Possibilities Of Using Active Learning Methods In Secondary Schools' Music Lessons

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to give an overview of active learning methods which could be implemented in the process of teaching music in order to make it more active and promote students’ interest towards music as a subject at secondary school level. The study concentrates on how Estonian secondary school music teachers use active learning methods in their lesson activities when teaching ca 13-16 year old students.

The following research questions were posed: what kind of active learning methods teachers mainly use in different learning activities when giving music lessons in secondary schools and which active learning methods students consider most interesting and like the most? In order to gather data, interviews with seven secondary school teachers from one Estonian city were conducted. In addition to that, 163 students were also asked to fill out a questionnaire.

The results of the study indicate that among active learning strategies teamwork is mostly used in music lessons; on the contrary, interviews, role plays, discussion and outdoor learning activities are used the least. Overall, singing is the most frequent learning activity and musical movement and field trips are used the least often.

Based on the results of the study it can be claimed that although teachers believe that they use active learning methods often the students think that it is done rather infrequently. It can also be claimed that teachers do not support their students to apply active learning methods in several areas of curriculum, and seem to need further instruction in how to facilitate students’ active learning. Teachers could be more knowledgeable on how to use active learning methods during various activities to wholly support the development of students.

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1. Introduction

Active learning methods are an integral part of modern education, including music education (see for example Brown, 2008; Kährik, Leijen & Kivestu, 2012; Scott, 2010; 2011). Use of active learning methods helps to develop a person who is active, energetic, able to collaborate and think creatively while being empathetic, respectful towards others and willing to collaborate in both small and large groups (Kuurme & Siim, 1991).

It is possible to increase students’ interest in the subject even in an ordinary lesson if the subject is presented in a way that makes students actively think about it. This means mainly the teacher's understanding of setting the expected study goals and stopping to only check the facts when questioning students. Asking questions that are not too difficult but require understanding encourages students to discuss and argue, to make assumptions about the connection between causes and effects and to exhibit inventiveness and creativity (Krull, 2000). Earlier research has shown that using active learning methods increases positive attitudes and students’ interest in the subject, motivates active participation in learning activities, increases intrinsic motivation, makes students more active and creative, develops collaboration and social skills, develops self-management skills and critical thinking abilities and creates an active, engaging, exploring-discovering learning environment (e.g. Kährik, Leijen & Kivestu, 2012; Renter-Reintamm, 2006; 2009; Scott, 2010; 2011).

Recent studies have indicated that in modern music education a new approach to didactic-methodological questions is needed and one of the important developments is active learning and other practical supporting areas (Kivestu & Leijen, 2013; Kivestu, Leijen & Steinbach, 2014; Liimets ja Raudva, 2006; Selke, 2007; Renter-Reintamm, 2009). Since in active learning the acquisition of knowledge is achieved through activities the music teachers in their work should keep in mind that changes should mainly be made in learning activities.

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1.1. About the current situation of music education in Estonian secondary schools

According to the current music syllabus of the national curriculum for basic schools music education has a balancing and supporting role in the student's emotional development and in acquiring other subjects. Through music a harmonious personality is developed by touching the body, emotions and intellect. By making music the student's personality is developed, skills and knowledge to make music alone and with others and to express oneself creatively are acquired. By studying in a group and individually communication and collaboration skills, ability to listen to one another, solidarity, tolerance, flexibility and emotional competence are developed and the student's self-esteem and learning motivation are guided (Põhikooli...2011).

However, studies conducted in recent years indicate that students feel that there is not enough active music making in music lessons (Liimets & Raudva, 2006). Liimets (2009) notes that a considerable number of students believe that the main goal of music education is to learn music history. Students participating in the study claimed that the in music classes it is mainly the teacher who speaks and many topics are presented in a too complicated and detailed manner. What students actually expect from music lessons is the opportunity to actively make music - to sing, listen to music, improvise and learn to play instruments. One previous study about music teaching in Estonian schools (Mõistlik, 2008) has mentioned that students
consider the repertoire of songs used in music lessons problematic, either too childish or, in the contrary, too complicated.

Studies conducted in Estonia show that many students consider music education less important than other subjects (Mõistlik, 2008; Heinla, 2008) and are of the opinion that in the future they will not need what they learn in music lessons.

The changing of the surrounding world, including the world of music, necessitates change in music education and teaching and requires that new knowledge and new conditions are taken into account. One of the main problems of modern music education is that music education in general has shown an inability to answer the challenges presented to it by fundamental changes in music and culture as well as pedagogy and education. Therefore music education must find a new foundation for itself and it has to have much common ground with the musical environment of the students. The task of the music teacher is first and foremost to offer young people the choices that exist in the world of music while supporting them in their personal choices (Ots, 2007; Juvonen, 2003; Heinla, 2008). This means that in music studies in addition to the results more attention should be paid to the learning process itself in order to increase students' opportunities to make and enjoy music.

### 1.2. Some possibilities of using active learning methods in the learning process

The man considered to be the creator of active learning, American education philosopher and teacher John Dewey has said that what we discover ourselves will remain and mean more to us (Dewey, 1933). According to Dewey an individual is an active participant in learning and learning should be directed and managed by the individual. Dewey also emphasized that social role is very important in learning. Gurian & Ballew (2003) have stated that by using active learning methods the students acquire knowledge through experience and therefore the knowledge is absorbed better.

The manner in which knowledge is presented is extremely important for facilitating its acquisition. Using active learning methods enables to present the subject matter in a way that is more interesting and more easily absorbed by the learner (Aher & Kala, 1996). In addition to acquiring new knowledge the use of active learning methods helps to increase students' interest in the subject as a whole. Previous research indicates that using active learning methods in music education is effective and enables to improve students' attitudes toward music and the learning activities related to it. (Kährik, Leijen & Kivestu, 2012).

Based on the above it can be stated that knowing and implementing active learning methods is a very important part of teachers' and also music teachers' work. Below, active learning methods that, when knowledgeably used by music teachers, enable the students to be active learners and to increase their interest in the subject of music education will be introduced.
In order to participate in the learning process more effectively students need communication. By learning together students have a chance to learn to listen to one another, to collaborate and also to experience individual responsibility, positive dependence on one another and discussing the activities among themselves (Gurian & Ballew, 2004). There are several different ways for learning together such as working in pairs, in groups, learning circles etc. These methods enable the teacher to engage all students in work through instructions directed to a group, to use students in helping and guiding others, to observe and analyze the students' collaboration skills in their mutual interaction (Salumaa & Talvik, 2003). One of the means of collaboration is role play. This method develops students' presentation skills, enables to practice desired behavior, to try new behavior and new approaches, to put oneself in the place of the other party of the problem in order to understand the other's motives and role (Paavel, 2005; Gurian & Ballew, 2004; Aher & Kala, 1996).

Other effective methods for activating students include multifunctional methods such as games, field trips, outdoor learning and project learning. These methods enable the teacher to expedite the achieving of learning objectives through students' experiential learning and to associate the subject matter with everyday life (Salumaa & Talvik, 2004). Field trip has also been mentioned in the national curriculum for basic schools as one of the required learning activities (Põhikooli...2011).

In case of larger study groups methods like engaging lecture, conversation and discussion are well suited for activating students. In case of these methods the teacher actively guides the work including the entire class and the students' activity is mainly expressed by asking and answering questions (Salumaa & Talvik, 2004). Brainstorming is another suitable method to activate students' thinking - it is a method of discussion where students are encouraged to find as many solutions to the problem presented to them as possible. Brainstorming can be used in any age group and this method is frequently used to generate new ideas or to develop students' creativity. Arguments between members of a discussion group increase their sensitivity towards the problems being discussed and, as a result, interest in the topic increases (Fisher, 2005; Krull, 2000; Aher & Kala, 1996).

In conclusion, it can be said that knowing and using active learning methods could help the music teacher to structure the lessons in a more diverse way and to increase students' interest in the subject of music.

2. Research questions

The aim of the present study is to give an overview of how active learning methods are used by secondary school music teachers in one Estonian city and to bring out methods that would enable to carry
out secondary school music lessons in a more diverse way and to increase the students’ interest in the subject of music. To achieve this aim the following research questions were posed:

1) What kind of active learning methods music teachers mainly use in different learning activities while giving secondary school music lessons?
2) Which active learning methods do secondary school students find most interesting and like the most?

3. Research Methods

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted among the music teachers and students of secondary schools in one Estonian city.

There are 10 secondary school music teachers working in the city and 7 of those participated in the study. Two teachers decided not to participate since they considered the topic too difficult for themselves, one of the teachers not participating is a primary author of the present study. 6 of the teachers participating in the study had had previous instruction on active learning methods.

Data was also gathered from VII – IX grade students of the same secondary schools, aged 13-16. The total number of students belonging to the grades included in the study is 174, 165 of them participated in the study, including 72 respondents from VII grade, 40 from VIII grade and 53 from IX grade.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Data was collected with structured interviews with 7 secondary school music teachers. The interview consisted of 15 questions aiming to discover which active learning methods teachers use during secondary school music lessons and which methods they mainly use in connection with which learning activities. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Data was analyzed by the lead researcher using a thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) method. First, open coding was applied to identify themes and subthemes occurring in the data. Second, the identified themes and subthemes were organized under wider categories. Third, all data was analyzed based on the developed wider categories. Results are presented following the identified themes and subthemes.

In addition, a questionnaire was used to gather data from secondary school students. The questionnaire consisted of 9 questions, including both open-ended and multiple choice questions. The students were asked how much they are interested in the subject of music education, they were also asked to describe
their usual music lesson. They were asked which learning activities they have encountered in music lessons and to name which learning activities they like the most and to explain why. They were also asked which active learning methods they have used in music lessons and to explain which of these they like most and consider most interesting. The data collected with the questionnaire was subjected to qualitative content analysis in the course of which the content and contextual meaning of the text was studied. During the analysis parts of text with similar meaning were categorized, topics relevant to the study were identified and the results were compared to what was presented in the theoretical part of the paper (Ryan & Bernard 2003).

4. Findings

4.1 Learning methods most frequently used by teachers

All teachers who participated in the study assess their use of active learning methods frequent. Teachers believe that students like the use of active learning methods, that it increases interest in the subject matter, allows to approach the subject more creatively, to better acquire and consolidate knowledge, for students to discover something new about themselves, to engage the whole class in collaboration and for students to be part of the process.

Music teachers consider singing most important in teaching music as a subject. Next in importance is giving theoretical knowledge, and only after that the respondents listed creating and maintaining interest in music, encouraging students to engage in singing and playing an instrument on their own and developing students’ musical taste and broadening their minds. At the same time respondents claimed that they consider it important to teach students to analyze music, to form and explain their own opinions and to guide students to think for themselves and find answers on their own.

All respondents use group work as the most frequent learning method while giving lessons and do it in connection with a great number of learning activities and topics (music history, composition, style, knowledge of instruments, singing, instrument playing, music literacy). Other active learning methods used included engaging lecture, research (e.g. writing summaries), field trip and dramatization. Compiling cross-words, composition and improvisation were mentioned less frequently. On rare occasions respondents mentioned musical movement, writing haikus, compiling posters, making concept diagrams, writing a programme for a piece of music, writing a text with gaps, drawing and field trips. When introducing new material PowerPoint presentations with video examples are mainly used as a tool, methods used to learn new songs include singing from the sheet music and learning to play accompaniment with bar instruments.
Teachers claim they most frequently use active learning methods in music composition and least frequently in teaching music theory and in instrument study (lack of instruments was mentioned as the main problem).

In the cases when teachers decide not to use active learning methods in lessons they consider the following to be the hindering factors: using active learning methods takes more time; there is not always time to prepare sufficiently; there are not enough music lessons; lack of in-depth knowledge about using active learning methods; the topic of the lesson does not support the use of active learning methods (e.g. a test). Limited space and lack of instruments were also mentioned.

To sum up, the teachers claimed that all music education learning activities are more or less connected to active learning. Several respondents mentioned that using active learning methods mainly depends on the teacher's willingness to make an effort since it requires much work and makes the teacher's job more difficult. Yet the effort is rewarded by students' joy in learning through activity.

4.2 Students' opinions and assessments of the use of active learning methods in secondary school music lessons

Majority of the students claimed that they are somewhat interested in music lessons. 18 boys think that music as a subject is of no interest to them. Most of the students that participated in the study mentioned that whether or not the lesson is interesting depends on the topic of the particular lesson. The positive aspects listed included the opportunity to learn about the music, and culture in general, of different countries, to listen to different music, to play instruments, to sing. Girls also mentioned that music lessons allow them to compose music and do group work.

Main reasons for why there is relatively little interest in music lessons included boring lessons, music chosen by teachers, including not liking the songs since they are not suitable for young people. Students also claimed that music theory is too difficult, they have to write too much in lessons and there are too many tests. There were also opinions that what is taught in music lessons will not be needed in later life. Students who learn music at a hobby school find that music lessons at the general education school are boring for them and they are not learning anything new there.

The students think that the most frequently used learning activity in music lessons is singing and the the least familiar are musical movement and field trips. Singing is also the learning activity that students like the most, followed by listening to music and playing an instrument.

Among the active learning methods that students claim teachers use in music lessons group work and work in pairs are most familiar to students. Students named outdoor learning and role play as the least familiar learning activities. Students were mainly of the opinion that their teachers use active learning
methods rarely when giving lessons (86 respondents claimed that their music teachers use active learning methods rarely, 65 said that they do it sometimes and only 13 replied that they do it frequently).

Students were asked to choose from a list the methods they like best and to explain their choice. Respondents overwhelmingly chose group work as the method they like best. The reasons included ability to communicate with others, to collaborate, to learn what other students know, the fact that it is interesting and amusing. Respondents also found that group work produces more diverse results. However, this choice may have been influenced by the fact that group work is the active learning method most familiar to the students and they have not experienced many other options.

Majority of the students also like to work in pairs since it allows them to discuss the topic with someone, to do the tasks together, to help each other if needed and, in addition, to get to know their classmates.

As an alternative to sitting in a classroom many of the students would also like to take part in outdoor learning and field trips. The respondents mentioned that when using these methods learning is more interesting, more free, one does not have to sit in one place and can get much more information. However, students find that field trips are very rare and there is almost no outdoor learning.

Students also mentioned discussion and engaging lecture as methods that they like because it allows them to discuss topics that they usually cannot discuss, to offer new ideas, to listen to the opinions of others and to ask questions.

5. Conclusions

Comparing the teachers' and students' replies it can be concluded that although teachers believe they use active learning methods very frequently the students feel that it is done sometimes or even rarely.

In agreement with previous studies, the present study also shows that the students' interest in music education as a subject is not particularly great, music lessons are not always considered interesting or the subject itself very important. Considering this, a greater effort by teachers in using different suitable active learning methods in different learning activities would be well justified. This is especially true for learning activities that are less interesting for students, such as acquiring music literacy.

In order for the school music education to have more common ground with the students' actual everyday musical environment the students' tastes in music could be taken into account more when compiling the repertoire of songs to be used in lessons.

Students find that using active learning methods makes learning more interesting and diverse. They desire an opportunity to communicate with each other, to express their thoughts, to learn outside the classroom and actively make music. Music teachers who mentioned in their interviews that music
education plays an important role in broadening the students’ horizons and developing their musical tastes could find significantly more opportunities to take the learning outside the classroom (for example by organizing outings to concerts or other field trips). Teachers could also find ways to use more different methods to activate students such as role play, outdoor learning, interviews, etc. Since teachers considered it important to develop students’ analyzing skills and to guide them to think for themselves and find answers independently, to develop and explain their own opinions, teachers should use the active learning methods of discussion, debate and conversation significantly more often.

The results of the study show that teachers do not support their students to apply active learning methods in several areas of curriculum, and seem to need further instruction in how to facilitate students’ active learning. Teachers could be more knowledgeable on how to use active learning methods during various activities to wholly support the development of students.

References
