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Rhythmical music practices in primary school music lessons. A video-based observational study

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Steven Schiemann

Rhythmical Music Practices in Primary School Music Lessons

A Video-based Observational Study

Introduction

Exploring existing musical practices and how all people engage in music-making and practising ("musicing" Elliott, 2009) can be regarded as one of the core interests of this book ("Music Is What People Do") and of research in music pedagogy per se. This study wants to shed some light on the existing practices of how rhythms are taught and learnt in primary school music lessons. Rhythmical Music Practices (RMP) are widely spread in (German) curricula (Hasselhorn & Lehmann, 2014, p. 86), voluntary content standards, e.g., National Standards for Music Education (MENC, 1994), and popular with primary school teachers (Aicher, 2014). RMP can therefore be regarded as a core practice of what people do musically, but only very little is known about RMP and the teaching practices of primary school teachers in general (Lehmann-Wermser & Krause-Benz, 2013). The aim of this study is to investigate various aspects of RMP, which will be presented in the theory section. To explore which approaches and practices for RMP were used by the teachers, the research questions and methods of this qualitative, video-based, observational study are outlined in the methods section. In the next section the results are presented. Based on the data of this study, implications of the teachers' choices of rhythmical components (object) and interaction and learning practices with the students (subject) shall be discussed in the discussion section.

Theory of RMP

Rhythm in music is defined as "an independent temporal order and design principle, characterized on the one hand by uniformity, referenced to a fixed period of time; and, on the other hand, by grouping, structuring and creating variety" (Dahlhaus & Eggebrecht, 1979, pp. 394–395, translated by the author). In this study, we must distinguish between two components of rhythm: technical and expressive components. Dahlhaus and Eggebrecht's definition of rhythm rather points to the technical components of RMP, which are "related to the mechanics of producing fluent coordinated outputs [... and are concerned] with accurate and faithful reproduction of a printed score, rather than with improvisation or composition" (Sloboda, 2000, p. 397). This technical definition of rhythm.

The expressive rhythmical components are timbre, timing, loudness, and pitch. Sloboda points out that the expressive rhythmical components, as in any music making, are "intentional variations in performance parameters chosen by the performer to influence cognitive and aesthetic outcomes for the listener" (Sloboda, 2000, p. 398). Hence the expressive rhythmical components "demand knowledge of the underlying structural and stylistic constraints of a piece or a genre" (ibid.).

The teaching and learning approaches of RMP are defined as playing "simple to complex [rhythms] in the form of body percussion and percussion instruments" (Hasselhorn & Lehmann, 2014, p. 86, translated by the author). RMP is contained in about 65% of the curricula of German primary schools (ibid., translated by the author). It includes the use of, e.g., rhythmic solfeggio syllables, rhythmic patterns and building rhythmical instruments. RMP can be performed as a reproduction, e.g., of a given or printed musical score, or as an invention of individually created rhythms, e.g., in composing a rhythmical loop to accompany a song.

The next chapter focuses on the interactions between teachers and students in music lessons and what is already known about RMP.

Music Lessons by Primary Music Teachers

Very little is known about the teaching practices of primary school teachers in general (Lehmann-Wermser & Krause-Benz, 2013) and especially about those of non-specialist music teachers (Hammel, 2011). Non-specialist music teachers are persons who have no professional vocational training in music education and/or musical instruments. They are responsible for up to 70% of primary music lessons in Germany (Lehmann-Wermser, Weishaupt & Konrad, 2020, p. 24). International studies report that non-specialist music lessons are a standard-situation and that "teaching outside the field" (Henley, 2011) is a normal condition for (primary) music lessons. Further German studies come to similar results, according to which, on average, "10.7 percent of the teachers in elementary schools

who [...] have taught music have a teaching qualification" (Autorengruppe Bildungsoffensive, 2012, p. 335, translated by the author) in this subject. In summary, many experts have the impression that music-pedagogical everyday life in elementary schools is still deficient. Mechtild Fuchs states that qualified music lessons are the exception, not the rule; music lessons are predominantly taught by non-specialist teachers, or they are not taught at all (Fuchs, 2015, p. 7). The state of music teaching in German primary schools has been known for decades, it is described as "desolate" (Günther & Ott, 1984, p. 455, translated by the author) as early as 1984. These results show a clear tendency towards the necessity of making a reasonable distinction between the RMP of specialist and those of non-specialist teachers of music (in primary schools).

RMP of Specialist and of Non-Specialist Teachers of Music

In this paragraph, differences in RMP between specialist and non-specialist teachers are pointed out. Earlier studies have shown that non-specialist music teachers lack the musical skills (Russell-Bowie, 2009) and self-confidence to teach practical music-making (Henley, 2011, p. 25). Aicher was able to show that primary music teachers ascribed themselves the highest competencies for RMP (Aicher, 2014). Other studies indicated that specialist music teachers spent class time on all nine standards from the *National Standards for Music Education* like singing and performing music "however, less time was devoted to those standards that required creative or artistic decision-making skills from the students" (Orman, 2002, p. 155). The duration of RMP in Orman's study from US elementary schools consisted of (N=30) specialist primary school music teachers and it was relatively low (M=1.07 min./ lesson) (ibid.).

To be able to analyze teachers' RMP in music classrooms, it would be necessary to not only measure durations of RMP, but also to reconstruct how RMP is performed by the teachers, in terms of social-constellations and spatial setups. The next section proposes a current approach by Wallbaum (2014, 2018) to compare music teaching practices.

Experiencing and Comparing Music Practices

Some relevant findings in comparing teaching practices in music lessons have been made by Wallbaum (2014, 2018), which also play an essential role in this study. Wallbaum found two striking spatial setups that served as indicators for a certain music teaching philosophy. This music teaching philosophy can either be described as a deductive or an inductive approach of teaching and learning music. Wallbaum discriminates between *Dirigierte SchulMusik* (conducted school music in a schematic spatial set up as a deductive approach) and *Moderierte SchulMusik* (moderated school music in a circular spatial setup as a inductive approach) (Wallbaum, 2014, p. 113–115). The schematic spatial setup of the *Dirigierte SchulMusik* (conducted school music) is teacher-centered. The students act primarily in relation to the teacher and follow the teacher's instructions.

The teacher constantly faces the students like a conductor and guides all phases (ibid.). It can be regarded as a deductive approach that refers to a directive learning model. The circular spatial setup of the *Moderierte SchulMusik* (moderated school music) is student-orientated, because in that arrangement the students mainly act in relation to one another and can try out their own musical solutions. The teacher can be inside or outside the circle: observing or alternating between working groups to support "the greatest possible degree of personal responsibility of all participants" (Wallbaum, 2014, p. 115, translated by the author). The teacher's role is to observe, to moderate, to go around and to help students (see Fig. 1). It can be regarded as an inductive approach that refers to a cultural learning model.



Fig. 1. "Dirigierte SchulMusik" (left) and "Moderierte SchulMusik" (right) according to Wallbaum (2014, pp. 113–115). Legend: circle = students.

This preoccupation with Wallbaum's schematic spatial setups can be regarded as an observable approach to link to hidden teaching implications in RMP. It can serve as an introduction to the cultural/teaching script which is defined, e.g., by the interactions and the spatial setups. A cultural script can be defined as "representations of cultural norms which are widely held in a given society and are reflected in the language" (Besemeres & Wierzbicka, 2007, p. 56). Of course, not everyone in a cultural community "conforms to shared understandings and, indeed, speakers are not necessarily consciously aware of them in normal interaction" (Goddard, 2012, p. 1039). The same understanding is applied to RMP in this study.

Methods

In this section research questions and research methods for analyzing RMP are presented.

Research Questions for RMP

This study is adapting two of the conference's key questions to the topic of RMP: "What roles does music play in society?" (p. 7, in this volume). This conference question is transformed to: "What roles do RMP play in primary school music lessons?" And the second conference key question: "How can music education connect with learners' expertise in music?" (ibid.), is transformed to: "How do RMP connect with learners' expertise in rhythmical music?"

To answer these two higher-level questions, this video-based observational study is focusing on the following research questions: What roles do RMP play in the primary school music lessons of specialist and non-specialist music teachers?

- (1) Duration: How long are RMP in music lessons?
- (2) Teaching approach: Are RMP approached in a creative or in a reproductive manner?
- (3) Instrumentation: Which instruments are used for RMP?
- (4) Spatial setup: Are rhythms practiced in a teacher-centered, schematic spatial setup (conducted school music) or in a student-centered, circular spatial setup (moderated school music)?
- (5) Participant performance: How are RMP practiced: solo, in groups or by all students?
- (6) Teacher performance: What do the teachers do during RMP?

To shed some light on the question how do RMP connect with learners' expertise in rhythmical music? – the results of the previously mentioned research questions (1)–(6) are summed up and interpreted in the discussion section.

Research Methods

The questions (1) to (5) are evaluated by using a quantitative content analysis for an observational video-based study. To mark the duration of each event of RMP in the video, event-sampling (Bakeman & Quera, 2013) was used with the video analyzing software ELAN (2020) (see Fig. 2). A rating manual ensured that all raters coded the events in the video recordings similarly. The interrater reliability for the raters (N=2) with (N=12) music lessons can be regarded as high (*Cohen's Kappa*=.84 – .89, $M_{\rm K}$ =.88, $N_{\rm coding}$ =321).

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Fig. 2: Quantitative content analysis using the video-coding software ELAN (2020).

To answer research question 6, a qualitative sequence analysis (Dinkelaker & Herrle, 2016) was incorporated to reconstruct actions and to identify opportunities and problems of RMP. A part of the lesson was chosen which contained a sequence of RMP (about two to four minutes): three sequences from two non-specialist and one specialist music teachers were analysed. The sequence analysis was subdivided into shorter units (sequence elements). The sequence elements focused on the teachers' performance. They contained a video still, a musical notation, a transcript of verbal and nonverbal actions, a description, and a discussion of meaning and function of the interaction between students and teacher (see Fig. 3 for an example of a sequence element of teacher 3).



Fig. 3: Example of a sequence element of the sequence analysis of teacher 3. Legend: T = teacher, S = student.

Mixed Methods Design

The framework of this study is an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2009; Kuckartz, 2014, p. 104–121). Its methodology follows four steps (see Fig. 4). A cross-sectional mixed-methods video study with non-specialist (N=8) and specialist music teachers (N=4) was designed.



Fig. 4: Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Research Design of the Study.

Sample

All teachers and students in this study participated voluntarily. The teachers were asked to present a music lesson with a focus on music practices. In total, 12 primary music teachers partook in this video-based study. The non-specialist (N=8) and the specialist music teachers' (N=4) average age was M=45.3 years (SD=6.9). Twelve complete music lesson (12×45 Minutes=9h) of these teachers, from the German state of Baden-Württemberg (south Germany), were recorded and analyzed.

Results

First, the research questions (1) to (5) are answered using quantitative content analysis (method 1). Then the findings for research question (6), according to method two (sequence analysis), are presented.

Method 1: Content Analysis

The results for research question (1) Duration: How long are rhythms practiced in music lessons? – showed that, in total, all music teachers in this sample practised rhythmical music for M=4.7 min./lesson. Differences between the two groups of teachers were observed. Non-specialist teachers practised fewer rhythms in a music lesson (M=3.1 min./lesson) than specialist teachers (M=8.0 min./lesson). Fig. 5 shows that students of specialist music teachers practised rhythms with varied approaches and combinations, e.g., rhythms combined with tonal instruments and/or singing and chanting. Meanwhile, students of non-specialist teachers combined RMP only with singing or chanting.



Fig. 5: Research question (1): Duration of RMP and variations of methods.

The second research question – "Are rhythms practiced in a creative or in a reproductive manner?" – aimed at analysing which approach to teaching/dealing with music was used (*Umgangsweise mit Musik*; see Venus, 1984). In this sample the teachers used RMP predominantly to reproduce rhythms for M=3.7 min./lesson or for sight-reading rhythms for M=1,0 min./lesson. An approach to RMP with creativity and improvisation was not observed in this study. Concerning the teaching approach of rhythmical pattern-exercises, there were only slight differences between non-specialist teachers (M=0.9 min./lesson) and specialist teachers (M=1.3 min./lesson). However, there were clear differences in the duration of reproducing RMP between the two groups. Non-specialist teachers reproduced RMP for M=2.1 min./lesson and specialist teachers for M=6.8 min./lesson (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Research question (2) Teaching approach: Are RMP used in a creative or in a reproductive manner?

The third research question asked about the instrumentation of RMP – "Which instruments are used to practise rhythms?" Rhythms could either be practised vocally, e.g., counting-off the meter "1,2,3", speaking out rhythmical solfeggio syllables, or by chanting a rhythm on a neutral syllable¹; instrumentally, e.g., by using non-tonal instruments like claves, guiro, tambourines; or by using body percussion instruments, e.g., clapping, stomping, snapping or by using a combination of these instruments.

In total, the students of all teachers practiced rhythms with non-tonal instruments the most (M=2.4 min./lesson) followed by using body percussion (M=1.3 min./lesson). A combination of vocal and instrumental RMP or the use of vocal RMP was performed either rarely or not at all.

Specialist music teachers used rhythmical non-tonal instruments for M = 5.2 min./ lesson, while non-specialist teachers used them for M = 1.1 min./lesson (see Fig. 7).

¹ It was planned to incorporate beat box and mouth percussion as well, but in this sample these were not practised by the teachers or students at all.

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Fig. 7: Research question (3) Instrumentation: Which instruments are used to practise rhythms?

Research question 4 focused on the spatial set up during RMP – "Are rhythms practised in a teacher-centered schematic spatial setup or in a student-centered circular spatial setup?"

In total, students practised rhythms mainly in a schematic spatial set up for M=3.8 min./lesson, which equalled 80.9% of the time spent on RMP. Circular spatial set ups were used for M=0.9 min./lesson, which equalled 19.1% of the time spent on RMP. These findings were almost identical for both groups of teachers: specialist teachers' $M_{\text{circular spatial set up}}=19.75\%$ and $M_{\text{schematic spatial set up}}=81.25\%$, and for non-specialist teachers $M_{\text{circular spatial set up}}=17.24\%$ and $M_{\text{schematic spatial set up}}=82.76\%$ (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Research question (4) spatial setup during RMP – "Are rhythms practiced in a teacher-centered schematic spatial setup or in a student-centered circular spatial setup?"

Research question (5) focussed on the mode of student participation in RMP – "Are RMP performed solo, in groups or by all students?" Both groups of teachers practised most of the time with all students (M=3.5 min./lesson). Mainly in specialists' lessons teacher modelling (M=0.8 min./lesson), solo-performances of students (M=0.8 min./lesson), and student group-performances of RMP were observed (M=0.9 min./lesson). In non-specialists' music lessons, these modes of student participation were only observed for a very small amount of time: teacher modelling for M=0.1 min./lesson, solo-performances of students of students for M=0.3 min./ lesson, and student group-performances of RMP for M=0.2 min./lesson (see Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Research question (5) participation modes: Are RMP performed solo, in groups or by all students?

Method 2: Sequence Analysis

The first result of the sequence analysis of method two indicated that the performance of RMP in circular spatial setups was characterized by a teacher-centered performance and not by a learner-centered one, as would be expected following Wallbaum's findings (2014, pp. 112–115). All groups of teachers, regardless of their status as specialist or non-specialist music teacher, showed the tendency to perform all spatial setups teacher-centered.

Secondly, it was observed that the teaching contents and goals of RMP derived and consisted primarily of technical components of RMP, e.g., accurate and metrical correct reproduction from the musical score or the aural model given by the teacher, and the correction of playing techniques on percussion instruments. Within this sample it was not possible to detect an attempt to explain, correct and support the RMP in expressive components, e.g., for loudness, pitch, timbre, and other sound qualities (see also Sloboda, 2000, p. 110). We found that five of the eight non-specialist music teachers participated in RMP themselves 'like a student', without guiding the class. Furthermore, it was detected that six out of eight non-specialist music teachers were focusing merely on visual aspects

of RMP, e.g., when correcting only postures of holding an instrument correctly, but not correcting the rhythmical part the students had played inaccurate. It was observed in all cases (N=8) that the non-specialist music teachers did not correct rhythmical aspects of RMP, while all specialist music teachers did (N=4). The following table is a shortened version of three sequential analyses (see Tab. 1)².

	Teacher 1 (T1), Non-Specialist	Teacher 2 (T2), Specialist	Teacher 3 (T3), Non-Specialist
Room			
Spatial Setup	Circular setup: Interaction only take part with referen Students do not refer to e	Schematic setup: Students do not refer to one another.	
Teacher's own RMP	T1 acts like a participat- ing student and plays along with her rhythmi- cal instruments.	T2 models and plays every rhythmical pat- tern to her students and plays along with her rhythmical instruments.	T3 acts like a conductor. But only turns herself to one of two groups. T3 does not play/sing along.
Teacher Support	T1 does not conduct her students. T1 only talks to students who perform their rhythm-pattern solo. T1 does not correct or explain any musical aspects of RMP.	T2 conducts all stu- dents. T2 gives every student feedback on accurate rhythmical practice. T2 provides instruction and explanations to all students.	T3 admits to her stu- dents that she does not know what the students have played. T3 does not correct or explain any RMP.

Tab. 1: Summary of three sequential analyses of three music teachers.

Results of Methods 1 and 2

In the overall interpretation of the two data analyses, we came across two major findings. First, the overall interpretation points out that RMP is very similar in terms of learning styles within both groups of teachers. These data show a clear tendency towards the

² These sequential analyses are a re-analyzation and re-interpretation of previously published data focusing on whether music performances included learning routines with elements of "spiral sequencing" (Schiemann, 2021, appendix). These data were originally analysed for evaluating the effects of coaching and further professional development for a group of non-specialist music teacher over one school year.

performance of RMP in the primary music lessons as a schematic spatial set up, which is clearly teacher-centered, and the approaches to learn RMP are almost always using reproductive methods with an emphasis on acquiring technical skills.

Secondly, the specialist music teachers differed from the non-specialist music teachers in being able to apply rhythmical corrections, implementing tonal instruments and offering a variety of social arrangements (see Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Overall interpretation: Similarities and differences between (non-)specialist teachers.

Discussion

First the musical components of RMP, the teaching approaches, and the ways of learning RMP are interpreted (A). Thereafter, the results are reflected in light of the research methods used, and finally an outlook with questions for further research is presented (B).

Interpreting Musical Components of RMP

As we have seen, there are considerable variations in the duration of RMP between different groups of teachers. Non-specialist teachers achieve low and specialist music teachers achieve high(er) durations in all research categories (1) to (5) of RMP. Furthermore, the results suggest that the observed teaching methods and goals used for RMP in both groups of teachers refer to the same underlying cultural script of RMP. This interpretation is supported by the observation that RMP was dominated by teacher-centered approaches and choices of, e.g., content and song repertoire. The role of RMP as a direct instructional method with focus on developing technical skills can be interpreted as the cultural practice of, what Sloboda has described as, the "classical conservatoire tradition"³ (Sloboda, 2000,

³ Sloboda refers to the increase in difficulty of performing western art music (classical music) within the last 300 years (2000, p. 399)

p. 399) – only transferred to a primary school music classroom setting. The findings of other studies support this assumption, that there seems to be a cultural script conforming to promoting technical musical skills, rather than expressive components. Studies report that students and teachers have "low exposure" (Piazza & Talbot, 2020, p. 1) to creative musical activities, e.g., composing, use of expressive components of music etc., but felt it was (very) important to foster its development (ibid., p. 8). Furthermore, it shows that, despite increased discourse in German music education about the inclusion of creative musical activities and expressive musical components (e.g., Godau, 2017; Wallbaum, 2018; Zuther, 2019), it seems that it has not yet influenced primary classroom practice (of this sample).

Interpreting Teaching Approaches and the Ways of Learning RMP

The way that students within a primary music classroom tend to learn and pass on new information about rhythms was very similar amongst non-specialist and specialist music teachers. In both groups of teachers, the learning style of RMP reflected greatly their intention to work on improving their students' technical and musical skills. The teachers predominantly chose the repertoire of songs and rhythms.

One of the transformed conference's key questions was "How do RMP connect with learners' expertise in rhythmical music?" (see p. 7, in this volume). It can be stated that there were no such approaches to RMP in this sample. RMP, as observed in the sample, were rather based on teacher-centered choices of rhythmical repertoire such as songs or patterns, meter, and the way RMP were practised, namely through teacher-centered instruction, i.e., the teacher told the students what to do, what to play, and what to practise. Hence, teachers did not leave room for cultural learning and/or the learners' perspectives on RMP.

The directive learning instructions in RMP created the impression that it was reduced to the delivery of factual – and not to be debated – information and content. Music teachers in this study did not focus on connecting with learners' expertise in rhythmical music. Constructivist methods were not observed in this sample. The directive model of learning (deduction) in this sample was not alternated by inventive teaching methods, e. g., inductive learning strategies like anchored instruction or cultural learning⁴ (see Rowan, 2013). Teaching procedures using constructivist approaches to generate many possible solutions or ideas to construct general principles in RMP were not observed in this sample. The unbalance of performing RMP in terms of working merely on technical musical components (object) and interacting with the learners (subject) predominately through directive learning models is highlighted in Fig. 11.

⁴ In the case of language learning, they are referred to as "extra-curricular activities [which are ...] activities performed by learners in out-of-lesson, or out-of-school time. Within a language learning context these may include attending a language club, watching a foreign language film, playing a part in a foreign play, participating in a foreign visit etc." (Goullier, 2007, p. 75).



Fig. 11: RMP performances in this study. Rhythmical Components and Ways Of Learning RMP.

Method, Outlook and Need for Further Research

Some methodological deficits, mainly the low number of participating teachers, must be identified here. Hence, this study is not representative, but it can help to shed some light on the questions – "What role does RMP play in primary school music lessons and how does it connect with learners' expertise in rhythmical music?" A closer examination of a higher number of teachers and their RMP would be advisable for further research, so that a thorough analysis of RMP can be undertaken.

Questions for further research are:

- Are primary music teachers lacking constructivist methods to incorporate students' ideas or contributions in RMP/at all?
- For what reasons did the teachers perform RMP predominantly in a teacher-centered approach, regardless of whether they used circular or schematic spatial setups? Do Wallbaum's (2014) conceptual considerations of these two spatial setups need to be expanded?
- Wallbaum focused on two crucial questions, which open the need for further research: Firstly, "how are the social (cultural, ethical) norms really interwoven with constellations of practices in the classroom?" (Wallbaum 2018, p. 424). The previously mentioned finding (b) suggests, that practices in the classroom, e.g., spatial setups, are not (always) interwoven with social or cultural norms or intentions of the teachers, at least in this sample. Would there be different findings in a larger sample or at secondary level?

Secondly "how are musical practices and educational practices related to and placed within cultures – and how should they be related in a state and society which enables different ways of life?" (Wallbaum 2018, p. 424). It was observed in this sample that RMP were performed one-sidedly, with a focus on a deductive learning approach to work on the correct performance of technical rhythmical components. This finding is in line with other research, which found that "less time was devoted to those standards that required creative or artistic decision-making skills from the students" (Orman, 2002, p. 155). A more balanced application of rhythmical components (using technical and expressive components), incorporating a variety of ways of learning RMP (deductive and inductive approaches), would very probably be advisable to "enable different ways of life" (ibid.). To promote a change in this direction, teacher education and professional development will have to work on the question – How can the overall teacher performance quality of (R)MP be raised and met in professional development and in curricula?

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