On the Music Teacher as a Role Model

An Essay on Understanding the Music Teacher from an Ethnographer's Point of View

Evert Bisschop Boele

Keywords: *Ethnography; ethnomusicology; ethnomethodology; idioculture; positionality*

This paper explores the relationship between ethnography and music education. The possible meanings of the prefix 'ethno' will be reflected upon in three related concepts: ethnography, ethnomusicology and ethnomethodology. In a second step, the focus will shift to music education. The concept of 'idiocultural music education' will be clarified in the context of the current debates about what music education is meant for in order to use ideas from ethnography in a productive way. In a third step, the core of this essay, two related productive ways of using ideas from ethnography are introduced: one focuses on the importance of ethnographic knowledge of pupils' musical lives, the other on the importance of making explicit the inevitable positionality of the music teacher as a musical idioculture. The concluding section explains why, ultimately, the idea of the music teacher as a role model needs to be reconsidered.

Introduction

I was educated at a Dutch conservatoire to become a music teacher. After that, I was educated at a research university to become an ethnomusicologist. At the time I obtained those degrees, they felt as somewhat related but essentially disconnected. Related, because they both were focusing on music. Disconnected, because at the time the idea of becoming a music teacher was to me intimately connected to a specific place (the music classroom), a specific audience (my pupils), and a specific relationship between me and them (me teaching, them

learning). The idea of becoming an ethnomusicologist felt as the contrary: as going out of the classroom into the world, as dealing with people rather than with pupils, and as me learning about and from those people and them teaching me.

After some decades of teaching, researching, thinking, talking, and writing, I eventually discovered that both – being a music educator as well as a music ethnographer – are related in much more intimate ways than I thought. In this essay, I will elaborate on this relationship. After this introduction, I reflect on the possible meanings of the prefix 'ethno' in three related concepts: ethnography, ethnomusicology, and ethnomethodology. I then, in a second step, shift my attention to music education. I identify a position in the current debates on what music education is meant for which enables me to use ideas from ethnography in a productive way. In a third step, the core of this essay, I discuss two connected productive ways to use ideas from ethnography: one focused on the pupil, the other on the teacher. In the concluding section I explain why, eventually, this means that we have to leave behind the idea of the music teacher as a role model.

The value of 'ethno'

Let me start with a reflection on the prefix 'ethno'. I have a long history with words starting with 'ethno'. I studied ethnomusicology, which is, basically, the cultural anthropology of music (cf. Merriam 1964). Later on, I bumped into ethnomethodology (cf. Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984), a barely known but important and fascinating strand in the social sciences. My preferred research design, over the years, became ethnography (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

The prefix 'ethno' binds ethnomusicology, ethnomethodology and ethnography together. The root form of 'ethno' would be the Greek 'ethnos', which was used by Aristotle to designate a group of people outside the polis with a common origin, common customs and a common religion (Dietze-Mager 2018). 'Ethnos' found its way into 'ethnicity', which "refers to the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a 'people' […], a comprehensively unique cultural entity" (Varenne 2023).

For a long time, ethnography as well as ethnomusicology have been understood in that same sense: ethnography, for example, as "the fieldwork-based study of a single society (ethnos) and its internal social structure" (Reese 2018, p. 76), and ethnomusicology as (amongst many competing definitions)

the "comprehensive analysis of the music and musical culture of one society" (Nettl 2005, p. 4). Ethnography does not only refer to a research design, but also to its products. Ethnographers produced ethnographies about 'the culture' of the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski 1922), the Balinese (Geertz 1973), or even the Frisians (Mahmood 1989). Such ethnographies were produced through conducting fieldwork, in which long-term participant observation in the everyday life of the people studied was combined with interviewing these people as well as studying the documents and artefacts they used while carrying out their everyday life tasks (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

But ethnography has changed since the cultural turn in the 1970s, in which the concept of culture was redefined (cf. Alexander 2021). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary reflects this nicely, as its two first definitions of the word 'culture' align with precisely this shift. It essentially starts with a pre-1970s definition: culture refers to "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group". It then shifts to a post-1970s definition: "the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time" (Merriam-Webster 2024). The shift from 'a group' to the more general 'people in a place or time' is essential. When studying culture, rather than focusing on people as part of a group, we now tend to focus on people sharing an everyday existence in a certain place and time – regardless of whether they feel belonging to a group, or not.

It is precisely this what ethnomethodology tried to do already from its beginning in the 1960s. Ethnomethodology "is a special kind of social enquiry, dedicated to explicating the ways in which collectivity members create and maintain a sense of order and intelligibility in social life" (Ten Have 2004, p. 14). And it is this ethnomethodological process-oriented direction ethnomusicology has taken, if only partly, in acknowledging the idea that music is human behaviour (rather than a thing, with a history), and that we have to look at concrete musical behaviour if we want to understand anything about music at all (cf. Small 1998).

It is the difference, in the terms of Andreas Reckwitz (2000), between using a totality-oriented or a meaning-oriented concept of culture. In this meaning-oriented concept of culture lies for me the essential goal of ethnography as a research design, of ethnomusicology as a discipline, and of ethnomethodology as a social theory. By using the prefix 'ethno', we indicate nowadays that it is our project to uncover the perspective from which 'collectivity members' ('individuals', or rather – see below – 'idiocultures') other than ourselves lead their everyday lives and constitute their worlds in processes of meaning making.

Towards another music education?

I now turn away from the 'ethno' processes of meaning making to discuss music education. But first some words about education in general. Listening to many educational debates in the Netherlands, it sometimes seems we are still waiting in the educational sciences for something comparable to the 1970s cultural turn in the social sciences and humanities. Mainstream educational debates, intensified in this (post-)corona era, seem to focus on efficiency and efficacy, on measuring outcomes and results, on rankings of national education systems through PISA scores, on rankings of schools, on comparisons and rankings of groups of pupils as well as individuals (the low SES; the overweight; the culturally diverse) and on what we now in the Netherlands call 'proven efficient interventions' to remedy 'arrears' due to the corona pandemic (cf. Ministerie van OCW 2023). If I listen carefully to these debates, I can only notice that, in spite of the evident fact that all parties involved wish the best education for each and every pupil, the preparation of young people living a meaningful life still appears to vanish out of sight due to our tendency to think about individuals in terms of their group membership or their positions on rankings.

Of course, also in the Netherlands, there has always been a strong counter current present in pedagogical thinking that focused on the individual pupil as a person, a human being. This counter current is growing in force, I believe, and influential thinkers such as Meirieu (2016), Masschelein (2021), or Biesta (2022), trying to restore the centrality of the individual child in education, are discussed avidly in education as well as in educational research. It is, however, still a counter current against a dominant, other way of thinking.

When it comes to music education, I see a comparable picture. In the Netherlands, music education has secured itself a certain place in education – however feeble it still is – by conforming to the norms of the dominant educational system. It has become a final examination subject in secondary schools in the 1970s, including a syllabus of knowledge and skills every pupil has to master (e.g. College voor Toetsen en Examens 2021). In primary schools, music education is currently re-securing its position through a huge lobby paid for by the Dutch Ministry of Education and cleverly backed up by the three most important powers in current Dutch society: Joop van den Ende's amusement industry, neuropsychology, and the Dutch Royal Family (Meer Muziek in de Klas, 2025). They are stressing how music (whatever that may be – the lobby is not very interested in defining its terms) contributes to social-emotional development, is good for the brain, fosters the executive functions 'in' pupils,

makes pupils more social, and also is fun – which basically means music is able to do everything at the same time, and therefore is the ideal solution for everything.

For the close spectator, it sometimes seems that the care for the musical development of the individual pupil has become irrelevant during all our talk about a 'generalized pupil' in terms of executive functions, social-emotional development, continuous learning lines, and efficient ways to teach everyone the basic skill of sight-reading. For that reason, I have been working on the development of some thoughts on the role of music education for individual development in the past few years (see e.g. Bisschop Boele 2022). For me, the primary question may be phrased as follows: what if the goal of music education is not the efficient development in the 'generalized pupil' of prescribed musical skills, knowledge and attitudes, but is to contribute to the development of the individual child into an adult for whom music plays a meaningful role in life?

I will not attempt to summarize my thoughts here, but I would like to point out two main points. One is that according to this line of thinking, pupils are not looked upon as an anonymous 'generalized pupil' or as belonging to a group, but as individuals – socialized individuals, with a specific context, a history, a biography. Through this line of thinking, we acknowledge that pupils are always already musical. The task of school is not to take over the musical development of pupils, but to contribute to that development by offering further possibilities to develop, to support and to challenge pupils' musical development from which pupils hopefully will choose what is most meaningful to them (Bisschop Boele 2022). The other one is that according to that conviction, not only the pupil is an individual with a context and a biography – an idioculture (cf. Fine 1979; Cavicchi 2009), as I would say. For the music teacher, the same argument is true. Music teachers are also idiocultures, with a specific context, their own history and biography, and innumerable options for further development of which only a few can be taken on and the rest will remain unlived lives (cf. Alheit 1994).

On the 'ethnos' of music education's pupils and teachers

On this basis, I would like to point out two major contributions post-1970s ethnographic thinking might deliver to research in music education. The first one is obvious: if music teaching is about giving each individual pupil possibil-

ities to develop, and if this development builds upon the histories, biographies and contexts of individual pupils, we need to know much more about those histories, biographies, and contexts. We need to do much more ethnographic research into the meaning of music in children's (and adults') lives.

And this research needs to be truly post-1970s. We do not need research about 'youth music culture' or 'asylum seekers' music culture' or 'the music culture of Turkish kids'. We need research about the musical idiocultures of one or more specific individuals, trying to map out their histories and biographies, the various contexts they find themselves in, the meaning music has for them in these contexts (cf. e.g. Campbell & Wiggins 2012). There is no quick win in this kind of research, which is local, small-scale, long-term, painstaking, and expensive. But if we, as a community of researchers, could all invest in this kind of research, we could come up with an increasingly detailed picture of the varied ways in which music is meaningful in people's, and already in children's, lives – which would be an excellent starting point for teaching music, and for the training of our future music teachers.

The second contribution ethnographic thinking may make to music education has to do with the positionality of the researcher and the music teacher. In pre-cultural turn ethnography, ethnographers themselves remained mostly out of sight. The ethnographic researcher acted as an objective, unbiased outsider to the culture under scrutiny. The researcher's role was to describe and to interpret the studied culture, in the name of science. The cultural turn radically rejected this idea and replaced it by stating that the ethnographic researcher is not outside, but always part of the studied world; that the researcher performs interpretive work leading hardly to a true account but at best to a plausible story (cf. Hammersley 2002). Methodologically, the requirement of researcher reflexivity was added to the existing list of ethnographic methods (Davies 1998). Nowadays, analysing observations, interviews, documents and artifacts must be based on an outspoken reflexivity towards an own positionality and situatedness of the researcher in the world.

When I transpose this idea back to music education, I see a similar picture. In music education, we think of the learners – mostly in terms of abstract groups, but hopefully more and more also as concrete individuals – all the time. But quite often, the teachers remain virtually invisible. That is to say, the teachers as persons, as individuals. They are outside of learning – they teach, they facilitate, they lead, they are efficient and effective, and most importantly: they are neutral to the point of invisibility. It seems to me that we try to neutralize the individualities of teachers by giving them a training that

focuses on generalities. There is one music teacher 'persona', one implicit ideal average music teacher, with all-round knowledge and skills, having acquired a generalized set of competencies which assures that music teaching becomes comparable across time and place (cf. KVDO 2018). This imagined music teacher knows how to cater for each and every individual pupil in the right way, assuring that each pupil develops in the way we think they should or hope they would. Teachers often function as an implicit role model in education: the aim is to develop the child in the direction of the teacher.

What if we transfer the idea of positionality, of situatedness, of idioculturality, back into our thinking about music teachers? What if we acknowledge that the music teacher cannot be 'ideal' but must by necessity be an idiosyncratic human being? What if we acknowledge that each music teacher can only be a truly inspirational role model for a few of the pupils? What if we would start looking at music education not as the responsibility of a single music teacher but as a system of actors surrounding each individual child in a specific way, and where the job of the music teacher is not only to teach music to pupils, but also to show pupils from which other individuals and in which other contexts something meaningful musical could be learned? Meaningful for some of the pupils in ways that the music teacher may not even be truly aware or sympathetic of?

The music teacher is not a role model

What I have tried to offer in this essay is some thoughts about how ethnography after the cultural turn, in two ways, can sharpen our thinking about music education. The first is that ethnography reminds us that our pupils are, each in their own way, constructing their world through very idiosyncratic – or rather idiocultural – processes of meaning-giving. Ethnographic research into children's musical lives truly tries to uncover their idiocultural perspectives on their world which can help music teachers enormously in their jobs. The second is that ethnography reminds us that not only the subjects of our endeavours, but also we ourselves, as researchers and as educators, are situated. Our position in this world leads to a specific perspective which may be for some people meaningful and for other people completely incomprehensible.

Am I suggesting that a good music educator should be an ethnographer? Far from it. But I do suggest that a true and unconditional interest in the 'other' combined with a thorough knowledge of the 'self' forms an excellent basis of

what makes a valuable music teacher. I plea for a core competency of developing what I call 'dialogical relationships in music education' (cf. Bisschop Boele 2021). I am aware that if we leave behind the idea that the music educator is a role model, we must also leave the idea behind that we, as music educators, are capable of prescribing what form of 'true musicality' our pupils are expected to develop themselves. In other words, we have to leave behind dominant societal discourse about what counts as true musicality, and what not (cf. Bisschop Boele 2018; Nieuwmeijer 2023, specifically chapter 4). I am, however, convinced that to help pupils find their own meaningful place in this beautiful and at the same time confusing hyper-diverse world is the true contribution of the music teacher to this world. And that, indeed, a bit of the ethnographer in the music teacher might help to foster this.

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