

III.2 What can we Expect from International Comparison in the Field of Music Education? Opportunities and Challenges

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Analysing the conversations at the conference the chapter addresses fundamental issues of cultural comparison in music education. There is a disciplinary bias that can tempt the researcher to overestimate cultural conditions. This could lead to cultural relativism that keeps us from critically addressing normative issues associated with aims and contents of music education.

1. Introduction

This chapter discusses issues of comparative music education referring to the symposium "International Comparison of Music Lessons on Video" held in Leipzig, September 2014. It will not address all possible challenges for such research but those that arose in the context of the working conference. Thus, I don't want to give too much thought to the very general question "What is comparative music education?" and instead ask "What were we doing when we compared videos of music lessons from different countries and what difficulties emerged?" and, from there: "What can we expect from comparing music education?"¹ Another limitation is that the following considerations will not include issues of historical comparison because that would be a topic for another publication. But since the chapter is about international aspects of music teaching it must address challenges of cultural comparison.

The Leipzig-Symposium was characterised by the dialogue between representatives of each country involved. It was not primarily about presenting research results but a work meeting, and the participants not only compared

1 This approach tries to avoid the problem of defining that could result if we ask "Is comparative music education defined by method, by content or by specific interests?" (the short answer is: by all of this). Maria Manzon showed that comparative education is not only an intellectually but also an institutionally constructed field so that we have to be aware of sociological factors (Manzon 2011).

music lessons from different parts of the world, mainly from Europe, but they also discussed different ways of thinking and talking about music education. In the debates² they referred to the video recordings which not only were the data to be analysed but also a stimulus to joint reflection. This was particularly relevant for joint conceptualization when faced with problems of translation. The exchange of views aimed at shared categories of comparison. The researchers from different countries searched for *tertia comparationis* as a first step towards comparing music lessons (see Chapter III.1 *Talking about Music Lessons*).

The definition of categories of comparison is an important step to be taken together. Gabriele Cappai (2010, 23), like many other authors, warns against a methodologically naïve comparative approach that lacks critical reflection of the *tertium comparationis*. She asks, who are in the position to define the categories of comparison?. Indeed, what I take notice of, as a researcher, depends on my personal background and my research interest. It may be that what interests me is not regarded as relevant within other music and teaching cultures. Thus, there is a danger that I miss what is crucial from the emic perspective of the locals and, instead, examine what is rather insignificant from a local culture point of view. This would be disastrous for any attempt to understand a foreign culture. But the problem might be even more challenging for a cultural research approach that tries to compare different meaning systems. Certainly, there are topics that are probably relevant to all school systems and to any teaching/learning culture. Joseph Tobin's famous study of pre-school in three cultures (Tobin/Wu/Davidson 1989, Tobin/Hsueh/Karasawa 2009) identified several shared issues like classroom routines and misbehaviour. However, this was not the starting point but the result of the study. In many cases, a common interest determines the research focus from the very beginning. Burnard et al. (2008) compare music teachers' perspectives on inclusive pedagogies in four countries already knowing that the education systems in (not only) these countries are faced with the challenges of reaching students who, for a variety of reasons, are at risk of exclusion. When the research, as in the present case, is about comparing music lessons on video without any predetermined issues it is more than advisable

2 See Christopher Wallbaum's introduction to this book for a description of the conference structure. See also the categorisation of the related tasks and activities in terms of the comparative-music-education-cube in Chapter I.1 *On Comparing. Mapping the Field of Comparative Research in Music Education* (60).

to take the background information and the interpretations of at least some people from the cultures concerned into account. But how to specify ‘the cultures concerned’ when we examine a music lesson from a large city in southern Sweden comparing it with a music lesson from Catalunya which is part of Spain? The question remains who should be asked. The ‘Leipzig approach’ was to involve the music teachers treating them as equal research partners and to gain a complementary perspective through inviting academics from the respective country.

In advance of the Leipzig-Symposium the participants were requested to record ‘good music lessons’ because the aim was to compare different views on music education. As Gita Steiner-Khamsi writes (assessing Tobin’s second ethnography that comprised “best practice” from reference schools): “the question of what practitioners consider a good school is very important in order to understand pedagogical belief systems” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, 35). However, the aim of the Leipzig-Symposium was not only to understand each other but to start a discussion also addressing normative issues that are associated with aims, contents, and methods of music education. It should be emphasized that this was not a matter of judging each music lesson but implied arguing about evaluation criteria. For such a dialogical approach, it seemed important to involve the music teachers who provided the ‘good’ lessons that were recorded, as well as the researchers and subject didacticians from each country.

What can we expect from such an approach? In answering this question distinctions must be drawn between different research interests and aspirations.

2. Research Interests and Expectations

Robin Alexander considers pedagogy to be “a window on the culture of which it is a part” and adds

that the comparative perspective is an important and necessary part of the quest to understand and improve the science, art or craft of teaching, and to enable us to distinguish those aspects of teaching which are generic and cross international boundaries from those which are culture specific. (Alexander 1999, 149)

Educational research often is about both understanding and improving learning processes and teaching practices. However, although the desire to im-

prove educational activities certainly is a perfect reason to carry out comparative research and although such research, in all cases, is about understanding, it appears reasonable to distinguish between those who are more interested in *basic research* and those who stand for *application-oriented research*. One could say that the former are researching with the main intent to understand the subject of their research, without immediately thinking about the possibilities of transferring the results to other teaching contexts, while the latter want to seek new knowledge in order to use or to provide this knowledge, explicitly with the aim of improving educational practices.

A further distinction should be made. Some search for cross-cultural characteristics of music pedagogy by comparing different educational cultures; for example they try to discover generic aspects of learning music related to human sensory perception independent of music tradition.³ They are interested in general principles of music education that are expected to be found by cross-cultural comparison. Others prefer case studies concentrating on one single region or country in order to learn something about pedagogical activities as part of a music tradition connected with the social and political structure of the culture researched. They might favour ethnographic fieldwork using thick description (after Geertz 1973), often without any interest in translating the results into application. Although the latter approach is not based on comparing different cultures of teaching and learning, it can be considered as comparative in a broad sense because we can only attempt to understand cultural practices that are foreign to us against the background of what we already are familiar with. That's why it is common to include ethnographic case studies that focus on one music educational culture without comparing in the strict sense of the word (see Sæther 2003, and Clausen 2009) under the umbrella of comparative music education.⁴ Sometimes, for example in edited books, several case studies from different places around the world are just compiled leaving the comparison up to the reader (see Green 2011).

Application-oriented comparative research in the field of education has frequently been accused of naïvely dislocating teaching methods without any contextual sensitivity. Indeed, the wish for transferring and implementing the

3 There is much research on universals and cultural constraints in music perception and cognition (see for example Stevens & Byron, 2009; Fritz et al., 2009; Stevenson & Demorest, 2009).

4 See also Clausen (2013) who defends this view. For further considerations see Chapter I.1 *On Comparing ...*

results of comparative research into practice can questionably lead to what has been called borrowing and means importation and copying (see Phillips/Ochs 2004). Since social contexts cannot be transferred it is important to take the differing philosophies of education into account if we want to learn about and from other educational cultures. With regard to music education Alexandra Kertz-Welzel critically discusses the concept of borrowing and conclusively pleads for using “philosophy of music education as a point of reference in order to overcome the lack of critical reflection in comparative music education and to professionalize it as a field of research” (Kertz-Welzel 2015, 64).

Comparative large scale assessments like PISA and TIMSS are characterised by a special interest in application usually not associated with a naïve notion of borrowing but, more strategically, with the international standards of a globalized economy. They are intended to develop educational systems, whereby learning outcomes represent the decisive quality criterion. Some doubts have been raised whether comparative research of this kind is able to improve educational activities or rather destroy regional traditions of teaching and learning since it is not really interested in factors that differ in terms of culture but instead serve as a means for politicians to justify and make changes in the educational system.⁵

Maria Manzon warns against the danger of instrumentalization, reminding us that comparative education was developed on political grounds driven by national (economic) interests.

Academic comparative education is thus highly sensitive to international and national societal discourses on education, which are then filtered through academic-institutional politics and market forces, and comparatists’ cognitive and micro-political interests in the field. (Manzon 2011, 225)

On the other hand, critical thinking is a good reason to conduct comparative educational research. To think ‘outside the box’ is a research interest that does not completely fit into the distinction between ‘understanding’ and ‘application’. Comparing can open up new perspectives for thinking and acting. It can be an act of (self-)enlightenment. What appeared to be inconceivable turns out to be reality. What seemed to be ‘natural’ turns out to be custom. We become aware of the uncertainty about what we have taken for granted. That does not mean to dismiss an educational practice or way of thinking as

⁵ See Steiner-Khamsi 2009.

wrong or out-of-date but to understand it as contingent, as historically developed and culturally shaped and might give us the possibility to reconsider it.

Critical comparative research includes reflecting the normative dimension of education. Frede Nielsen recommended to do philosophy of music education in a comparative and dialogical way. What he calls didactology includes the reflection of normative issues from an international and comparative perspective (Nielsen 2005). Similarly the dialogical approach of the Leipzig-Symposium sought to respond to the challenges of cultural research through jointly reflecting different cultures of music education in order to identify shared issues and categories of comparison.

3. Remaining Challenges

According to Gabriele Cappai (2010, and see also 2005) there are at least three unresolved challenges of cultural research:

1. Cultural research, whether in anthropology or comparative education, is often characterized by a *disciplinary bias* that can tempt the researcher to overestimate cultural conditions and to neglect economical, institutional and social factors as well as psychological aspects like the influence of individual personality traits. Cappai suggests interdisciplinary thinking⁶ as an antidote to what might lead, in the worst cases, to a kind of cultural determinism and thus to cultural relativism.
2. Naïve *ethnocentrism* can be another source of cultural relativism: “Research about foreign cultures is sometimes conducted with a kind of epistemic unconcern that provides a breeding ground for relativistic views” (Cappai 2010: 24).⁷
3. *Cultural relativism* in its epistemological and/or ethical version denies the possibility of a genuine understanding of foreign cultures and doubts that it can be plausible to argue with reason in normative issues. The supposed insularity of different cultures would put an end to any ambitious com-

6 Steiner-Khamsi (2014) comes to a similar conclusion.

7 Translation by author. In German: “Die epistemologische Unbeschwertheit, mit der gelegentlich Forschung in fremdkulturellen Kontexten stattfindet, war schon immer der beste Nährboden für relativistische Sichtweisen.”

parative research but fortunately we can meet this challenge less by referring to universals but by insight into the hybridity of any culture.

The participants of the Leipzig-Symposium can hardly be accused of naïve ethnocentrism but despite the strengths of the dialogical approach several challenges still remain, some of which could be observed in the discussions during the conference. In the following, some outstanding issues will be described on the basis of excerpts from the conversations during the conference which were recorded and transcribed afterwards.⁸ It appears that they are related to the points mentioned by Cappai.

3.1 What do we compare? Or: How to identify the subject of comparative research in music education?

As said above, the Leipzig-Symposium provided an opportunity to discuss differing perspectives of music education and to jointly define possible criteria of comparing. But what exactly is compared? To conduct comparative research in music education collaboratively in an international research group firstly means to agree about the shared subject of research. What are we going to talk about? Do we have any research interest in common? This is not always clear from the beginning. Before we can start to negotiate about tertiary comparisonis we have to decide about what we are going to compare.

Music lessons were the subject of debate at the Leipzig-Symposium, however, it turned out that there was no complete agreement on what constitutes a music lesson. From a European view, it was remarkable that so many students are taught in the California lesson (approx. 80) and that the teacher is supported by a kind of classroom assistant playing the piano.⁹ The question was raised whether we really see a music lesson or rather a kind of choir rehearsal involving a *répétiteur* in the video even though it seems amazing that, instead of conducting, the conductor primarily talks about issues of music theory. During the final discussion it was suggested that the distinction between a music class and a choir might be misleading with view to the concept of choir classes. One participant argued:

⁸ See also Chapter III.1 *Talking about Music Lessons* for an overview of the discussions.

⁹ See Chapter II.7 *Creating a Classroom Culture ...*

A distinction between a choir rehearsal and a music lesson is a very German perspective. Of course in – and in California here this is, this – what seems to be a choir rehearsal is an ordinary music lesson in a special course.

Another one agreed:

Yes, because he also runs choirs out of school whereas this is part of the timetable.

Nevertheless, the question remained:

Is it what we in Germany call a ‘Schulchor’ – a school choir – or is it something else?

This is not only a translation problem that could be solved by consulting a dictionary and speaking accurately but we are faced with differing cultural traditions of music education. The question occurred in the final discussion which indicates that we must always expect the need for communication about what is to be compared and about the possibly differing research interests. It is not sufficient to enter into an agreement at the outset of a joint comparative research project but we have to carry on coordinating different emic perspectives.

3.2 Cultural attribution error

As said above, in cultural research and comparative education we are faced with a tendency to interpret what is perceived in terms of cultural differences. And cross-national comparisons tend to interpret differences in terms of national differences.

„The blind spot of cultural anthropology is the attribution fallacy. It is pronounced when ethnographers engage in cross-national comparison of two or more cases that are situated in different countries. They tend to interpret the differences in terms of national differences and inadvertently end up using a political category (nation-state) to explain cultural differences between their cases.“ (Steiner-Khamisi, 2014, 36)

There seems to be a bias towards contrasting rather than comparing different cases. Even if the participants of the Leipzig-Symposium carefully avoided (self-) attributions like “typical Swedish” or “typical German” there was some tendency to prefer cultural or country specific explanations for what was observed while neglecting other reasons. This may be because of the cross-national setting of the comparative research conference.

During the discussion about the Estonia lesson it was noted that the teacher often stands on a red carpet in front of the students who are seated on chairs in three rows. One participant asked for the cultural meaning:

I was just wondering about the carpet in the classroom. It was like she had the stage for herself and (...) was singing *ex cathedra*. (...) What did it symbolize? Why was there a carpet for her?

An Estonian colleague offered a rather pragmatic explanation for the carpet in the middle of the classroom suggesting that the position of the teacher has no particular significance. She happens to stand on the carpet by chance:

Probably the reason is that sometimes they put a drum set on the carpet to avoid a very loud sound.

However, there appears to be a strong need for an explanation based on cultural factors. The participant who had raised the question about the carpet was not completely happy with the answer and asked again:

So it didn't symbolize something about her position or something?

The Estonian colleague reiterated the negative reply at first but then tried to meet the wish of her interlocutor offering an explanation that is at least characterised by some kind of cultural elements that relate to the redness of the red carpet:

No, no, I don't think so. But maybe there is another – just something to look different, because that building itself – the school building is quite new and quite – let's say: modern, built from concrete. Inside and outside. This grey one. And sometimes it feels really very boring and the old teachers they all try to make it more human.

The question remains as to whether the position of the teacher on the carpet is culturally significant. A question like this cannot conclusively be answered by asking a representative of the culture concerned because it is not certain whether he or she has a clear knowledge of the supposed cultural meaning. Cultural anthropology is bound to question the cultural interpretations given from the emic perspective of the informants if the researcher gets the impression that she or he understands better what is going on than the people involved. This is why a cultural anthropologist should avoid 'going native'. Otherwise she or he could be accused of being naïve. However, researchers who think they understand the practices of other cultures better than the natives because of a superordinate academic perspective expose

themselves to the same accusation. For a dialogical approach to international and cross-cultural comparative research about music education, this can only mean to jointly discuss differing interpretations without guaranteed success.¹⁰

3.3 The challenges of relativism for comparative research on music education

Where normative issues become the subject of a controversial debate we face particular difficulties. In discussing their different views the participants of the conference seemed to have a kind of inhibition to criticize music lessons from other countries from their own perspectives. They talked about unexpected observations sometimes expressing great astonishment (this was part of the “game”, see Wallbaum’s introduction in this book) but they usually avoided a critical analysis. This is quite understandable to a certain extent. The restraint seems appropriate. Lacking knowledge of the cultural context presents problems in assessing learning environments and teaching practices. Moreover, one is concerned not to judge by the wrong criteria. Normative issues are sensitive in any case. Those who discuss normative issues in an unfamiliar cultural context don’t want to get on a slippery slope. But if we want to communicate about the normative foundations of our pedagogical beliefs in order to learn about ourselves, we should not be too concerned about possible misunderstandings.

One participant of the Leipzig-Symposium noted that in her country a kind of music lesson like in Sweden would not be possible. There were not such musical instruments in the classroom, and the teachers would not be able to teach all the instruments. When asked whether she would wish to have the possibilities like in Sweden the answer was “no”, but she showed some hesitation about discussing and criticizing the approach to music education in the video.

Hm ... that’s a good question. I thought not, I couldn’t like it (...) because for me it’s very difficult to be a teacher with all this indifference (...). For me its difficult. And sometimes you see, the students have not working ... for me its ... is not ... it’s not in my mind (laugh).

10 See also Gottovik (2007) about the history of the Writing Culture debate and on the pros and cons of a dialogical approach in cultural anthropology.

Despite of the challenges of cross-cultural communication we should not get trapped in cultural relativism because a relativistic view does not help us when we have to make up a decision on what is to be done (Rolle, 2017). Refraining from the examination of normative issues in discussions amongst representatives of different cultures would neglect an important field of comparative educational research.

The tendency to avoid controversial discussions about difficult issues in the context of an international conference may well have other reasons. There might be language difficulties. Different levels of language competence between native speakers and non-native speakers may lead to a certain shyness and will surely cause an unequal balance of power in the exchange of arguments. This was potentially exacerbated at the Leipzig-Symposium because academics and practitioners met, the former being more familiar with the rules of scientific discourse. A more detailed analysis could reveal issues of hierarchy and power reflected in wording and turn-taking. This undoubtedly challenges any research approach based on international dialogue.

There are no final results. The discussion is to be continued. The cross-cultural dialogue remains open to new arguments. That was to be expected.

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