

Music education in the Grade R classroom: How three teachers learned in a participatory action inquiry

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Abstract

The contribution of music education to the holistic development of the young learner is uncontested. However, in South Africa, the vast majority of Reception Year (Grade R) teachers do not have the required competences to teach music in ways that optimally enhance the holistic growth of their learners, as this aspect has been largely neglected during their pre-service and in-service training. In this paper, we report on a year-long intervention aimed at enabling three Grade R non-music specialist teachers at one urban township school in the Eastern Cape to create music-based learning opportunities for their learners. We employed a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) approach to the inquiry, which combines research with development. Our findings indicate that after a series of collaborative interactions, the participants started to explore and tap into their own musical competences. They revisited notions of the self as (ill-)equipped, (un)confident, (in)competent and (in)dependent music teachers, and began to assume autonomy and agency with regard to effective music education in the Grade R classroom. We consequently argue that under-qualified in-service teachers can be enabled to improve their practice through research interventions that stimulate maximum participant involvement, such as PALAR.

Keywords: Grade R, music education, non-music specialist teacher, continuing professional development, participatory action learning and action research

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Introduction

Arts and music education received minimal, if any, attention during the educational reform process in South Africa (Browne 2010; Herbst, De Wet & Rijdsdijk 2005; Nel 2007; Vermeulen 2009). In this paper we report on a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) study aimed at enabling three Grade R teachers to present pedagogically useful musical learning opportunities for their learners. We argue that the findings of our study indicate that PALAR projects can scaffold transformation, empower teachers and also emancipate research participants (Zuber-Skerritt 2011). We contend that under-qualified practicing teachers can be enabled to improve their practice through research interventions that stimulate maximum participant involvement such as the one on which we report

Music and the holistic development of the young learner

The South African Department of Education committed itself to quality education aimed at cultivating the *holistic* development of all young South African learners right at the outset of the educational reform and transformation agenda (RSA DoE 1996). Several factors can arguably enhance such holistic development and, in this regard, the unique role of music is uncontested (Hallam 2010). Hallam argues that there is evidence that music in educational settings enhances cognitive development, in particular with regard to mathematical thinking and language acquisition. Gardner (2006) says that, ultimately, music education unlocks every young child's innate musical intelligence.

Given such views, the critical role of the young child's music teacher, who should facilitate optimal gain from encounters with music, is evident. However, in the vast majority of primary schools in South Africa and elsewhere, music is taught by generalist teachers with no formal specialised music training (Bainger 2010; Biasutti 2010; Herbst et al 2005; Vermeulen 2009). Inevitably, these teachers' lack of formal music education can generate feelings of incompetence and a lack of self-confidence when it comes to using music in teaching. It is small wonder, then, that Browne (2010) warns against the perpetuation of unequal music education in South African society, since learners at most under-resourced, previously disadvantaged schools continue to receive music education of inferior quality compared to those attending well-resourced schools in affluent areas, where music education is often outsourced to properly qualified music educators.

The above-mentioned shortcomings and dire need for the continuing professional development (CPD) of non-music specialist generalist Grade R teachers, especially in under-resourced schools, motivated us to embark on this project. In essence, we wanted to ascertain how in-service non-music specialist Grade R teachers at such schools can be enabled to transform their identities in music (IIM) (Hargreaves & Marshall 2003) towards perceiving themselves as competent, confident and autonomous Grade R music teachers and to assume agency for their learners' musical and holistic development.

Three Grade R teachers, Mary, Jane and Ann,¹ were selected through purposive sampling (Babbie & Mouton 2006). They were chosen since they represented the most characteristic, typical and distinctive features of generalist Grade R teachers employed

at under-resourced schools in South Africa.² Throughout the study, we aimed to nurture their competence, confidence and agency by assisting them to unearth their own innate musical potential and renegotiate their identities in music (IIM) through self-discovery (Hargreaves & Marshall 2003). Our decision to do so was based on Mills's assertion (1996, cited in Biasutti 2010) that non-music specialist teachers essentially require faith and confidence in their own inherent and informally obtained musical competences rather than formal music instruction.

In this study, differences in rank, race and culture were however eminent. Mary, Jane and Ann were females of mixed race ('Coloured') descent. We were conscious of the fact that, as female, white, Afrikaans-speaking music educationists in our fifties, who grew up during the heydays of apartheid, we represented the 'previously advantaged', whose 'whiteness' inherently embodied historic notions of power and superiority (Toni 2009). We were also aware that our Western/Eurocentric music training essentially informed, yet also restricted, our conceptions of music and approach to music education (Nzewi 2003).

Based on the above, it was thus imperative to use an emic, qualitative research design that would urge us to view the project from the participants' perspective (Babbie & Mouton 2006). Since the ultimate aim of this study was not to explain or predict human behaviour, but to describe, understand and ultimately enable the participants towards agency and ownership, we adopted a research approach that foregrounded participation, local knowledge, and 'conscientisation' (Van der Riet 2008). The focus on participation emphasised the participants' dynamic involvement in the research process. This enabled them to take ownership of the process and participate in the management and implementation of the various components of the research process. The notion of 'local knowledge' accentuated contextualisation of the research process to that which the participants knew. This enabled contextualisation of the change processes (Bagnolia & Clark 2010). The emphasis on 'conscientisation' foregrounded reflective processes that encouraged the development of the participants' critical consciousness, transcending their common-sense explanations, towards increased critical and systematic inquiry (Gaventa 2006). We adopted PALAR as our methodological framework, since we regarded this approach as particularly appropriate for research conducted in rapidly changing environments challenged by multifaceted problems, such as we are experiencing in contemporary South Africa. Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (2011), international PALAR doyenne, explains that such projects focus primarily on improvement of participants' practice and development of their critical dispositions through observing, reflecting and re-doing in a cyclical manner. Our study was also rooted in Chen and Chang's (2006) 'whole teacher approach'. This approach requires that researchers first gain a thorough understanding of the context, attitudes, beliefs, existing skills levels and specific needs of the participants, before facilitating transformation processes.

Emphasis was placed on specific data generation strategies that would enable us, as researchers, to 'stay close' to Mary, Jane and Ann and allow *their* experiences and perspectives to direct ongoing collaboration. The research power therefore shifted

towards the participants (Bainger 2010; Creswell 2007), and learning occurred through a process of joint discovery (Bless, Higson-Smith & Kagee 2006). Interaction and close collaboration afforded Mary, Jane and Ann opportunities to articulate, extend and analyse their own local knowledge (Byrne, Canavan & Millar 2009; Van der Riet 2008). This led to more effective and sustainable transformations. Our decision to work with a small number of participants was therefore justified by the participatory and emancipatory aims of the study.

Data were generated in collaboration with the participants and using a range of strategies. These strategies included initial and ongoing needs analyses exercises, conducted via focus group discussions, nominal group technique (NGT), and drawings and narratives of the participants. Data were also generated via regular non-interventionist observations of the participants' implementation of music activities in their classrooms. The diverse data generation strategies enriched our understanding of relevant issues by equally valuing the participants' perspectives to validate information (Yardley 2008). Our observations and interpretations of their experiences were therefore triangulated with the data generated by the participants themselves as they shared their own perspectives on their work and their feelings at the time (Bainger 2010).

Participatory research normally positions itself within the interpretative tradition of social science research. This stance encourages researchers to be receptive in order to understand and interpret the meanings and intentions that prompt everyday human action (De Vos 2000). However, due to its emancipatory intentions, the study was also located in the critical tradition. Throughout the study, we aimed to facilitate the transformation of the participants' perceptions of themselves as (ill-)equipped, (in)competent, (un)confident and (in)dependent music teachers.

Evolution of the study

Cycle 1

The first cycle unfolded as follows:

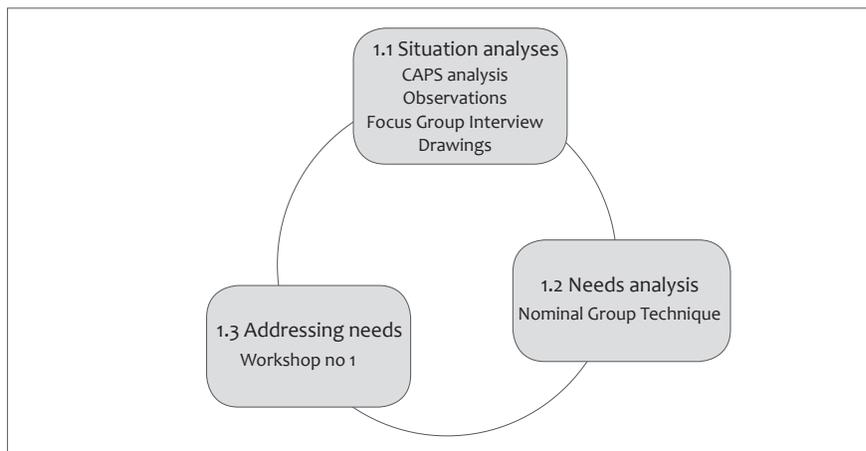


Figure 1: Unfolding of first cycle

At the outset of the study, in collaboration with the participants, we conducted a thorough study of the national Grade R curriculum, focusing in particular on references to music. This was followed by situation analyses of existing music education practices in the three Grade R classrooms through non-interventionist observations, a focus group interview, and a drawing or sketching activity. In addition, we conducted a needs analysis activity using nominal group technique (NGT) to enable the participants to identify their real needs (and not our assumptions) with regard to music education.

In response to the data generated through the situational and needs analyses, intervention strategies to improve the situation were then devised jointly with the participants; in other words, in collaboration with them. This happened during an initial daylong workshop, after which the participants applied their newly developed ideas, acquired through learning in the workshop, in their respective classrooms. Three further collective daylong reflection sessions were then held. The data generated during these reflection sessions informed the next cycle of actions. Throughout the study, we continued with non-interventionist classroom observations, averaging about one every second week. In order to further ascertain each individual participant's personal experience and evaluation of her applied learning, we also conducted narrative inquiries, requesting each participant to write a reflective piece describing her unfolding experiences (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpport 2011). Cycle one is described in more detail below.

Cycle 1.1: Situation analysis

Analysis of national Grade R curriculum

The national Grade R curriculum is structured according to three learning areas, namely numeracy, literacy and life skills. Music, together with dance, drama, visual arts and crafts, constitutes an integral component of the life skills learning programme, along with *beginner knowledge* of natural science and social science. Due to the interdisciplinary approach to teaching in Grade R, teachers are expected to infuse arts experiences with other curriculum components; for example, dance and music with physical development, drama and music with language development, and visual arts, crafts, music and dance with numeracy development (for example, to reinforce concepts of shape, pattern, time, counting, distance, direction and size).

Observations

The three Grade R class groups at the particular school each consisted of approximately thirty-six African and Coloured learners whose home language were either isiXhosa, Afrikaans, or English. Since the three teachers were all Afrikaans-speaking, communication with isiXhosa-speaking learners was facilitated by a local parent who also acted as teaching assistant. Learners' only exposure to music occurred during the daily music ring. These musical experiences were restricted to the singing of isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans action songs, to which learners performed basic movements. Further conceptualisation of basic music elements, skills development or learning was insignificant. Music was also not applied in an interdisciplinary manner or infused with other learning areas such as numeracy or literacy, as required by policy.

Focus group interview

During the situation analysis phase, we also conducted a focus group interview in order to determine the participants' implicit understanding of the benefits of music for their learners. They were asked to recall former music activities and deliberate on its effect on their learners. During the interview, it became evident that the teachers held some implicit and experiential knowledge regarding the benefits of music for young learners, despite their lack of formal music training. Mary, for example, asserted that "*[e]very child loves music [...] It helps them to socialise with other children in the class. Joining in music activities helps them to feel accepted, and this interaction gives them a sense of belonging*"; Jane observed that music "*helps some children to release tension – especially those children with problems at home*"; and Ann remarked that "*[m]usic helps slow learners to catch on quicker and learn concepts like counting faster*".

Drawings

At the outset of the study, the participants were also requested to draw a typical daily music ring activity. Our intention was to ascertain the existing situation with regard to music education in the Grade R classrooms at the particular school, as well as each

participant's personal disposition towards music as informed by her experiences. We decided to use drawings because they stimulate reflection and enable participants to convey messages both literally and figuratively. Weber (2008); Prosser and Loxley (2008); Barnes and Kelly (2007); and Stuart (2007) hold that participants usually experience a drawing activity as exciting, non-inhibiting and empowering; consequently they often reveal hidden feelings and inner selves. Upon completion of the drawing activity, we held interactive discussions, during which each participant explained her drawing and clarified questions posed by the rest of the group. These discussions were recorded and transcribed.

Mary's drawing reflected a multicultural learner corps. The children were actively involved in music activities such as dancing, singing, playing instruments and clapping hands. However, she also included images of non-participating learners who were merely observing. During the discussion, she raised this as an issue that requires change. Jane and Ann's drawings also reflected diverse emotions of learners interacting with peers. They, too, explained that, although the children enjoyed music activities, not all of them were benefiting optimally. The drawings confirmed the data generated via the observations and focus group interview, namely that, despite lack of formal training, the teachers still attempted to present music activities by applying innate, tacit music knowledge. In general, all involved enjoyed music activities, although the teachers were clearly aware of limitations. They were implicitly aware of the advantages of music for learner growth, but admitted lack of self-confidence, as they felt ill-equipped and incompetent, doubting their own ability to present meaningful music activities and, as such, cultivate the musical and holistic development of their learners. Our next step in the PALAR cycle was thus to ascertain specific music education needs, as identified by the participants themselves. Once we established these, we could, in collaboration with the participants, devise action plans to address their needs.

Cycle 1.2: Needs analysis

We used the nominal group technique (NGT) as initial needs analysis instrument. One focal question was asked to the group, namely, "*What would you require to enable you to teach music effectively to your Grade R class?*" Random responses were listed on a flip chart. No discussion was initiated at first, but the participants were requested to ask clarifying questions. Thereafter, the listed items were clustered and the clusters numbered. Without any interference from us as researchers, the participants then prioritised the clusters and identified the three most pertinent topics in order of importance.

It was evident that the most pressing barrier related to resources. The teachers experienced the lack of non-melodic percussion instruments as an impediment to learners' active involvement in music activities. They wanted to resolve this by learning how to manufacture home-made classroom instruments from recyclable materials. The second need related to their perceived limited music knowledge and skills. They wanted to improve their musical competences in order to interpret the curriculum correctly and present meaningful music activities. Thirdly, the participants requested

guidance with regard to the integration of music with numeracy and literacy development in their young learners.

It was clear that the participants' needs could be addressed by applying the principles of participatory action learning and action research (PALAR). It was thus collectively decided to conduct a daylong workshop, as this would allow for maximum participation and uninterrupted time and focus.

Cycle 1.3: Action learning

Since our study was primarily transformative and emancipatory in nature, the workshop activities focused on the facilitation of critical, independent and creative thinking. During the workshop, the participants were continuously encouraged to delve into and apply their own resourcefulness and adaptive expertise, rather than merely absorb knowledge transmitted by us. During the first session, the teachers were provided with recyclable materials, such as tins, boxes, wool and so forth, and requested to explore ways to assemble non-melodic percussion instruments. Several creative ideas emerged spontaneously. Gradually, the participants gained confidence in their own ability to design and make non-melodic percussion instruments. They were eager to conduct similar projects with their young learners.

The next session of the day, as proposed by the participants, consisted of a meticulous analysis of the musical concepts and expectations of the Grade R national school curriculum. Our deliberations indicated that musical terminology such as 'pitch', 'rhythm', 'timbre', 'tone intensity' and 'tempo' required clarification. Once demonstrated and experienced via sample activities, the concepts were grasped and the participants were able to suggest learning experiences that could enhance their learners' conceptualisation of these musical elements through enactive learning and play. We observed increasing excitement, self-confidence and a sense of achievement as a result of personal successes experienced during the workshop.

The final session of the day was devoted to innovative thinking about possible integration of music with literacy and numeracy development. We focused in particular on storytelling, an integral component of early literacy development; for example, strategies to infuse music into storytelling and to enhance stories by adding instruments to depict specific characters or events were explored. Further opportunities to use music to reinforce numeracy concepts, such as pattern, were also discussed. We observed growing excitement and enthusiasm, and, by the end of the workshop, it was evident that the participants had sufficient faith in their own abilities to further experiment with their newly acquired knowledge and skills by independently applying these in their own classrooms. One teacher, for example, wrote in her journal: *"I saw music through new eyes. I learned such a lot. I can definitely change my old ways of teaching."*

The workshop concluded cycle one. It was collectively decided that the participants would apply and experiment with their newly acquired learning in their respective classrooms. They were asked to continue making journal entries reflecting on music

activities presented to their learners, as their reflections would inform the nature of further learning and action.

Cycle two

Cycle two unfolded as follows:

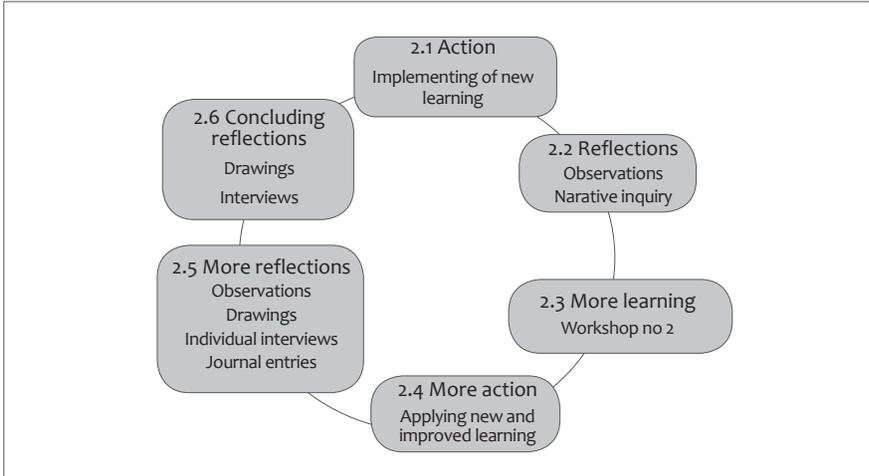


Figure 2: Unfolding of second cycle

Cycle 2.1: Action: Implementation of new learning

As mentioned above, the next phase required the participants to implement their new learning in their classrooms. They decided to embark on projects involving learners in the making of home-made musical instruments, complemented by instrumental play activities. They also decided to explore creative ways to integrate music activities with numeracy and literacy learning.

Cycle 2.2: Reflections: Observations and narrative inquiry

In order to monitor the implementation of the ideas developed during the first workshop, non-interventionist classroom observations were once again conducted. We observed the participants as they applied their newly acquired learning. This included the execution of instrumental play activities with home-made instruments and the infusion of music into numeracy and literacy in order to enhance interdisciplinary learning. Activities were video-recorded for future reference and reflection.

Data generated during our second round of observations, as well as the participants' reflective narratives, clearly indicated a significant increase in self-confidence, creativity and autonomy. The participants were beginning to revisit their identities as (ill-)equipped, (in)competent and (in)dependent music teachers. For example, Mary wrote, "I have noticed some growth in myself in believing that I CAN

teach music to learners.” Jane said, “I understand now that everyone is able to teach music [...] and I feel that I have already developed skills and knowledge to improve my music teaching.” Ann was delighted about her own emergent ability to teach music and stimulate her learners’ love for music. In her reflective narration, she mentioned that “[t]eaching music now is very exciting. I love music and I am looking forward to improve [sic] the love of music in myself and in my learners”. We clearly noted increased discovery of their personal innate musical abilities, which emerged organically as they explored and ventured into formerly uncharted territory.

However, despite these encouraging reflections, the participants still felt apprehensive about the extent of their foundational music knowledge. They requested another workshop focused on deepening their conceptualisation of fundamental musical elements such as rhythm, pitch, tone intensity and timbre, and the subsequent design of music activities that would enable learners to conceptualise these elements. Due to time constraints, this workshop had to be scheduled for the beginning of the next school year.

Cycle 2.3: More learning

Although the aim of the second workshop was to strengthen the participants’ understanding of basic musical concepts and subsequently design activities to assist learners to conceptualise these, the new school year started with its own challenges. Due to unforeseen extension of the local township, the school was confronted with an unanticipated influx of almost three hundred new Grade R learners, without additional staff capacity. Consequently, each teacher had to manage a group of almost a hundred five- to seven-year-old children entering formal schooling for the first time, in limited classroom spaces, whilst still facilitating meaningful learning.

The second workshop consequently commenced with a collective discussion about ways to overcome these challenges. It was soon clear that, despite the obstacles, the participants were indeed able to transfer learning acquired during the first cycle to the new, significantly larger, groups of young Grade R learners. They exhibited resourcefulness and agency in proposing ways to overcome the unanticipated obstacles; for example, by splitting classes, involving community members in instrument-making projects, and so forth. Their expressed need for more profound conceptualisation of basic musical elements was also addressed via focussed musical encounters and discussions. This was followed by joint explorations of creative ways to facilitate learner conceptualisation of musical elements, predominantly through play. Collectively, it was decided that pitch, tempo and tone intensity in music would be introduced to learners by means of incidental learning during singing activities; rhythm would be experienced and introduced during movement and instrumental play activities; and timbre would be experienced when learners handle home-made classroom instruments during music activities.

Cycle 2.4: More action: Implementation of improved learning

The next step in the research process therefore required the participants to apply their new learning in their classrooms in an autonomous manner. During our follow-up visits after three months, we observed activities that included the following:

- During singing activities, all three teachers indicated the various pitch levels and melodic contours with their hands, thereby facilitating learners' ability to differentiate between high, low, ascending and descending melodic contours and encouraging them to pitch correctly.
- Conceptualisation of tempo and tone intensity was enhanced during activities that enabled learners to experience distinct contrasts. Songs were thus sung softly as well as loudly, or fast as well as slowly. Consequently, learners' listening skills were also stimulated. Musical literacy development happened incidentally, yet intentionally: when songs were sung loudly, learners were introduced to the symbol *f*, and alternatively *p*, when the songs were sung softly.
- Learners' rhythmic development was promoted during movement activities. They were required to walk or run steadily in response to varying drum beats. Again, musical literacy learning happened parenthetically: a crotchet was displayed during walking and a quaver during running activities. These activities also enhanced development of the learners' auditory skills.
- Rhythmic growth and conceptualisation of tone colour (timbre) were facilitated during instrumental play activities during which learners were encouraged to imitate simple rhythmic patterns on home-made instruments such as tambourines, drums and shakers. Learners also experienced timbre during these activities by observing the different sounds of the various instruments. Their auditory discrimination skills were further developed by exploring tone colour differences between containers filled with pebbles, rice or beans.

Cycle 2.5: Reflections: Observations, drawings, interviews and journal entries

During follow-up classroom observations it was evident that the teachers were indeed able to facilitate their learners' musical growth by successfully implementing useful activities, irrespective of unduly large class groups. They exhibited a clear understanding of musical elements such as pitch, tone intensity, timbre, tempo and rhythm. Despite evident improvement in the participants' competence, resilience, resourcefulness and adaptive expertise, we concluded cycle two with more reflections to generate further data. We conducted another drawing activity, another interview, and further analyses of the participants' journal entries, as we wanted to ascertain the participants' perceptions of their new learning. We also wanted to determine whether the participants had understood and adopted the notion of reflective practice, as demonstrated through the cycles of action learning and action research during the research study. We needed to determine whether our involvement empowered them to such an extent that they were willing and able to take ownership of their own continuing music learning and

music actions. Ultimately, we wanted to gauge the participants' sense of themselves as confident, competent and autonomous music teachers.

The participants were thus asked to make another drawing in response to the following prompt: *"How do you see yourself as music teacher at present?"* The drawing activity was followed by individual interviews, during which each participant was asked to describe her professional development as music teacher as it evolved during the study. Mary drew three trees. The first tree was barren, without any leaves; the second had small leaves; and the third was in full bloom. In her drawing, Jane contrasted night and day scenery. She also included a lit candle. Ann drew a blackboard displaying the word 'boring', and next to this she drew bright flowers with the word 'fun' written all over the picture.

The participants also shared excerpts from their personal reflective journals, which they had kept throughout the study. Mary, for example, wrote, *"I can now say I am reaping the fruits of my commitment. I can see it and it excites me, as this puts my teaching on a different level"*, while Jane wrote, *"I experienced a change from night to day in my teaching methods."*

The data obtained during the second round of reflections clearly suggested increased motivation and enthusiasm due to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.

Cycle 2.6: Concluding reflections: Drawings and interviews

Since the ultimate aim of the study was to facilitate the emancipation of the three participants and the transformation of their identities as (ill-)equipped, (un)confident and (in)competent music teachers, it was critical to determine their sense of independence and autonomy. Consequently, we refrained from further active involvement, transferring complete ownership of the research to the participants. However, we visited the school again after a period of nine months to ascertain the situation. Again, we used drawings and individual interviews to generate data.

Mary drew a picture of several happy children participating in music activities. Most children were singing. Some learners were holding musical instruments. A few learners were playing on the balancing beam. Ann drew a picture of singing learners. She also included a television, radio and books. Jane drew music notes pouring into a huge mug. The mug was leaking and the word 'challenges' was written where the notes trickled out.

During the follow-up individual interviews, each participant referred to notions of empowerment, emancipation, autonomy and agency. It was clear that they felt competent to teach music with more self-assurance and skill. Mary noted that she had grown personally and felt more confident to teach music, while Ann alluded to her growing faith in each child's innate musical ability, which she sought to nurture. Jane mentioned that her active participation, collaboration and contributions during both workshops had strengthened her self-confidence and independence. Her discovery of her own ability to devise meaningful music activities stimulated faith in her own innate capabilities.

Data analysis

The data in this study were generated by means of non-interventionist observations, drawings, individual interviews and personal journal entries. It is our contention that the data were authentic, trustworthy and usable, due to the participatory research approach adopted. We adopted the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method of data analysis. IPA concedes that research is a dynamic process and acknowledges that the personal worlds of both the researcher and participants influence the generation and analysis of data (Smith & Osborn 2003). It also recognises that the quality of data depends on participants' ability to describe and communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences clearly to the researcher, as well as the ability of the researcher to facilitate this communication and reflect and analyse the resulting data (Brocki & Wearden 2006). The data were analysed through an open-coding method, in other words, the data were broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised, and categorised in new ways (De Vos et al 2011). Since our study was conducted in a particular geographical area of South Africa, with a maximum of three participants, we do however concede that our accounts are mere probability statements, made on the grounds of what would be true for these participants, and not all Grade R teachers in South African schools (Bless et al 2006).

Data presentation

The leitmotiv permeating all the data generated was transformation. It was clear that the research study had instigated a diverse range of changes. Two major themes, each with its own relevant sub-themes, could be identified. These themes related to transformation of the self and transformation of the young learners.

Theme 1: Transformation of the self

Data generated via our observations, interviews and participant drawings clearly indicated that the teachers' perceptions of themselves were transforming. It was evident that the three teachers had experienced a transformation in their sense of both their professional and personal selves.

Sub-theme 1.1: Transformation of the professional self

The teachers felt more encouraged, empowered, enlightened and confident to teach music. Ann, for example, described her teaching as being "*at another level*", explaining that, "*I feel empowered through this research and have gained more knowledge on teaching music*". Jane admitted that for her, "*the light was switched on; I never realised that music can form part of all the learning areas*". Mary also acknowledged that she "*never knew that music can be used to teach learners everything they have to know. The power of music on children is amazing*".

The data also confirmed the participants' growing belief in their own ability to present music activities. Mary, for example, reported that during the two workshops, she "*felt at ease. After the second meeting I relaxed. I am more confident now*". During her

second interview, Ann also alluded to the notion of self-confidence: *“This nurtured self-confidence in me [...] I now believe in my ability to teach music.”* Jane wrote in her journal: *“I have noticed some growth in myself in believing that I CAN teach music to learners.”*

The boost to their self-assurance inevitably stimulated the participants' commitment and eagerness to unlock their learners' musical potential: *“It is my responsibility to nurture it and expose it.”* The teachers were clearly eager to introduce their learners to music: *“The research intervention encouraged me a lot [...] I was so excited and enthusiastic to get back to my class and share with them my new knowledge.”* Their understanding of good practice was also transformed: *“I know a little bit now, but what I know, I want to do with excellence.”* Their emergent self-assurance also prompted agency and brought about changes in practice: *“I think it would be a good idea to try and include parents of learners to help make these instruments [...] I want them [the learners] to play in a little orchestra.”* Furthermore, the teachers exhibited reflective competence, initiative and an eagerness to establish a community of learning and practice (COLP): *“I reflected on my teaching and especially my music teaching [...] it would be great if we could work together in planning of lessons and learn from each other.”* Transformed perceptions of the self as an autonomous and competent music teacher encouraged the participants to transform and improve their practice. Jane adjusted her daily routine and noted that the inclusion of music activities in the daily programme changed the atmosphere in class: *“Since the intervention, there is more excitement in the class [...] so I can actually see that music changes the atmosphere in the classroom [...] sort of calming them down.”* Ann also referred to the noticeable soothing effect of music, reporting that *“music helps me with discipline in my class [...] It is as if music keeps the children calm”*. Mary asserted that *“the experience I have gathered so far, helped me to use music to calm my learners down [...] music brings a sense of calmness and it seems easier to get their attention through music”*. It was also evident that the transformation in their classrooms affected another level of stakeholders: Ann reported that *“parents and colleagues were impressed with what we have achieved”*.

Crick (2008) and Shulman and Shulman (2011) believe that a competent teacher embodies a particular disposition, one that is characterised by a desire to be proficient in what they do. This aspiration is visionary in nature and essentially rooted in a yearning to contribute to the improvement of society. ‘Competence’ thus implies a sense of agency, action and value. When discussing teacher competence, Fairbanks, Duffy, Faircloth et al (2010) also emphasise the vital importance of teacher attitudes and beliefs. These constitute critical foundations for teachers' commitment and approach to teaching, since they influence perceptions about situations, affect general conduct in the classroom, and ultimately shape perceptions of personal growth.

Based on the data generated, it is our contention that the participants experienced significant growth in their own professional competence. The data furthermore indicated enhanced understanding of music content knowledge, a core competence required of any professional teacher. It was also clear that the participants became more reflexive. Their self-knowledge deepened. Self-reflection is a key prerequisite for

good teaching, since it involves teachers' views on aspects such as their responsibilities, training, qualifications and pedagogical knowledge (Liakopoulou 2011). The teachers' reflexive competence also enabled them to adjust to change and approach unforeseen circumstances proactively and creatively. They exhibited adaptive expertise, as they were able to justify the changes they made to their music teaching. They clearly grew in confidence, a key requisite for good music teaching, especially by non-music specialist teachers (Hallam, Burnard, Robertson et al 2009).

Sub-theme 1.2: Transformation of the personal self

The data also indicated that, apart from revisiting and renegotiating notions of the self as a professional teacher, the participants experienced transformation at a more profound, personal level. When discussing to her drawing, Mary explained that “[t]he tree started to grow bigger and developed leaves, and eventually started to grow fruit. I grew personally”. The participants also discovered their inherent creativity, resourcefulness and perseverance. Jane wrote in her journal that the project “inspired me to think more creatively. We had to make plans to make things work. Unfortunately we also face challenges. But that did not put me off. There is a saying in which I fully believe, and that is: Challenges beg to be solved! Being exposed to all these challenges forced us to endure and make plans to survive”.

The data also indicated transformed personal dispositions towards music. During the second interview, Ann acknowledged: “I started to like music. I have seen a different side of music.” This view was shared by Jane, who admitted: “I am much more confident now in teaching music, and even started liking music.” Mary expressed her transformed stance on music as follows: “I now believe that every person has musical ability deep inside. I love singing in the kitchen.”

Liakopoulou (2011) asserts that competent teachers have particular personality traits, such as patience, humour, creativity, flexibility and enthusiasm, and holds that educative interventions can indeed nurture these qualities. It is our contention that the PALAR approach employed in this study cultivated the kind of personal and professional growth required for good music teaching in Grade R.

Theme 2: Teachers' sense of the transforming learner

Our data also confirmed the teachers' growing awareness of the transformational effects of music on their learners. In this regard, they alluded specifically to music's therapeutic value and its contribution to the holistic growth of the young child. They also observed that music activities encouraged their learners to socialise across cultural and language divides.

Sub-theme 2.1: Music's contribution to the holistic development of the learner

The teachers were clearly aware of the beneficial effects of music on their learners' gross motor and fine motor development. Jane noted that “I can see how the children grow in physical strength just by dancing and jumping to the songs we sing”. Mary also

observed that her learners “*have developed physical skills like balancing themselves on a beam [while] listening to music*”. In her response, Ann alluded to cognitive development through music: “*I can say without a doubt that music enabled the learners to grasp concepts faster.*” Mary concurred, reporting that she “*experienced that the children learn new concepts easier when they do it by singing it in a song. Music helps to improve their memory*”.

Nye, Nye, Martin and Van Rysselberghe (1992), among others, hold that music contributes to young learners’ cognitive development, since it presents information that needs to be organised through conceptual thinking. During musical encounters, muscles, ears, eyes and often voice interact with the brain. The data clearly confirmed the participants’ intuitive awareness of the contribution of music to the intellectual development of their young learners.

Encounters with music also enable human beings to access and experience profound emotions that can often not be communicated via language (Nussbaum 2001; Röscher 2002). Campbell and Scott-Kassner (2012) thus argue that music activities allow young learners to experience and express emotions in unique, non-verbal ways. Music helps them to access their inner worlds and organise their feelings (Nye et al 1992). The data generated clearly indicated the teachers’ innate awareness of the link between music and emotional development.

Sub-theme 2.2: Restorative value

The data also revealed that the teachers had observed the remedial impact of music on their learners. When clarifying her drawing, Ann explained that “*the children that felt unhappy when they arrived [...] later started smiling after being involved in music*”. She concluded by stating that “*it is wonderful to see how their moods change through involvement in music*”.

Jane believed that the music activities provided a sanctuary and a safe haven that enabled “*children with problems at home [to] use music to expose themselves and express their feelings*”. She noted that the learners’ “*self-confidence grows when taking part in music activities. Their little lights started to shine. They love doing it. To see the faces when we do music ring now with instruments, blesses my heart*”.

Mary’s second drawing represented children “*dancing, singing, jumping around and clapping hands*”; she explained that she could “*see the joy in them when they do music*”. During the interview, Jane also referred to the liberating impact of music activities on learners: “*They lose inhibitions when they start moving. They use music to dance and jump and get rid of extra energy.*” She furthermore observed that, during music activities, the children “*release tension and it helps the children expressing [sic] feelings without using words. Children enjoy music and they can be themselves*”. Ann concluded that, ultimately, “*music awakens something inside of them. It unlocks something that’s there, but maybe [they] never got a chance to unlock that potential*”.

Sub-theme 2.3: Social cohesion

As mentioned earlier, the three class groups comprised African and Coloured children whose mother tongue was either isiXhosa, English or Afrikaans. All three participants noted that music activities enabled their learners to transcend their cultural and linguistic differences: *“Music helps to overcome this problem.”* Ann noted that the learners *“enjoy interaction with friends, as this gives them a sense of belonging”*. Jane also believed that *“participation as a group is important and music helps them to take part as a group as well as individually. They respect one another”*. Mary concluded that *“as trust develops between them through being part of music, racial separation disappears”*.

It was also clear that the participants believed that music activities enhance young learners’ understanding of other people and cultures. They were of the opinion that music activities contributed to their learners’ early socialisation, as it enabled them to communicate with their young peers (Delport 2006; Röscher 2002). In this regard, the participants were also acutely aware of the unifying and reconciliatory potential of music education, specifically in relation to their multicultural class groups (Röscher 2002). The participants’ observations thus support Delport’s argument (2006) that music can enhance social cohesion in a transforming multicultural society such as South Africa. Their perceptions also endorsed the views of McTamane (2005) and Joseph and Van Niekerk (2007) that music can be used to strengthen social ties and reinforce cultural identities.

Ultimately, our findings confirmed that, after a series of collaborative interactions, the three Grade R teachers had understood the notion of reflective practice and action research cycles, and had taken ownership of their own learning in action. Above all, they had discovered their own innate musical competence, and were excited and eager to develop it. This enabled them to explore ways to incorporate music in their daily teaching and learning activities. They adopted the identities of equipped, confident, competent and autonomous Grade R music educators. They developed agency and adopted transformative roles in their classrooms (Babbie & Mouton 2006).

Conclusion

We believe that our project confirmed the suitability of a participatory learning and participatory action research approach (PALAR) for research studies that aim to enable participants to gain the necessary competences that will eventually give them agency and autonomy. We trust that this project will ultimately guide policy makers, subject advisors, school leaders, and above all, teacher educators towards providing effective and efficient in-service training of teachers, not only in terms of music education, but also with regard to other disciplines.

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Figures

Figure 1

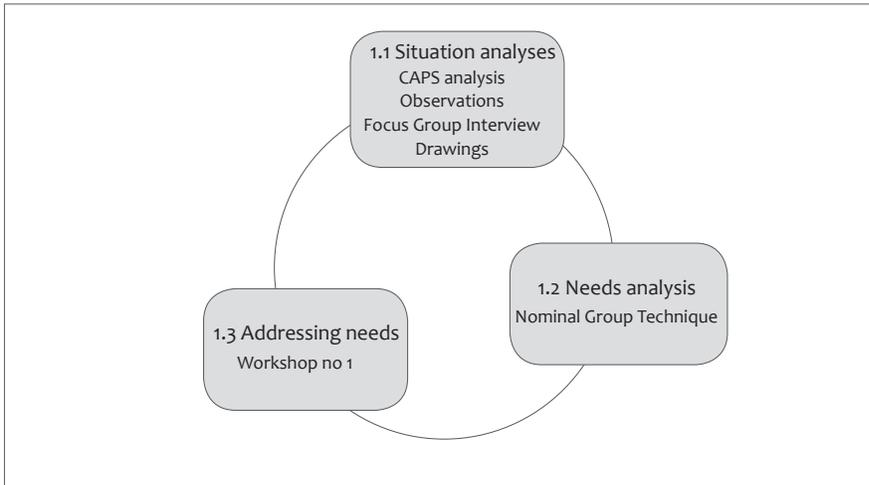
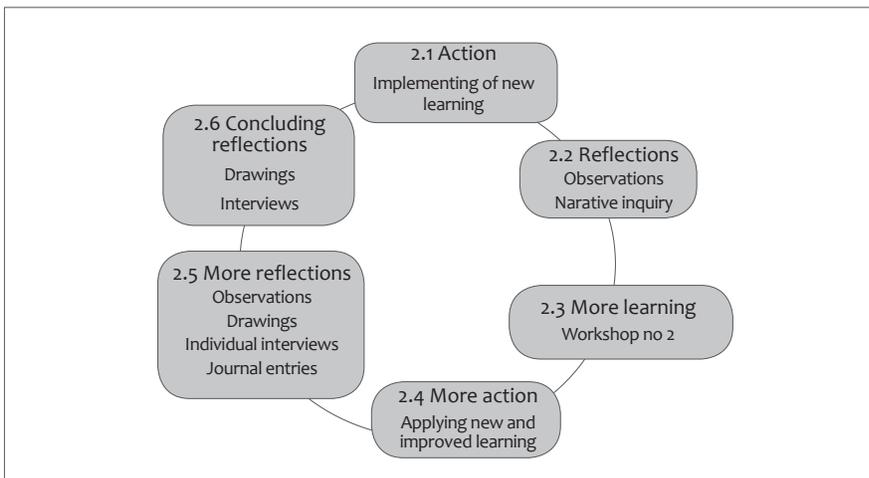


Figure 2



- i. Pseudonyms
- ii. We attended to all ethical requirements expected of researchers who conduct research where human beings are involved. Written, informed consent was obtained from the school principal, participants and the Eastern Cape Department of Education. All participants were ensured of their anonymity.