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***The imaginative minds - the relationship between the artistic experiences of preschool children
and the development of empathy and prosociality***

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ABSTRACT The study concerned the empathy and prosociality of certain six-to seven-year-old children in an integrated art education programme, and the relationship of music to the children's empathy and prosociality. The subjects of the research were 40 preschool children taking part in an integrated art education programme. Half of the children participated in a music-oriented programme and the other half in a programme that was similar, except for the absence of music. Empathy was measured by the Feshbach & Roe pictorial report empathy test, in which responses relating to a child's emotional status are operationalised as empathy. The children's prosocial behaviour was assessed in interactive situations during the preschool day, using the assessment forms of Weir & Duvéen and Kalliopuska. The study also examines the essence of music and the possibilities of experiencing emotional meanings in music.

This article focuses the qualitative part of the study. Qualitative research was used as a means of approaching the processes that occurred in the groups of children during one preschool semester. The action processes were described on the basis of observations made from video material. The pedagogical ideas for teaching were developed according to the Hungarian music educator Dr. Klara Kokas' pedagogy of music listening. This video material was used to find out exactly what, in this process, were the essential factors related to the actions of the children and, in addition, special care was taken to observe the factors related to empathy and prosociality. Observation of the action process as seen in the video material, revealed the critical importance of games of make-believe as a form of mutual interaction among children. Children used their imaginative minds to construct new ideas in playing and the arts. The observed material also showed that the children in a group without music made their own musical sound worlds -- their own musical improvisations -- in short episodes here and there in relation to their playing. The results obtained from observation of the children's action process show that any form of art and play can act as an "open scheme", a symbol of a child's mental processes, extending to all the developmental stages and experimental nuances of a child.

KEYWORDS: *empathy, prosociality, musical education, integrated arts education, games of make-believe, 6- to- 7- year-old children*

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Introduction

The purpose of the study (Ruokonen 1997) was to assess the relationship of a 4-month musical and arts education program at one hour each week to the holistic development of empathy and prosociality of 6- to 7-year old children. This article is focused to the qualitative analysing and description of the observed video material.

Empathy may be assumed to be the holistic process in which various components (affective, cognitive, kinaesthetic, and physiological) can be differentiated. The process of empathy reflects several dimensions as empathy may function on both physiological and kinaesthetic levels as well as on cognitive and affective levels simultaneously. Empathy should be distinguished from sympathy and other characteristics or defence mechanisms of the personality. Empathy always requires maintaining a distance psychologically from the situation, whereas sympathy requires we share the event emotionally. Sympathy is then subjective, whereas objective observation is clearly present in empathy. Empathy is evident in human relations in such a delicate manner that might talk about a creative process based on intuition. (Beres & Arlow, 1974; Eisenberg & Strayer 1987; Kalliopuska, 1983/1992.)

According to Mirja Kalliopuska (1983/1992) true empathy always works for positive aims.

Empathy requires sensitivity, which means that a person relaxes ego boundaries and regresses in the service of the ego: her/his conscious control is slight, yet this temporary identification with another person is under control so that person does not lose hold of himself. During the empathetic process a person omits her/his own thoughts, him/herself, and takes another person's role attempting to feel the impressions of the other person. A person makes observations from another person's point of view, trying temporarily to identify with another person's role. After this momentary identification she/he returns to him/herself, closes the ego boundaries, and cognitively processes the impressions from the other person, analyzing, classifying, and conceptualizing the material and finally giving it a concept. Person labels the impressions as certain concepts. In this way one discovers in what kind of situation the other person experiences and makes use of the acquired information for the benefit of the other.

The main formulation of music and arts relates to musical enjoyment and pleasure and the significance of music to symbolic processes within the individual. These symbolic processes begin

in the mind and they are capable of transferring vital functions in different directions. According to Lehtonen (1993, 1996), music, which activates the symbolic processes, also activates pleasure, which the symbolic processes begins to represent by something other than the gratification produced by the vital functions. Music/arts can provide individual object-relationships as self- and transitional-objects. Music activates the symbolic process because its form is like an “open schema” in to which a listener can project any contents of their psyche. Kohut (1971) describes a self object, which music/arts could be considered, as follows. The self-self-object relationships are present from birth to death; throughout his life a person will experience himself as cohesive, harmonious, a firm unit in time and space, connected with his past and pointing meaningfully into a creative-productive future. But this holds only as long as at each stage in his life he experiences certain representatives of his human surrounding as joyfully responding to him, as available to him as sources of idealized strength and calmness, as being silently present. Though an essence like him, at any rate able to grasp his inner life more or less accurately, so that their responses attuned to his needs and allow him to grasp their inner life, when he is in need of such sustenance.

Kurkela (1993) describes music as an open abstraction in which fantasies and make-believe games are present. Music/arts can represent as many form as human life itself and it can be attuned to the individual needs of a person experiencing or performing it. Music has the capacity for functioning as a transitional-object (Winnicott 1982). This aspect of musical and artistic expression and perception makes music analogous to the playing of children, which is also considered to be a transitional phenomenon. Music is probably even more important as a means of experiencing feelings because sounds are more abstract than the materials of the other art forms (Pugh, A. & L. 1998,12-13).

Erkkilä (1996) has created the three-dimensional theory of the emotional meanings experienced in music. This theory combines the psychoanalytical and cognitive psychological views about emotional experiences in music. The first level is the vitality affective level, mainly according to Stern (1985). Every person has this level of experiencing music from birth and it forms the basis for all musical development. Stern (1985) speaks about dynamic forms that a child uses together with different senses to read his/ her environment. Through the dynamic forms, music can be significant for a child, although he/she can not yet experience music as a learned system. The second level is a psycho-dynamic level in which the brain dominance theory, as well as the psychoanalytical theory on formulating the primary and secondary process thinking (Bash-Kahre

1985), are utilized. Bash-Kahre has formulated the division of thinking into a primary and secondary process. The secondary process thinking is realized through the interaction of three different thinking modes; operational thinking (tangible and logical, no room for emotions, metaphors or symbols), emotional sensomotoric thinking (sensual impressions, motoric and spatial experiences and strong emotions) and chaotic thinking (typical thinking for a newborn child, when he/she encounters the overwhelming inner and external stimuli). Operational thinking and emotional-sensomotoric thinking are linked to the brain dominance theory. Operational thinking is characteristic of the left hemisphere and emotional-sensomotoric thinking of the right hemisphere. On this level, the strong and meaningful experiences in music become important. The third level is a cognitive level, where the emotional experience comes out of learned and cultural knowing of music. Musical emotions are thought to arise as a result of the cognitive process caused by the musical stimulus or chain of stimuli.

According to Damon (1983), through play the child can express his/her thoughts and feelings (also unacceptable) and explores the full range of imaginable experiences. Peller (1954) has analysed the symbolic content of play in terms of its emotional value to children. The first benefit is that children's play is their attempt to compensate for anxieties and deficiencies, to obtain pleasure at a minimum risk of danger and/or irreversible consequences. In play the child can try to solve problems without any risks, or the child change the real situations to provide happy endings. Or the child may repeat an unpleasant episode in play over and over again, thereby lessening the impact of the initial experience. The second benefit of play is the opportunity for the satisfaction of wishes that are not otherwise realisable. Through fantasy play children can always be anything they want to be without realistic limitations and frustrations. A third benefit, according to Peller (1954), is that by playing out scenes to their own advantage, children are able to neutralise fears and, in play, to do things that they would not otherwise dare to do. The child can safely play out his/her negative feelings, like anger or hostility, without any harmful consequences. The fourth emotional benefit of play is its role in the development of a positive self-conception in the child. Children can create situations and play active and competent roles. The opportunity to experience feelings of power and competence strengthen the self confidence in real life situations as well. In fantasy play and arts the world is experienced by a child in an other reality, which is a play reality where all possibilities are unlimited and even omnipotent (Otto 1993,39-44).

Lehtonen (1993, 1996) writes about meta-thinking in music, referring it to a creative play reality.

Bateson (1976) and Garvey (1990) write about the mega-language of play, which is a very symbolic and holistic way of communication. So both in play and music/arts there is a possibility for emotional experiences and expressions.

According to Cowie (1989) “children create stories not only to make sense of an experience but also to explore alternative ways of enacting that experience”. Cowie (1989) argues that there are many parallels between the fantasy themes or narrative-like features of children’s fantasy play and the narratives they write later. I would also argue that there are also many parallels between the fantasy play themes and the narratives in the arts that they express immediately or later.

Creative artistic expressions include experiences, metaphors, images, rituals or archetypes. Through expressions the personal narratives change gradually into sagas. The process can also be the opposite in meaning to the archetype level come into mental life and artistic expression. (Reason, P. & Hawkins, P. 1988.)

Methodology

The empirical object of research was 40 preschool children from two preschools who were taking part in an integrated arts education programme. Attending daily preschool of the same suburb 40 children took pre- and post test. Half of the children participated in a music-oriented programme and the other half in a programme that was similar except for the absence of music. The author herself taught one pilot group (integrative arts education programme with music) and one control group (integrative arts education without music), while another teacher taught another pilot group and control group. Research was carried out by means of a triangulation in which, in addition to the quantitative results of an experimental research programme, qualitative research was used as a means of approaching the processes that occurred in the groups of children during one preschool term.

Empathy was measured by the Feshbach & Roe Empathy Test (Feshbach & Feshbach 1969), in which responses relating to a child’s emotional status are operationalised as empathy. Children’s prosocial behaviour was assessed in interactive situations during the preschool day, using the assessment forms of Weir & Duveen (1981) and Kalliopuska (1981). The study also examined the essence of music and the possibilities of experiencing emotional meanings in music. In the

quantitative part the results obtained for empathy and prosociality from the initial and final measurements and their relationship to background variables, were examined mainly through the t-test and the correlative connections.

This article concerns the qualitative part of the study. The qualitative research was used as a means of approaching the processes that occurred in the groups of children during one preschool semester. The action processes were analysed and described on the basis of observations made from video material. This video material was analysed by systematic observation and the results were used to find out exactly what, in this process, were the essential factors related to the actions of the children and, in addition, special care was taken to observe the factors related to empathy and prosociality.

Results

The results showed that the children's age and the social status of their parents was related to the children's empathy in the initial measurement. Thus those children who were born at the beginning of the year and who had parents with an academic education received slightly higher starting points. In terms of prosociality girls were assessed in both the initial and final measurements as being better than boys. Although the results of the imitation based musicality test (Lotti 1988) showed no relation to empathy or prosociality, girls and those children who had a musical hobby outside of pre-school gained better musicality test points than the others.

There were no significant differences between the pilot and the control groups in the development of empathy and prosociality. The final measurement showed that the differences existing in the initial measurement had evened out, with those children born at the end of the year advancing the most, and the social background of the parents no longer showing a relationship to empathy in the final measurement. During the term there had been general progress in empathy and prosociality in both the pilot and control groups.

Both meta-thinking and mega-language in fantasy play were observed in all groups. Observation of the action process from the video material showed the critical importance of games of make-believe to children as a form of mutual interaction in artistic performance, like music movement or music painting. The observed material also showed that children in those groups, which did not have music made their own musical sound worlds - their own musical improvisations - in short episodes

here and there in relation to their play. They told their make-believe stories by playing in movement, drama or paint.

An integrated arts education programme that left room for children's own play ideas was experimented with and verbalised in both the pilot and control groups. The pilot group had music in the arts education programme while the control group did not. It was treated each time as a happening that would produce pleasure for the children. Spontaneous verbalisations and discussions related to emotions were most apparent in both groups during visual expression. This occurred when the children explained their experiences from music, movement, fantasy play or their own paintings. An increase in pleasure occurred from the desire of the children, time after time, to spontaneously link games, and the images aroused in the children, to dramatisation, movement and visual expression, whether music was included in the action or not.

During the action process, no differences in the amount of verbalisation of emotions or helping actions were observed between the pilot and control groups. The pilot group children depicted their musical experiences at the vital affect or psycho-dynamic levels with related emotional meanings of music. In the narratives, where the emotional meanings related to the vital affect level, children described their feelings by painting, drumming or dancing. Their verbalisations were, for example "*there was a great storm, real windy and I was flying as a leaf*", children described explosions, being in a great hurry, fadings in the sky or waves at the sea. The verbalisations on the psycho-dynamic level were connected to a few affects, like happiness or sadness, anger or fear. For example, one girl is music-painting and telling a story: "*There is a black cloud coming into the town. The thunderstorm begins and there is an enormous flash.*" The child beside her asks, worried: "*Are you afraid?*" (And this is also a sign of empathetic thinking). She answers by showing the house and people in it in a painting: "*They are afraid,*" (a possibility to feel an unpleasant affect from a distance). And then she paints the flashes and says: "*They are lucky, the big flash only hit a tree*". Although the children evaluated the art education programme very pleasurable they used both pleasurable, and unpleasurable affects to describe their emotional expressions in music or fantasy play.

The verbalisation of the affects was not very common for the children, a more usual thing was the holistic action in play and artistic expression. Children who listened to music described more affects in their stories. For example, two children moving with music: "*We are brownies, look at us, we are in love! We are going to have a baby brownie!*" (the other child has a ball under her sweater).

The frequencies of verbalised emotional expressions used in connection to empathy or prosocial behaviour expressed more pleasure than negative feelings. In all groups happiness (music14/no music15), anger (music7/no music6), fear (music9/no music7) and sadness (music7/8no music) were verbalised. Prosocial behaviour between children was seen as well in imaginative play situations as in other action. There were not at all the emotional experiences of the cognitive level of Erkkilä's (1996) three dimensional model. The main reason may be the young age of the children (6-7 years).

The arts and fantasy play gave children the opportunity to repeat the fearful and horrible sinking of the ship Estonia, which was in all the news at the time of observation in 1994. This accident came into the paintings and fantasy play in every group, and children played it over and over again as they had heard it. And through the play children also tried to resolve problems without any risks, by changing the real situations, for example by drawing more powerful lifesavers to provide happy endings. Children wanted to neutralise their fears and to do things that they would not otherwise dare to do. While the children are painting one girl says: *"Give me a piece of paper, I would like to paint a boat."* Teacher: *"You already have a piece of paper."* A girl: *"The paper is not big enough, the boat is enormously huge."* One boy asks: *"Is it the boat which sank?"* The girl rejects this: *"No!"* Another girl: *"My mom knows about it, it was a day of sorrow."* After that all children painted something related to the accident. One boy: *"I drew only black lines, this is a sunken navy."* The other boy: *"I painted a submarine, it is not going to sink because it is always under the water."* The other boy telling about his painting: *"There was a horrible storm and the boat became full of water and sank."* One girl asked: *"Is there anyone on the beach who could help them?"* The other boy looks at the painting and says: *"I can't see anyone."* The boy who painted it repeats immediately: *"Yes, there are. I'm going to draw them now!"*

Through expressions in arts and fantasy play children wanted to be in roles without any realistic limitations for example they told stories about building a big boat, flying bears, a space church, and rainbow nests. Children did this every time and I think it was the main reason that they found the programme so pleasurable. It was important for them to imagine something unbelievable without any frustration, in another reality, and act in this world in an omnipotent role. They had the opportunity to experience feelings of power and competence to strengthen their self confidence. The other important feeling for them was the flow in musical movement. The children enjoyed the movements going round and round and all the time in a faster tempo. This was for them like an ilinx-game (Kalliala 1999) and they did it usually in pairs. So the emotional experience in music

was an impulse for the physical and mental inner contexts to fly in the experiences of an ilinx-game (Ruokonen 2000).

The fantasy play situations were mostly cooperative. Individual and duo fantasy play situations were also observed while dancing and moving with music. According to Hoffman (1977) a 6-7-year-old child has a sense that others have internal states, thoughts and feelings that are different from one's own. Children frequently used their ability of role taking in their fantasy play situations showed their prosociality and empathy occasionally in their play situations, especially in dramatising a song and while telling stories about their paintings.

Conclusions

During the action process, no differences in the amount of verbalisation of emotions or helping actions were observed between the pilot and control groups. The pilot group children depicted their musical experiences at the vitality affective level or psycho-dynamic level, with related emotional meanings of music. An integrated art education programme that left room for children's own play ideas was experimented with and verbalised in both the pilot and control groups. It was treated each time as a happening that would produce pleasure for the children. Spontaneous verbalisations and discussions related to emotions was most apparent in both groups during visual expression, when the children explained their pictures. An increase in pleasure occurred from the desire of the children, time after time, to spontaneously link fantasy play, and the images aroused in the children, to dramatisation, movement and visual expression, whether music was included in the action or not. The results obtained from observation of the children's action process show that any form of art and play can act as an "open scheme", a symbol of a child's mental processes, extending to all the developmental stages and experimental nuances of a child.

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