Against the music teacher as a role model.

The importance for music education of ethnography outside of the classroom

Vs 11-5-2022

Prof. dr. Evert Bisschop Boele, Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen/Erasmus University Rotterdam; e.h.bisschop.boele@pl.hanze.nl

Explanatory note
This is the text of a paper I prepared for the 'Tagung Ethnographie und Musikpädagogik' (HMTM Hannover, May 14-15, 2022). Unfortunately I fell ill while finishing the paper and was not able to attend. The paper, in this slightly unfinished state, was however read at the conference by my esteemed colleague prof.dr. Andrea Welte.

1.

I was trained at a Dutch conservatoire to become a music teacher. After that, I was trained at a research university to become an ethnomusicologist. At the time I obtained those degrees, they felt as somewhat related but essentially disconnected. Related, because they both were focusing on music, I guess. Disconnected, because at the time the idea of being a music teacher seemed to be intimately connected to a specific place (the music classroom), a specific audience (my pupils), and a specific relationship between me and them (me teaching, them learning). The idea of being an ethnomusicologist felt as the contrary: as going out of the classroom into the world, as dealing with people rather than with pupils, and, maybe, as me learning and them teaching me.

I am a slow learner. It took me some decades of teaching, researching, thinking, talking and writing to eventually discover that both might be related in a much more intimate way.

2.

Let me start with a first reflection. I have a long history with words starting with 'ethno'. I studied ethnomusicology, which is, basically, the cultural anthropology of music. Later on, I bumped into ethnomethodology, a now rather obscure strand in the social sciences. And my preferred research design, over the years, became ethnography.

Ethnomusicology. Ethnomethodology. Ethnography. What binds them together is the prefix 'ethno'. Of course, the root form of 'ethno' would be the Greek 'ethnos', which, I am told by the Internet, was used by Aristotle to design a group of people bound together by common customs, religion and politics[1]. 'Ethnos' found its way into 'ethnicity', of which Encyclopedia Britannica claims that it "refers to the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a 'people' (…), a comprehensively unique cultural entity."[2]

Of old, ethnography as well as ethnomusicology have been understood in that same sense: the attempt to shed light on the life – the culture, if you want – of a specific group of people – an ethnos. Ethnography does not only refer to a research design, but also to its products. Ethnographers produced ethnographies, about the culture of 'the Trobriand Islanders', 'the Balinese', or even 'the Frisians'. And such an ethnography was produced through long-term participant observation in the everyday life of 'the natives', combined with interviewing those same

---

[1] https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnos, 3-5-2022
[2] https://www.britannica.com/science/anthropology/The-anthropological-study-of-education#ref839804, 3-5-2022.

natives as well as studying the documents and artefacts these natives used while carrying out their everyday life.

But ethnography has changed since the cultural turn in the 1970s, in which the concept of culture was redefined. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary reflects this nicely. It gives two different definitions of the word culture which align with precisely this shift. Britannica starts with an essentially pre-1970s definition: culture refers to "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group". It then shifts to a post-1970s definition: "the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time"[3]. The shift from 'group' to 'people' is essential. When studying culture, rather than focusing on people as part of a group, we now tend to focus on people sharing an everyday existence at a certain place and time - regardless whether they feel they are a group, or not.

It is precisely this what ethnomethodology tried to do from its beginning in the 1960s already. Ethnomethodology "studies the `common-sense' resources, procedures, and practices through which members of a society interpret their everyday life, and how these social interactions, when mutually recognized within particular contexts, creates orderliness".[4] And it is this direction ethnomusicology has taken, if only partly, in acknowledging the idea that music is human behaviour (rather than a thing, with a history), and that we have to look at concrete musical behaviour if we want to understand anything about music at all.

It is the difference, in the terms of Andreas Reckwitz, between using a totality-oriented or a meaning-oriented concept of culture. And in this meaning-oriented concept of culture lies for me the essential goal of ethnography as a research design. In ethnography, we try to uncover the perspective from which individuals other than ourselves – and in the case of auto-ethnography, maybe we ourselves – lead their everyday lives and constitute their worlds in processes of meaning giving. The methods used (observation, interviewing, studying documents and artefacts) are means to that end; and an inevitable post-1970s element which I will dwell upon slightly later in this presentation is reflexivity.

3.

So far ethnography. I now turn to music education for a short while. But first some words about education in general. I don't know exactly about the situation in Germany, but if I listen to many educational debates in the Netherlands it sometimes seems to me that we are still waiting in education for something comparable to the 1970s cultural turn in the social sciences and humanities. Mainstream educational debates, intensified in this (post-)Corona era, focus on efficiency and efficacy, on measuring outcomes and results, on rankings of national education systems through PISA scores, on rankings of schools, on comparing and ranking groups of pupils (the low SES; the overweight; the culturally diverse), and on what we now in the Netherlands call 'proven efficient interventions'. And if I listen carefully I can only notice that, in spite of the evident fact that all involved wish the best education for each and every pupil, the individual pupil largely remains out of sight.

Of course, I exaggerate. Also in the Netherlands, there has always been a strong counter current present of truly pedagogical thinking that took the individual pupil seriously as a person, a human being. This counter current is growing in force, I believe, and influential thinkers such as Meirieu, Biesta or Masschelein, trying to restore the centrality of the individual child in education, are taken

---

[3] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture, 3-5-2022.
[4] https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-is-ethnomethodology.html, 3-5-2022.

up avidly in education as well as educational research. It is still a counter current against a dominant other way of thinking, but one sees that it even sometimes has an effect on that dominant way of thinking (but very slowly).

When it comes to music education, I see a comparable picture. To my mind, in the Netherlands music education has secured itself a certain place in education – however feeble it still is – by conforming to the norms of the dominant educational system. It has become a final examination subject in secondary schools in the 1970s, including a syllabus of knowledge and skills any pupil should master. In primary schools, music education is currently re-securing its place through a huge lobby paid for by the Dutch Ministry of Education and cleverly backed up by the three most important powers in current Dutch society: Joop van den Ende's amusement industry, neurobiology, and our own Royal House. They are stressing how music (whatever that may be – the lobby is not very interested in defining its terms) contributes to social-emotional development, is good for the brain, fosters the executive functions 'in' pupils, makes pupils more social, and also is fun – which in sum makes it at the same time 'the real thing' as well as relaxation of 'the real thing', and therefore the ideal solution for everything.

Of course, I exaggerate, again. But for the close spectator, it sometimes seems that the care for the individual pupil seems to have left the building during all our talk about executive functions, social-emotional development, continuous learning lines, and efficient ways to teach everyone the basic skill of sight-reading. But again: of course here also exists a counter current with strong historic roots and wide connections within the music education community. The question of this counter current may be phrased as follows: what if the goal of music education is not the efficient development of prescribed musical skills, knowledge and attitudes, but is to contribute to the development of the child into an adult for whom music plays a meaningful role in in his or her life?

I have been working on the development of some thoughts on this kind of music education in the past few years. I will not attempt to summarize that here, but would like to point out two main points. One is that in this thinking pupils are not looked at as anonymous or as belonging to a group, but as individuals – socialized individuals, that is, with a specific context, a history, a biography, and endless possibilities to develop, from which they hopefully will choose what is most meaningful to them. The other one is that in this kind of thinking, not only the pupil is an individual with a context and a biography – an idioculture, as I would say. For the music teacher, the same argument can be given. He or she is also such an idioculture, with a specific context, his or her own history and biography, and innumerable options for further development of which only a few can be taken on and the rest will remain unlived lives.

4.

On this basis, I would like to point out two major contributions post-1970s ethnographic thinking might deliver to research in music education. The first one is obvious: if music teaching is about giving each individual pupil possibilities to develop, and if this development builds upon the histories, biographies and contexts of individual pupils, we need to know much more about those histories, biographies and contexts. We need to do much more ethnographic research into the meaning of music in children's (and adults') lives.

And this research needs to be truly post-1970s. We do not need research about 'youth music culture' or 'asylum seekers' music culture' or 'the music culture of Turkish kids'. We need research about the musical idiocultures of one or more specific individuals, trying to map out their histories and biographies, the various contexts they find themselves in, the meaning music has for them in

these contexts. There is no quick win in this kind of research, which is local, small-scale, long-term, painstaking, expensive. But if we, as a community of researchers, could all invest in also this kind of research, together we could come up with an increasingly detailed picture of the varied ways in which music is meaningful in people's, and already in children's, lives – which would be an excellent starting point for teaching music, and for the training of our future music teachers.

The second contribution ethnographic thinking may make to music education has to do with the positionality of the researcher and the music teacher. In pre-cultural turn ethnography, the ethnographer him- or herself remained mostly out of sight. The ethnographic researcher acted as an objective, unbiased outsider to the culture he or she studied. His or her role was to deliver the description and interpretation of the culture under study, in the name of science. The cultural turn radically rejected this idea, and replaced it by stating that the ethnographic researcher is not outside, but always part of the world he or she studies; that the researcher performs interpretive work leading not to a true account but at best to a plausible story. Methodologically, the requirement of researcher reflexivity was added to the existing list of ethnographic methods. Nowadays, analysing observations, interviews, and documents and artifacts has to be based on an outspoken reflexivity towards the own positionality and situatedness of the researcher in the world he or she researches.

When I transport this idea back to music education, I see a comparable picture. In music education, we think of the learners (mostly in terms of abstract groups, sometimes also as concrete individuals) all the time. But quite often, the teachers remain out of sight. That is to say: the teachers as persons, as individuals. They are outside learning – they teach, they facilitate, they lead, they are efficient and effective, and most of all: they are neutral to the point of invisibility. It seems to me we try to neutralize the individualities of the teachers by giving them a training that focuses on generalities. There is one music teacher 'persona', one ideal average music teacher, with all-round knowledge and skills, having acquired a generalized set of competencies which assures that music teaching becomes comparable across time and place. This persona knows how to cater for each and every individual pupil in the right way, assuring that each pupil develops in the way we think they should or hope they would. This persona often functions as an implicit role model in education: the aim is to develop the child in the direction of this persona.

Again, I exaggerate. But what if we transport the idea of positionality, of situatedness, of idio-culturality, back into our thinking about music teachers? What if we acknowledge that the music teacher can not be all-round but must by necessity be a human being? What if we acknowledge that each music teacher can only be a truly inspirational role model for a few of his or her pupils? What if we then would start looking at music education not as the responsibility of a single music teacher but as a system of actors surrounding each individual child in a specific way, and where the job of the music teacher is not only to teach music to pupils, but also to show pupils from which other individuals and in which other contexts something meaningful musical could be learned? Meaningful for some of the pupils in ways that the music teacher may not even be truly aware or sympathetic of?

5.

I know, this is hardly new; and we already do it. Some of us. Or do we? What I have tried to offer in this talk is some thoughts about how ethnography after the cultural turn, in two ways, can sharpen our thinking about music education. The first is that ethnography reminds us that our pupils are, each in their own way, constructing their world through very idiosyncratic – or rather idiocultural – processes of meaning-giving; and that ethnographic research into children's musical life that truly

tries to uncover their perspective on their world can help the music teacher enormously in his job. The second is that ethnography reminds us that not only the subjects of our endeavours, but also we ourselves, as researchers and as educators, are situated. Our position in this world leads to a specific perspective which may be for some people meaningful and for other people even totally incomprehensible.

Am I suggesting that a good music educator should be an ethnographer? Far from it. But I do suggest that a true and unconditional interest in the 'other' combined with a thorough knowledge of the 'self' forms an excellent basis of what makes a valuable music teacher. I plea for a core competency of developing what I call dialogical relationships in music education. I am aware that this is mostly at odds with dominant societal discourse about what counts as true musicality, and what not. I am, however, confirmed that to help pupils find their own meaningful place in this beautiful and at the same time confusing hyper-diverse world is the true contribution of the music teacher to this world. And that, indeed, a bit of the ethnographer in the music teacher might help to foster this.