

Krämer, Oliver; Piotraschke, Maximilian

Meaningful rehearsals. Criteria for musical work with small instrumental ensembles

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Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipt.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

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Oliver Krämer & Maximilian Piotraschke

Meaningful Rehearsals

Criteria for Musical Work with Small Instrumental Ensembles

Introduction

Musical meaning arises in moments of experience that, as part of an individual's biography, can have lifelong implications, especially in music teacher training (MTT). In our work with students we notice that such moments play an important role in the course of their educational process and can significantly shape their professional understanding: While the students acquire the requisite skills, musically meaningful moments occur that can implicitly function as models in professional teaching situations later on. This is especially true when working with ensembles.

The following article gives an insight into our work with MTT students in small instrumental ensembles especially under the COVID-19 restrictions, focusing on the parallels between the academic rehearsal situation at university and their future professional activity at school, i.e. making music in class. While the students experience ambivalences between informal and formal teaching and learning and gradually take on an active and leading role in the rehearsal situation, reflecting on such moments enables them to look ahead to the future and forms the basis for discussing didactic strategies for their forthcoming work in schools.

This dual perspective on current study activities and future teaching in schools raises concrete research questions. A central desideratum in teaching and research, from our perspective, are criteria-based observation tools that could take into account the diverse personal, social, and aesthetic ambivalences of working situations with small ensembles and encourage fruitful reflection. In order to reduce the gap, we placed our study at the interface between teaching and research using the methodology of grounded theory. Based on oral discussions and participants' written learning reflections, we developed criteria for the observation and consideration of small ensembles from a music education

perspective that we discuss against the background of current theoretical models in the field of music education research. We see the findings of our research as a contribution to more precise self- and group-reflection on musical rehearsal work. Thus, a process of self-professionalization can be initiated, helping MTT students in the planning and implementing of meaningful rehearsals in music education contexts.

Context of our study

According to our study programme, students training as primary and secondary school music teachers at the University of Music and Drama in Rostock (Germany) must enrol in both practical and theoretical courses as well as didactic seminars with a special focus on music education. In addition to individual instrumental and singing lessons, the range of practical music lessons also includes collective singing, conducting choirs and working with instrumental ensembles. For the latter area of study, our curriculum establishes an overarching objective to be pursued throughout the year, regardless of the type of ensemble in which the students enrol: *“The students confidently lead ensembles of different instrumentations and methodically develop stylistically diverse concert programmes”* (SFPO, 2021, p. 29). As far as the teaching content of the course is concerned, the study regulations specify the following aspects (ibid.):

- *Ensemble-specific repertoire knowledge and rehearsal methods;*
- *Creation of own arrangements;*
- *Development of own interpretation approaches;*
- *Verbal and body language appropriate to the music.*

The idea behind these curricular specifications is learning to take on consciously a responsible role in the rehearsal process. In this context students develop and apply specific skills, e.g. rehearsal management, arranging, developing and implementing different approaches to interpretation and, last but not least, acquiring conducting know-how.

During the planning for the academic year 2020/21, we noticed a serious gap in our curriculum due to the circumstances and contact restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The music ensembles (choir, big band, experimental music group, Orff ensemble), which are normally part of our study programme, could not be offered in the usual way and to the same extent because the number of people permitted to meet face to face was low, in accordance with the rules of infection protection in force at the time. Since the ensembles are a mandatory part of the curriculum and therefore had to be offered, we decided to make a virtue of necessity and focus on small instrumental ensembles to fulfil the needs of our study programme.

The students could enrol voluntarily, in self-selected groups, without being bound to a certain musical style in advance. In the end, two ensembles registered for the course. After the first sessions, it became clear that we were dealing with a special constellation. Each ensemble consisted of four people who were already close friends before. So we, both course leaders and students, found ourselves faced with (seemingly) conflicting scenarios, similar to group work in school music lessons. The dynamics can be described and illustrated in terms and representations according to Espeland (2010, p. 134) and Godau (2017, p. 130) in Fig. 1. The rehearsal situation is flexible along two polarities: It can move from a more teacher-centred structure (*formal*) to a rather private atmosphere in which the participants meet on an equal footing (*informal*); and it can follow a planned process structure (*sequential*) or arise from the moment and the intuitive impulses and needs of those involved (*non-sequential*).

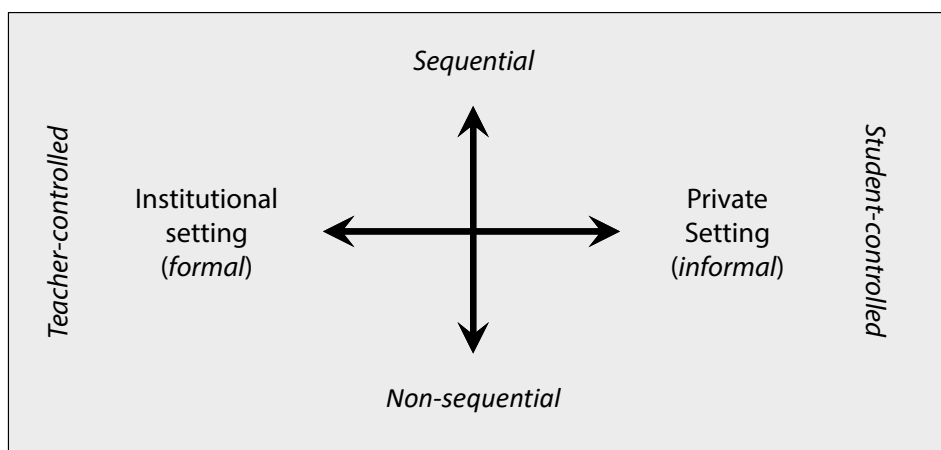


Fig. 1: Matrix for characterizing music rehearsal scenarios (following Espeland, 2010, p. 134, with modification by the authors)

Although the course as a whole took place in the institutional setting of the music university, the individual rehearsals shifted towards an informal atmosphere due to the friendship of the ensemble members (cf. Green, 2004). In addition, we started by consciously working with open tasks and suggestions without even addressing the question of leadership and conducting within the ensembles, primarily in order to get the groups going. Only later did we set tasks that required a clear responsibility – with the various members of the ensemble changing roles. In this context, it is not surprising that the diversity of role understandings became a central issue. In an attempt to resolve the conflicting approaches of traditional rehearsal work and leadership on the one hand and the processes of informal ensemble work on the other, we located our activities in the middle of the dichotomy, integrating aspects of both sides. We have recognized that

the work with small instrumental ensembles, as we designed it, centres on ‘participatory rehearsal work in formal settings’.

In the reflective conversations after the rehearsals, a parallelism in the perspectives repeatedly emerged: Just as our MTT students worked in the ensembles, their students would later learn and practise their instruments in music lessons and ensemble settings at schools. The MTT students showed particular interest in the question of which music teaching measures could be appropriate in certain situations and how they are related to certain role understandings, especially with regard to their own ideas of the teaching role. For us, as the people in charge, the particular challenge was to bring out these dimensions in the follow-up discussions and link them back to the rehearsal observations.

The ensemble courses end with a summative assessment. Instead of practical exams with grades, we established written learning reports in our study programme. This format is innovative in two ways: first, it shifts away from numerical grades to verbal appraisals, and second, it opens the door to a formative view of the students’ achievements in a yearlong learning process. Doing so, we switched our perspective from an ‘assessment of learning’ towards an ‘assessment *for* learning’, which includes meta-reflection on the learning process itself and an estimation of future development even after the end of the course.

The learning reports emerge from a co-constructive process of negotiation. The process starts with a written self-assessment by the students. Based on a set of categories they reflect on and describe their individual learning. They consider the repertoire, their familiarity with certain pieces of music and their difficulties with others. They also reflect on their abilities to communicate musical ideas and to plan and carry out ensemble rehearsals. They estimate their individual learning progress and reflect on what they still need to learn as prospective music teachers. In a second step, the university teachers formulate their own view of the students’ learning development, as they have perceived it over the course of the academic year, on the basis of these written self-reflections. Finally, in a third step, a conversation takes place in which the teacher and the student discuss the different perspectives and their perceptions of the individual achievements.

In the search for suitable prompts for reflection in the students’ written self-assessment at the end of the year, we came across a considerable amount of literature on rehearsal and ensemble work, which can be roughly divided into two fields: first, concrete instrumental and conducting methods (Lenzewski, 1958; Mölich, 1975; Brödel & Schuhenn, 2009; Cotter-Lockard, 2012; Holley, 2019) and second, research (Jansson et al., 2019; Henning, 2021) and theoretical approaches (Ardila-Mantilla et al., 2016). We propose to divide the first field into conservative (Brödel & Schuhenn, 2009) and innovative music education approaches (Holley, 2019), making the distinction in relation to how the aspect of participation is understood. However, in both fields of the literature we lack specific descriptions of how formal and informal musical constellations can be appropriately recorded, how dynamic role changes affect the rehearsal process and, finally, how this should be

dealt with in music teacher training. At this point, a real research desideratum revealed itself from the concrete pedagogical work: as a preliminary framework and model for the self-assessments to be written by the students, we urgently needed suitable categories with which significant moments in dynamic rehearsal constellations of chamber music ensembles in music teacher training can be perceived, reflected on, and evaluated.

Research Methodology

The study is designed to follow cyclical steps going back and forth between data collection in the pedagogical setting and increasing in-depth research. Because of this open approach and the iterative process between data collection and evaluation, we locate the study in the grounded theory methodology (cf. Kuckartz 2018, p. 82). Its aim is to develop categories for the observation, evaluation and reflection of meaningful rehearsals with small instrumental ensembles.

The process of collecting the research data began with a joint discussion with all the students. It took place in the last session of the one-year ensemble course (Fig. 2). The open discussion lasted sixty minutes and centred on the students' experiences, the most notable teaching moments and the perceived learning outcomes. In order to talk to each other as freely as possible, we did not record the conversation on audio media, but took written notes of the salient statements of the participants (1). We analysed these working notes and condensed the students' statements into eight categories (2). We then further explored the categories through an additional online survey (3) in which the students were asked to rate the relevance of the categories from their perspective. The result was a differentiated ranking in which the categories appear according to their subjective importance for the students with regard to their ensemble experiences.

In the next phase, we returned these eight categories back to pedagogical practice: they now served the students as a framework and template for self-assessment when writing the reports on their learning status (4). These learning reports form the core and the actual cases of our study, which we coded in a further step (5) to check the category system for completeness. We then took two additional coding steps: first, we coded the excess by assigning new categories to the previously unassignable relevant statements (6) and, finally, we double-checked all the reports using the full category system (7). Only then did we relate the results to existing theory (8) and developed an observation form as an evaluation tool for future ensemble courses (9).

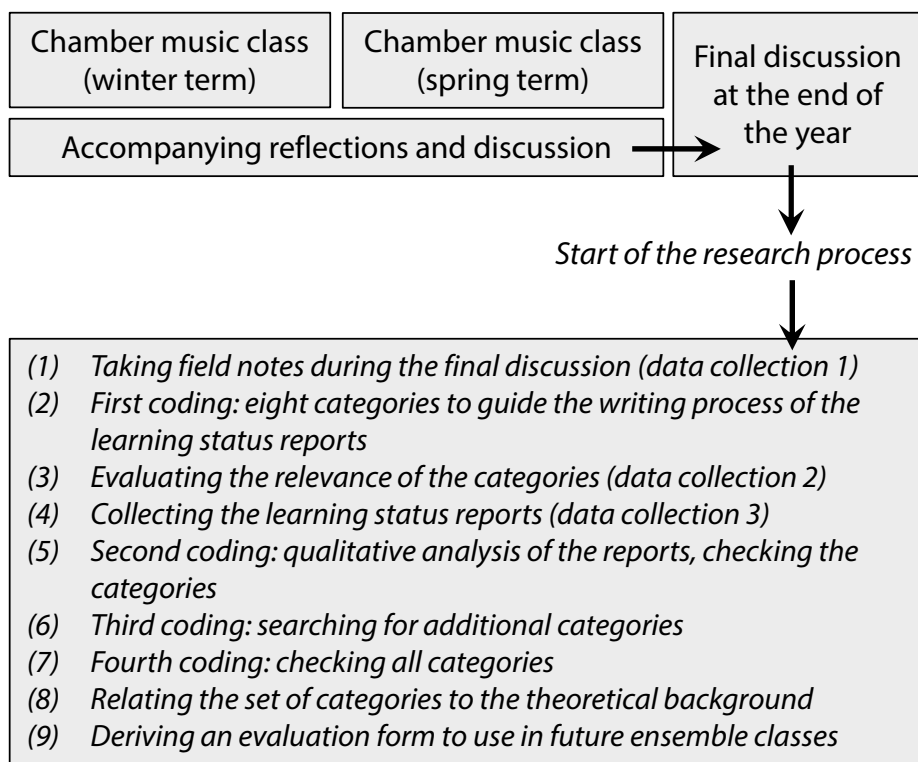


Fig. 2: Design of the study

Results

Based on our working notes from the joint discussion with the students at the final session of the course, a first formation of relevant dimensions took place. The following eight overriding characteristics of meaningful ensemble work are the outcome of this initial categorization step: 1. *motivating selection of repertoire*; 2. *artistic and pedagogical ability of the person in charge*; 3. *detailed and comprehensive planning*, 4. *strength-oriented musical arrangement*; 5. *convincing pedagogical legitimacy of the joint work*; 6. *musical phenomena as unifying rituals in group processes*; 7. *functional notation*; 8. *tension between guidance and involvement*. In the context of the course these eight features functioned as guidelines for the students to write their self-assessments.

There are similar lists with categories for the other ensemble formats, such as choral conducting, big band, integrative band and so on. However, these lists are normally top-down specifications for those who teach the classes. In our case, we decided to develop the categories in a bottom-up process, starting from the group discussion with the students. In this way, we wanted to ascertain the importance that the students themselves attach to ensemble work.

Alongside the work on the self-assessments, we conducted an online survey. In addition to their writing task, we asked the students to rank the categories according to their relevance. Fig. 3 shows the results of the ranking.

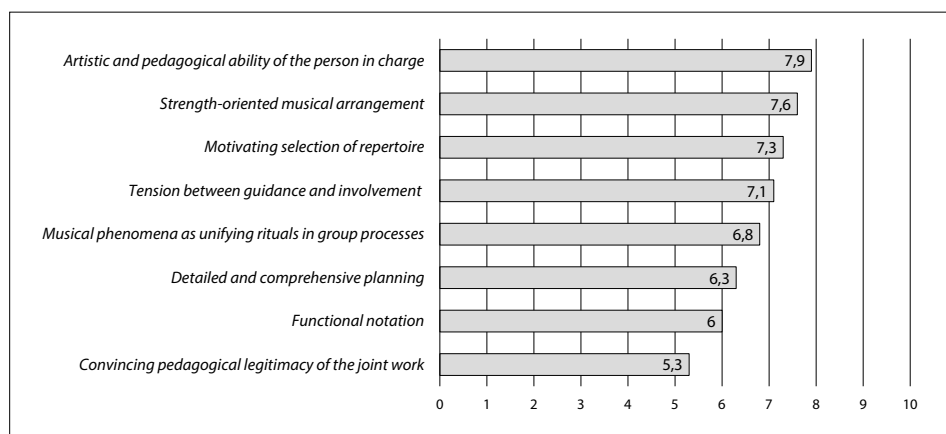


Fig. 3: Ranking of the different categories by the students according to subjective relevance

A slightly different order emerged after we coded the students' learning reports and assigned the resulting codes to the eight existing main categories from the first coding phase. Tab. 1 shows the quantitative distribution of the sub-codes after this new coding step. Two things stand out clearly: firstly, the comparatively large number of coded statements that could not be assigned to any of the existing categories ('excess'), and secondly, one original category for which no statements could be found in the students' reports at all. In the memos we wrote right after the coding process, we noted that there are more aspects of rehearsal methodology to be found in the excess statements which we did not assign to any of the categories. The role of listening, for example, seemed to be a central point for the students when reflecting on the rehearsals: they repeatedly perceived listening as a change of perspective to playing.

Main categories of the coding	Ranking according to the number of subcodes
Excess	23
Tension between guidance and involvement	12
Strength-oriented musical arrangement	11
Detailed and comprehensive planning	10
Motivating selection of repertoire	6
Functional notation	3
Artistic and pedagogical ability of the person in charge	3
Musical phenomena as unifying rituals in group processes	2
Convincing pedagogical legitimacy of the joint work	0

Tab. 1: Ranking of the main categories according to the number of subcodes after analysing the students' learning reports

At this point we decided on two further coding steps: we first analysed the excess separately and then, in a second step, went back to all the documents with the consistent set of categories and subcategories. The result of the additional coding steps is the complete set of categories shown in Tab. 2. From the original eight main categories, only six remained during the final coding. We deleted the category *Convincing pedagogical legitimacy of the joint work*, since the students' reports did not contain any information about this. As an explanation, we assume that the (musical) action itself, when imbued with meaning, does not need justification. The second main category that we dropped was *Musical phenomena as unifying rituals*. The statements that still fell into this category in the first phase could now be assigned to a new, significantly more meaningful subcategory in the area of rehearsal methodology. Interestingly, the newly added main category of *Rehearsal methodology* did not appear as such in the final discussion with the students, but only in the later written self-assessments. Even more surprising is the fact that it is now both the largest and most differentiated category in our final system. We have also added *Room acoustics* and *Instrumentation and style* as additional categories. To a certain extent, these two fields reflect the determining factors of a specific rehearsal over which the person in charge has only limited influence.

Room acoustics	Instrumentation and style
Detailed and comprehensive planning	Strength-oriented musical arrangement
<i>Goal-oriented structure of the rehearsal process</i>	<i>Consideration of the players' musical backgrounds</i>
<i>Repertoire adapted to suit the ensemble</i>	<i>Collaborative arranging</i>
<i>Analysis of the pedagogical setting</i>	<i>Instrument-specific musical role</i>
<i>Didactic reduction</i>	<i>Transparency of the ensemble sound</i>
<i>Joint reflection</i>	<i>Enjoyment of playing as target category</i>
<i>Spontaneous reaction supplements preparation</i>	<i>Reduction of the original scores</i>
	<i>Dealing with varying levels of technical skill</i>
	<i>Appropriate tessitura and comfortable range for players</i>
Functional notation	Artistic and pedagogical ability of the person in charge
<i>Alternative rehearsal tools for learning music</i>	<i>Clear concept of the intended sound (inner ear)</i>
	<i>Gestures and conducting</i>
Interpersonal level	Motivating selection of repertoire
<i>Non-verbal communication</i>	<i>Appropriate level of difficulty</i>
<i>Know each other socially</i>	<i>Stylistic diversity</i>
<i>Know each other musically</i>	<i>Pre-selection of pieces</i>
<i>Communication and decision-making</i>	
<i>Interests and goals</i>	
Tension between guidance and involvement	Rehearsal methodology
<i>Unwanted leadership due to inability of others</i>	<i>Musical quality of the beginnings and endings</i>
<i>Ambiguous relationships</i>	<i>Groove and rhythmic precision</i>
<i>Reassignment of roles</i>	<i>Usage of media</i>
<i>Clear leadership</i>	<i>Variety of methods</i>
<i>Constructive communication for positive atmosphere</i>	<i>Phases of exploration</i>
<i>Intentional stimuli to steer the group process</i>	<i>Project work vs. sequential rehearsals</i>
<i>Democratic negotiation of decisions</i>	<i>Phases of practice</i>
	<i>Diagnostic listening</i>
	<i>Work on the musical form</i>
	<i>Formal/informal dynamics</i>

Tab. 2:
Final set of main categories and subcategories

Discussion

In search for suitable theory models for meaningful work with music ensembles and for suitable rehearsal strategies against the background of pedagogical considerations, we came across only two current models: one from Austria and one from Germany.¹ In relation to these models, we want to close with a discussion on our own findings and determine the extent to which the perspectives are compatible in terms of content.

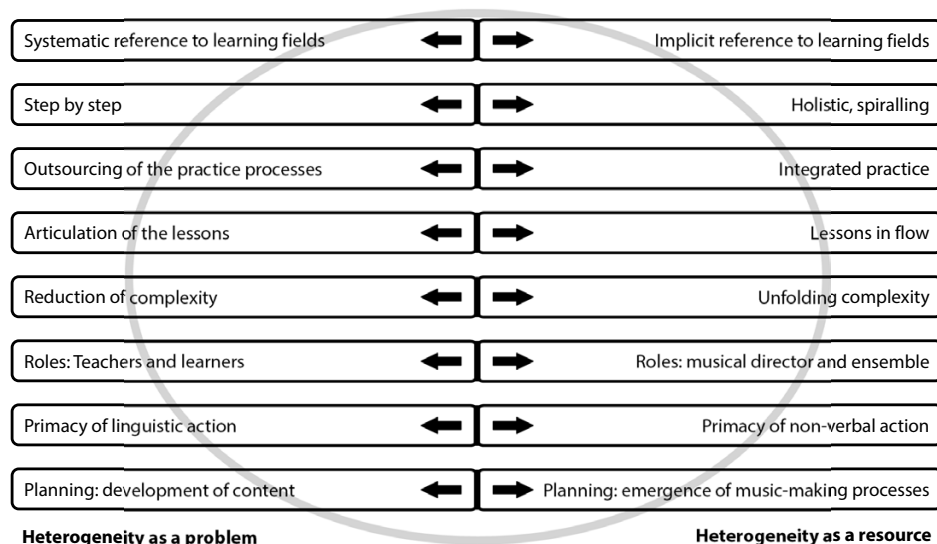


Fig. 4: Polarities between pedagogical und musical perspectives on rehearsing (Aigner-Monarth & Ardila-Mantilla, 2016: translation by the authors)

The first model (Fig. 4), designed by Elisabeth Aigner-Monarth and Natalia Ardila-Mantilla (2016, p. 43), shows two fundamentally different perspectives on the observation and analysis of musical rehearsal processes. The left side emphasizes the pedagogical perspective: practising appears primarily as a learning process that is expressed in didactically motivated considerations and actions and in the corresponding roles of teachers and learners. The right side emphasizes the inner-musical perspective: the rehearsal appears as a creative, artistic process in which the heterogeneity of those involved is no longer a problem but becomes a resource. Both perspectives form an area of (potential) conflict and differentiate between several polarities. Teachers can flexibly move back and forth between these

¹ Both models are published as part of the proceedings following a conference on instrumental group tuition which was held in 2015 at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw).

polarities and change perspective step by step. Individual terms, which are intended as poles in this model, are actually also found as content-related points in the students' self-reflections (e.g. the aspect of "didactic reduction" or the question of included "practice phases"). Overall, it seems that the students do not see the relationship between the pedagogical and artistic approaches in the sense that the model suggests, namely as two poles of a behavioural spectrum, but rather as a synthesis that fruitfully comes together in musical rehearsal work, without the one being separated from the other (e.g. "artistic and pedagogical ability of the person in charge").

The situation is slightly different with the second theoretical model (Fig. 5), which was generated from the research conducted for the German JeKi project.² Ulrike Kranefeld (2016) identified the central motives and dimensions of this form of ensemble work in music education based on interviews with the teachers involved (school teachers and instrumental teachers). With regard to the central motivation for enabling ensemble playing, Kranefeld elaborates three essential points from the teacher's point of view: First, to teach differentiated; second, to support and encourage the members of the ensemble individually; and third, to develop the collective sound of the group (Kranefeld, 2016, p. 14).

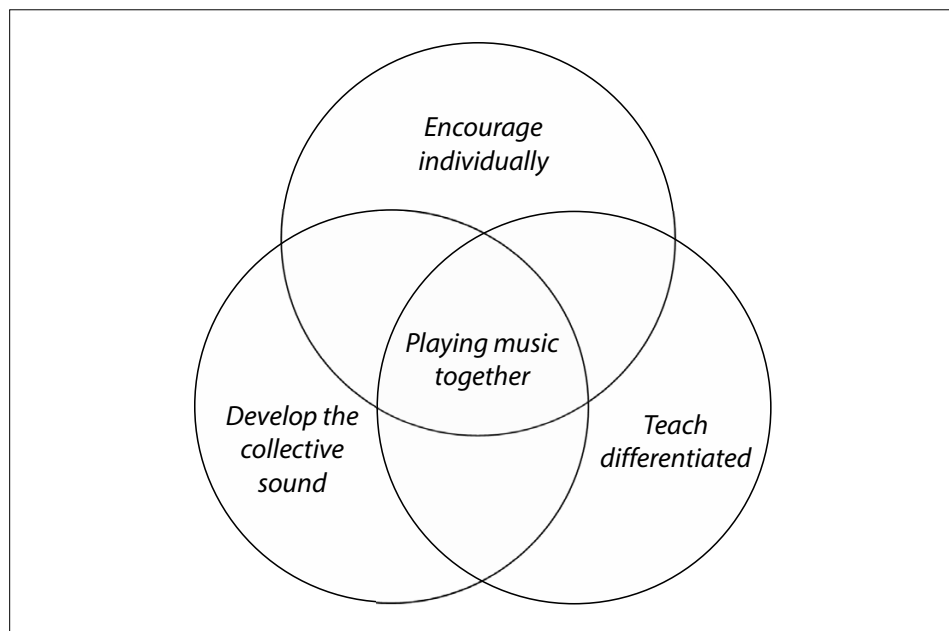


Fig. 5: Three essential guidelines for rehearsals in music education settings (Kranefeld, 2016; translation by the authors)

² JeKi is an acronym for *Jedem Kind ein Instrument* (=an instrument for every child), a pedagogical project for collectively learning instruments in a classroom context at general schools in Germany.

In fact, as Fig. 6 shows, the eight main categories of our coding system can easily be located in relation to the three essential objectives that Ulrike Kranefeld elaborates in her model of pedagogically meaningful ensemble rehearsals in the context of the German JeKi project. The majority of the categories found serve at least two of Kranefeld's central demands for ensemble work that is meaningful from a musical and social point of view. According to our understanding, the students' reflections on the "tension between guidance and involvement" play the most important role in the entire field because they are essential for the type and success of the musical interaction and also show references to all three dimensions of Kranefeld's model.

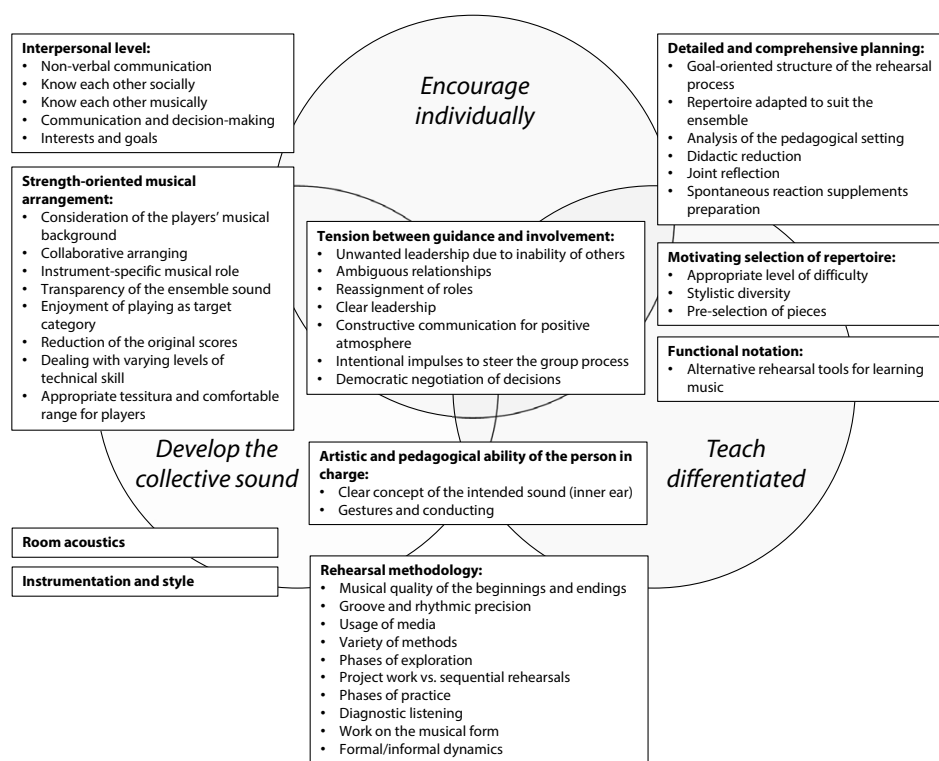


Fig. 6: Set of categories and subcategories in relation to Kranefeld's essential guidelines for rehearsals in music education settings

Conclusion and Implications

Rehearsal work with small instrumental ensembles has generally been much less frequently researched in the context of music education than musical work with common larger formations such as choirs, orchestras, or big bands. In addition, it has differences in content to these which are evident, for example, in a more flexible understanding of the roles of those involved and in considerably greater opportunities for participation. It was the central concern of our study to take a closer look at this specific rehearsal work with small instrumental ensembles and to explore its didactic specifics.

On the basis of reflections supplied by university students, we were able to generate a differentiated set of categories which must be given particular didactic attention when rehearsing with small instrumental ensembles so that the process is experienced as significant by the individuals involved and that they can feel emotionally engaged and involved in the musical work. The musical and pedagogical field of rehearsals can now be convincingly structured on the basis of ten main categories, with the aspect of 'tension between guidance and involvement' being the one to which the students referred the most and which is therefore most relevant with regard to planning and carrying out rehearsals with small instrumental ensembles.

Certainly we do not want to claim or establish a fixed cause-effect connection between informal dynamic rehearsal work, participation and the genesis of meaning. However, our findings allow the assumption that in rehearsals in which the students become involved, can contribute, and are encouraged and challenged according to their learning level, the probability of meaningful moments with music increases. Conversely, if the person in charge of the rehearsal enforces his or her individual concept of musical interpretation, without taking the participants' ideas into account, we assume that the probability of 'meaningful moments with music' declines.

In addition, we were able to show that our results are very close to an existing music education model for group rehearsal processes that Ulrike Kranefeld developed in connection with research into the Jeki project. In a certain sense, our results can be understood as branched differentiations of the three essential pedagogical guidelines (*teach differentiated, develop the collective sound, and encourage individually*).

Our research results have already found their way into our own music-teaching practice as university teachers and have played an important role since the completion of our study: in a further step, we developed a specific observation sheet based on our results. When using it, the aim is not to work through as many points as possible, but to sharpen the participants' view of the special features of a specific rehearsal situation and to capture the significant moments of the players' interaction. Since then, we have used the observation sheet either as a coherent form with all the categories and dimensions or as isolated cards with the focus on one of the main categories to draw attention to specific aspects of the

rehearsal process. However, it is also conceivable to use the isolated categories in the sense of “rotating attention” (cf. Mantel, 2013, pp. 24–25) and to successively make them the subject of a series of rehearsals. In addition to such peer-to-peer feedback, the categories can also be used for in-depth self-reflection on the basis of the various dimensions and items.

With our specific set of categories, we want to contribute to a broadened perspective on the complex musical-aesthetic and social structures of each rehearsal. We want to show that so much more is possible in terms of social dynamics and constructive participation than we generally assume in music education situations. In this sense, we hope that our findings will help to improve music pedagogical practice by reflecting on ensemble rehearsals in different social settings and from different perspectives.

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