaching communication more effective as "instrumental communication, directly involved in supporting a systematic learning process" (Iancu, 2012, p. 28).

3. Research Questions

In order to present the research question as clear as possible, we highlight the idea put forward by some Finnish researchers who consider that: „The usefulness of music education has been explored during recent decades and the results have been different, depending on the point of view of the researcher. The speculation about the genuine essence of music education leads us, in any case, to the deepest levels of being human beings: knowing, feeling, understanding significances and meanings, thinking, learning and teaching, acting and believing. All this takes place in successful music education" (Juvonen, Ruismäki, & Lehtonen, 2012, p. 198).

The qualitative study of the importance of knowing the notions of music theory by teachers for the preschool level therefore aims to find answers to questions such as: How often does an educator use music theory elements in working with children? What are the most commonly used music notions? What elements of musical language are mostly used in didactic communication? If the elements of music theory are not taught as such, should they be known by a preschool teacher.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this study is to set a number of benchmarks that can improve initial music education of teachers for kindergarten, balancing the relationship between musical skills and knowledge.

The secondary objectives of the study are:

- identifying students' opinion on the importance of acquiring the basic notions of music theory for the future profession;

- identifying the elements of music theory to be acquired in initial teacher education for the preschool level in order to optimize their teaching and the future musical education of preschoolers;
- identifying the equilibrium points in the musical training of future teachers for the preschool level.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

Twenty-seven students from the University of Oradea, the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, specializing in Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education and 12 preschool teachers, mentors of pedagogical practice, from three different kindergartens participated in the study. The students are in the second year.

Students are enrolled in the optional music courses - choral ensemble and musical instruments in primary and preschool education. They will study music didactics in the next year of study.

Of the 27 students, 3 work as educators and 2 as teachers, the 5 are pedagogical high school graduates. Two of the students are high school graduates specialized in music, 2 of them are singing in church choirs, and 2 others are dancing in local dance bands. In the case of the six students, the choice for musical disciplines was primarily determined by the pleasure of singing and the desire to get involved in any music-based student activity.

The preschool teachers have all the first level of teaching degree, being graduates of pedagogical high school. During their vocational school, they studied acoustic guitar, suitable for the accompaniment of singing songs.

5.2. Method and evaluation tool

As research methods, we opted for the unstructured interview and spontaneous observation.

The interview is an appropriate research method for the studied topic because free answers can provide a wider perspective of the point of view of those interviewed. Designing a questionnaire by a music specialist would mean asking specific questions in this area, which may represent a limit in research by possible parti-pris or the tendency of respondents to provide the expected response.

The interview was conducted face-to-face, considering that the spontaneous reactions and the relatively short reaction time of the respondents were factors that can provide a wider and clearer picture of the subject being investigated.

Spontaneous observation is a method applied only during the work with the students. This method involves the presence of the researcher in the research environment; therefore, in the study undertaken, it cannot be used to analyze how the knowledge or lack of knowledge of the musical language elements is reflected in the activity of the teachers for preschool cycle.

As an instrument to investigate the perception that the subjects of the study have on the importance of knowing basic notions of music theory, we have developed an interview guide.

The interview guide aimed at exploring the categories of possible solutions for the improvement of the didactic activities carried out with the students from the specialization of the Primary and Preschool Education Pedagogy at the musical disciplines. In this respect, it was formulated as a goal of the study the

identification of indicators for the section on the importance of acquiring the knowledge of music theory in the initial preparation of teachers for the preschool level.

The main theme of the interview was to find solutions to improve initial teacher education for music education.

The general question addressed to all interviewees was: To improve the musical education process in kindergartens, those responsible for initial teacher education want to know your point of view. What suggestions, tips do you want to submit in this regard? This was completed with additional questions like: How do you learn new songs? How do you refresh your repertoire? How do you interpret the children songs? How do you take care of the children's and your vocal hygiene?

6. Findings

The results of the research are presented in a descriptive report summarizing the answers of the study participants.

In student's case, responses have been differentiated according to their musical knowledge and experience. The 2 graduates of the high school of arts and those who are singing in various musical groups believe that all those working with children must know the basic notions of music theory to understand the rhythm, the melody, the ways of interpreting the songs in the repertoire for children. The other respondents believe that the theory is useless for an educator, as long as it is sufficient if they learn the songs by hearing. At the same time, they said that for children, the only important thing is that "the teacher sings beautifully".

Teachers have agreed that there are notions of music theory that they have to know because they teach specific terms in didactic communication, but these notions don't have to be deepened beyond the educational needs of the children they work with.

One of the suggestions made by the respondents was that, in the initial preparation of preschool teachers, they should go through those theoretical notions that are useful in working with little ones, without that their level of understanding and assimilation is strictly assessed. Another opinion expressed in this respect was that each song in the repertoire could be analyzed from a theoretical point of view. This would ensure the repetition of musical language elements until they were appropriated.

Respondents have mostly said that they learn new songs by hearing, from the internet. Teachers for preschool cycle have said that the current technology makes their work easier by offering more songs, and the effort to learn them is considerably reduced. Solfeggio becomes an increasingly rare practice. Teachers have also referred to tuning for singing, saying that the existence of Internet negatives solves this issue, while the instruments previously used in this aim - diapason, guitar, flute, accordion etc. are very rarely used.

As for the way children sing, the students with musical experience believe that they can easily teach children what it means to sing slowly or fastly, loud or low, to take into account the content of the ideas of the songs. The other students state that when they sing in the chorus, they largely understand the conducting gesture and respect it, but they are not familiar with the terms of music interpretation. They are concerned that both explaining how to interpret songs and leading a group of children through a specific gesture are too difficult for them. Educators mention that they have learned the terms of nuances and movement and their conducting gestures were shaped and perfected over time by constantly working with children.

Most respondents referred to the synchronization of child groups as problematic. Students with musical experience and teachers have proposed a solution in this respect to use the metronome for understanding tact.

The spontaneous observations made during the activities with the students show that their greatest problem is not the total or partial lack of musical knowledge, but the attitude towards music theory. Although students want to use the musical terms with ease, until they manage to do so, they think that the elements of musical language are too abstract and difficult to understand. The training of young people in dynamic and complex learning activities, including musical listening and analyzing, can gradually change the way they relate to the musical field and to music theory.

7. Conclusion

Analyzing the answers of those interviewed, we find that they are open to the study of elementary notions of music theory. We note, however, that there is a strong fear among students about the possible assessment of the musical knowledge they manage to assimilate.

We consider that the repeated theoretical analysis of songs in the children's repertoire contributes to the acquisition of musical language elements only if it is alternated with other working methods. Otherwise, there is boredom, exhaustion which leads to a mechanical memorization of the notions of musical theory instead of their conscious understanding.

The Internet is proving an inexhaustible source of children's songs. The continuous refreshment of the repertoire is of course beneficial if the selected songs respect the age particularities of the children and have aesthetic and educational value. In this respect, the teacher needs to know:

- what is the ambitus of children's vocals at a certain age;
- what a logical structure, what form a song must have so that children can learn it easily.

The exemplified theoretical notions can be detached from musical practice by analyzing songs from children's folklore. These songs have the ambitus and the formal structure in full accord with the vocal and assimilation possibilities of the little ones.

Interpretation of songs is the main musical activity in kindergarten. This is the observable result of the teacher's and children's work they are presenting in public, at certain celebrations. Thus, the children's music interpretation must meet the following criteria:

- to be clean and correct from the musical point of view;
- take into account the level of intensity at which children can sing at a certain age without distorting musical sound;
- to respect musical joints and phrasing;
- fit into the musical aesthetics of the song, avoiding the inappropriate accentuation of syllables (for example, final syllables);
- to sing tied, without fragmenting singing through unjustified breaths placed inside of the words etc.

The knowledge of these basic rules of musical interpretation results from the study of the notions of music theory.

Learning tact, how to report time unit, as the main factor of singing synchronization can be done creatively, following the model proposed by percussionist Glennie (2018) as follows: the metronome is selected on an average unit, followed by each beat to be marked with four sixteenths notes. While preserving the structure of the four sixteenths notes, we can change the metronome-marked tempo, thus changing the perspective.

As is normal at preschool age, the child experiences the universe of sounds before knowing the organization's rules and principles. Although music requires permanent play with musical sounds, it cannot be compared to a game or sport with precise rules. It is known that man first sang, and then sought to know the mechanism that would base the song. Theoretical notions thus acquire a descriptive meaning, not a prescriptive one. They contribute to understanding the musical phenomenon, refining the quality of singing and music playing. Apparently, the teacher can discover the universe of sounds in the same time, through the same experiences with the children they work with. But is not in his/ her duty to guide children into exploring the sound universe so they can form musical skills that they can use throughout their lives? Wouldn't he/ she have to have adequate musical knowledge for this purpose?

The question that can be formulated is not if for singing or playing music people need knowledge of musical theory, but when is the right time to get this knowledge so that it can be useful, so that it can improve the quality of music interpretation. In this sense, we believe that education is meant to provide a learning experience rich enough to awaken in children the curiosity about the profound understanding of music.

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