

Thematic Article

The Bodily Experiences of Music Teachers

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Abstract

This paper deals with the specifics of a music teacher's work in kindergarten and presents an empirical study, based on the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology. In the research outcomes, the experiences of the music teacher's work in kindergarten are presented through their stories about memorable moments of their professional activity. Initially, in accordance with the theory of Max van Manen, the research data were viewed through the prism of five dimensions (lived time, lived space, lived self-others, lived things, and lived body), typical of all phenomena. The paper discusses one of them, i.e. the teachers' experience from the perspective of the lived body. The stories demonstrate how through the looks, facial mimicry, and body language, moments of the teacher's everyday routine are revealed that would otherwise be overlooked or considered irrelevant.

Keywords: body experience, music teacher, kindergarten, phenomenology of practice.

Introduction

The specifics of the work of music teachers in kindergarten are much more complex than would seem at first glance, as it is dependent on cultural traditions, the context of professional activity, and particular situations. Therefore, the work of music teachers ought to be comprehensively examined both theoretically and through empirical research.

There are many possible methods for researching the work of music teachers. The character of research depends on the chosen research strategy, epistemological orientation, and the research issue. The current paper presents a qualitative empirical study that applies a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The main objective of this phenomenological research is an interpretive description of the music teachers' lived experiences of teaching music in kindergarten. Based on the theory of Max van Manen (1990, 2014), the experiences of music teachers are viewed through the prism of five dimensions typical of all phenomena: lived time (temporality), lived space (spatiality), lived self-others (relationality), lived body (corporeality), and lived things (materiality). In the paper, the teachers' experience from the viewpoint of the lived body is discussed.

The body and its relationship with the other is a topic frequently analysed by phenomenologists. In the phenomenological tradition, the body is considered to be the fundamental way of existing in the world, and any experience is believed to come into being and develop on the basis of the body (Mickūnas & Stewart, 1994). Attention is paid to how the human body reveals an individual's inner world and how the external world reveals itself internally to an individual (Sverdiolas, 2005). Thus, e.g., when we meet another person, we first experience him/her through the body: through eye contact, a smile, a handshake, or an embrace. The body is the medium through which we get to know and experience the world.

Philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962) examines the body not as an object of natural sciences, but rather as a specific subject, a living and lived body which has direct open access to the world. Merleau-Ponty seeks to overcome the duality of the mind and the body, drawing our attention to the fact that the body is not merely a tangible or physiological object. It represents a node of living meanings in which different meanings and entire ensembles of meanings unfold, such as sensory, gestural, and motoric functions, feelings, interpersonal relations, understanding, speech, and thinking. Thus, being a body means being related to the world and participation in it.

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Although existence in the material world is only possible through the body, bodily experiences are often considered insignificant. Even when body is at the center of discussion, we construe our bodily experiences as tools to achieve other goals, rather than the body itself being the main goal of investigation. Therefore, a phenomenological perspective of the body opens up a different space of meanings. In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1962), we find ourselves in a world of objects that we encounter through our bodies.

The role of the body in music experience and music education is still an area open to research (Holgersen, 2010). Despite attempts for the inclusion of the body (together with emotion and sociality) into the theory and practice of music education, the bodily experiences of being in music remain very poorly investigated. In its nature music is: „at the same time far and near, has voluminosity, impulsivity, an undeviating relation to human expressivity, is organized in a vertical and horizontal arrangement, and tends towards sequentially“ (Raptis, 2019, p.68). When music is played the body act and reacts. The bodily experiences of music is a great possibility of verifying and realizing personal attitudes and beliefs, also it is a way to “see” and understand other people's experience. This study is focused on music teachers and their bodily experiences in teaching music.

Methodology

This phenomenological, qualitative research study was conducted using the hermeneutic phenomenology approach developed by Max van Manen (2012; 2014). The main objective of hermeneutic phenomenology is to describe the possible meanings of prereflective individual experiences that can reveal the essence of the studied phenomenon, in this case – the bodily experiences of music teachers. In the hermeneutic phenomenology tradition researchers formulate a research question rather than a research problem. The main question raised during this study is: how does a music teacher experience his / her own body during the process of teaching?

Phenomenology as a philosophy and a method

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness. Phenomenology as a philosophy seeks to know the phenomena within human beings and calls for constant reflection related to our understanding and seeing of the world and our existence in it (Crotty, 1998). The phenomenological perspective helps scholars to study and understand human experience without any prior assumptions or knowledge and creates prerequisites for researchers to disclose a phenomenon through the people that experienced it (Converse, 2012).

The basis of phenomenology as a research method is analysis of human experience that allows one to perceive and understand phenomena as experienced by other individuals (Dahlberg, Gjengedal & Raheim, 2010; Friesen, 2012). As stated by Seamon (2015), phenomenological research aims to describe how different individuals experience the same phenomenon and what meanings they attach to that phenomenon. Thus, the researcher focuses not on individuals, but on the phenomenon and on what is common among different experiences of the individuals.

Although there are quite a few variants of the phenomenological research strategy, our inquiry was based on the method proposed by the originator of the phenomenology of practice Max van Manen (2014). Phenomenologists of practice start their empirical research by looking for moments "trapped" in an individual's memory that the individual can share. According to van Manen (2014), when acting at a particular moment, individuals usually do not stop to think about their behaviour, they do not perceive it and do not take a detached look at themselves, therefore the experiences cannot be clearly seen at the moment when they occur. People tend to more or less forget the past, however, certain special moments of personal life stay in their memory. Those moments are analysed according to five existential dimensions. Each of these dimensions can be analysed separately, and altogether they reveal the essence of the experienced phenomenon.

Data collection

Lived experience can be collected through different methods, the most important being a phenomenological interview. The interview questions are formulated in the process of the interview, yet constantly keeping in mind the main issue of the interview and the investigated phenomenon. Van Manen (2014) recommended discussion of the dimension of corporeality through these questions: How do you experience one or another situation with your bodies? How do your desires, fears, joys, or anxiety get embodied in the world you live in? Based on those recommendations, music teachers were first asked to remember and retell moments of their work they considered significant. The guiding interview question that was posed to the teachers was

this: *Please recall a striking moment from your everyday practice of teaching music. Remember that moment and relate what happened at that moment: what did you feel, what did you do, what did you say, what did others say, and so on. Relate only what happened at that time and what you experienced. Try to be as specific as possible in recalling that moment and tell me about it with as much detail as possible.* This helped us collect the teachers' prereflective experiences rather than opinions, assessments or viewpoints. Afterwards, they were asked questions about bodily experiences at those moments.

The research sample

Phenomenological research does not require a large sample (van Manen, 2014). I sought to collect sufficiently rich lived experiences that could help us to reveal the bodily experience of music teachers. I understood that, for a phenomenological interview, the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee is especially important: it should be close and open, based on trust and friendship. While the researcher is interested in past experiences, most of the details have been forgotten, yet the close relationship makes it possible to recall some particular moments.

The study was conducted in Lithuanian kindergartens, where children receive two weekly lessons (up to 30 minutes), supplemented by other musical activities, such as vocal ensembles or music projects. Lessons are led by teachers that have completed music education training programmes at institutions of higher education. The targeted sample was chosen based on these criteria: completion of music education studies, at least 10 years of experience teaching in kindergartens and participation in music or educational projects. This allowed me to sample educators having diverse experiences. Five music teachers (all women) were interviewed. All had worked in kindergartens as music teachers for more than 15 years. The interviews were conducted at the kindergartens where they taught. The average interview lasted about one hour (50 to 70 minutes). The total duration of the audio recordings was five hours.

After transcription and analysis of the interview data was completed teachers were contacted by phone and asked to provide additional information about the context of teaching music in a particular group or to clarify certain thoughts. I had two additional conversations with Jonė and Daiva.

Data analysis

Six stories presented by the teachers were chosen for the analysis. Following the methodology of van Manen (2014), after conducting interviews, data reduction is employed, then brief anecdotes are written to be analysed in order to identify the essence of the narrative and to establish pure experience. The written narratives acquire the form of a "fictional work", which seemingly departs from the experience of one particular individual and acquires the status of universality.

All the interviews, with the permission of the participants, were audio recorded and decoded on the same or the following day in order to take advantage of the fresh impression and the impression of the conveyed experience, and to remember the ideas and comments that arose in the process. During the analysis of the data, some of the respondents were contacted repeatedly and asked to specify their ideas expressed during the first interview or to supplement their stories. The stories were not compared with one another, no repetitions or similarities were sought, and no generalisations were made. From the phenomenological viewpoint, first and foremost, the moment was enjoyed, which in each case was different and unique. Therefore, each story presented in this text was seen as a unique experience. The research data were structured by presenting brief descriptions. These were prepared according to the recommendations of Saevi (2013) for a hermeneutical phenomenological text: an everyday and familiar topic was discussed, specific experiential material was used, and an unconventional writing style was applied.

To ensure the reliability of the research data, some of the interviewees were sent the stories and asked to read them and to confirm that the written story revealed the one told during the interview. The texts prepared by the researchers did not receive any comments. The teachers agreed that the stories their experiences and were presented ethically. In the presentation of the research data, the names of the research participants were changed.

Position of the researcher

Just like the music teachers in this study, I have completed studies in music education, and have taught music in kindergartens for more than 10 years. I have authored music curricula for schools and teach in higher education, preparing students for early childhood music education.

During the last 5 years, I have participated in several academic and educational projects related to early childhood music education. Si, I am well acquainted with the context of teaching music in kindergartens and the type of work that is done by music teachers who work there. During data collection, I consciously sought to dissociate myself from my own previous knowledge and to concentrate only on the experiences of the music teachers.

All of the study participants had known me for over 10 years and participated in different events, projects, or discussions regarding music education-related issues. The common professional experiences helped me to establish close relationships during the interviews, to obtain open and sincere stories, as well as to go back for reconsideration and additional data.

Results

The topic of the lived body directs the researcher's reflection towards how, in the framework of the investigated phenomenon, our bodies are lived (van Manen, 2014). The main question raised during this inquiry was: how a music teacher experiences his own or other peoples' bodies in the process of teaching? The analysis of the research data resulted in the identification of three characteristics of the lived body: an eloquent look, a talking face, and a narrating body.

An eloquent look

In a music lesson, I sing one of my favourite songs. I am completely focused on singing. The voice is full and rich. The song is sad, and I put my heart into singing it. When singing the second stanza, I observe the children's response: oh, how well they are listening. From that moment on, I split into two teachers. One continues singing, the other is observing the children. Their eyes look special: widened, not blinking, fastened on me. They do not express any emotion: no interest, or joy, or admiration, or sadness. Just wide-opened eyes, looking at me and as if not seeing me, a gaze I feel with my entire body. The children are totally immersed in music, they are totally with me and the song. Absolute communion. The nondescript look is in fact very eloquent (Daiva).

The story is interesting in two aspects. The first one is Daiva's "splitting" into a singing teacher and a teacher reflecting on the children's response. There is a clear distinction between the two actions: whatever is happening with the body (singing with emotion, in full voice) and what comes to her head when observing the children. The Cartesian Self as the dualism of the mind and the body is lived and experienced by teachers in the context of the children's look.

What is a look? In a physiological sense, a look is an action of a human organ – the eye, directed to a particular object under observation. During a direct contact with another person, a look expresses constant and attentive watching that confirms the viewer's attention and care. Sartre (1980) was one of the first philosophers who paid great attention to the topic of the look. When describing another's look directed at us, the philosopher argues that another individual's look is not just the eyes looking at us. The eyes of another individual indicate that they are looking at us, however, we do not notice the shape or the colour of their eyes. To paraphrase Sartre, the best way to meet another person is to not even notice the colour of their eyes. What we record is not the eyes, but the look, which may be questioning, demanding, supportive, or eloquent. In the contact with children, the look contributes to Daiva's understanding that "*the children are totally immersed in music, they are totally with me and the song*". It is the look that prompts the children's response to what is happening in the classroom and helps to feel the communion of being in music.

On the other hand, another person's look helps us to experience ourselves. According to philosopher Sartre (1980), in the face of another person's look, we become visible and become the object of other people's observation. The look may evaluate us, embarrass, or make us feel important. Teacher Aida says that, as soon as the children's eyes are fixed on her, "I feel the significance of my being with the children and the importance of the moment with all my body". When teaching music, we encounter not just one, but many pairs of eyes directed at us; we are evaluated and become the objects of observation not to one, but to all the group members. Teacher Laura shared her impression that "the children's looks remind me that I visited the hairdresser's, dyed my hair, or put on a new blouse. I forget about it, do not think about it, but read it all in the children's looks".

A talking face

I have visitors in my lesson: it is observed by university students. They do not embarrass me, and we work the same way as in every lesson: I am telling the children a musical story, we learn a new song, and we improvise the characters of the story with musical instruments. I am telling them about a cheerful hare, a cunning fox, and a lazy bear, I am "frightened" when the hare meets a wolf, "glad" when the fox deceives him, "surprised" when one child tells me he saw a fox in the forest, and "angry" when one after another they start telling me what animals they have seen. Dozens of facial muscles convey my joy, interest, fear, anger, or surprise. I must look stupid to the students with all my expressions. During the break I glance at the mirror – mimicry wrinkles are clearly visible (Laura).

The story highlights a distinctive, well-defined role of the face when teaching children music. The face of the teacher becomes alive, talking, and responding. Laura perceives her own face not merely as a part of her body, but also as a story-teller, a mediator of her relationship with the children. Philosopher Lingis (2010) defines the face not merely as an expressive part of the human body, but also as a repository of signs. Other phenomenologists also define the face as a place where signs hide. According to philosophers, the face is a source of communication which shows us and our emotions and expressions (Levinas, 2001), it talks and reveals what is passed over in silence (Merleau-Ponty, 1986).

It is interesting to note that Laura "discovers" her talking face when observed by other people. Just like Daiva, Laura sees herself through the eyes of others. In front of the students, her usual facial expressions seem strange and stupid to her. Sartre (1980) also notes that an individual becomes attentive to his own body not because of himself, but because of others. That means that individuals are constantly aware of their bodies not from their own viewpoint, but how other people may see them. In other words, they sense their bodies from the perspective of other people: How does the other see my body? How does the other perceive my responses? Laura feels the unconventionality of her facial expressions when comparing herself in an everyday environment and when being observed by strangers – the university students.

A narrating body

In a music lesson, I am different. I take off my high heels and put on comfortable, unrestricting clothes. Together with the children, I sit on the floor, roll around to the sounds of music, walk on all fours, and imitate different animals. I turn into the leader of a lion gang, a slowly crawling snail, or a motionless tree branch. My body identifies itself with a character, tells the story, and invites the children to get involved in the situation. I become something else, and am no longer a teacher to the children, but a playmate, a participant of the created situation. My body responds to the children's movements, repeats them, and extends them. Our bodies engage in conversation (Jonè).

Jonè tells the story of a body that differs from her normal, everyday body upon which she usually does not reflect. Our body is totally normal to us when, being beside other bodies, it behaves in accordance with learnt and automated patterns, when we feel relaxed and calm while our bodies perform synchronic actions that do not seem in any way unusual to others. Our everyday environment, such as a circle of friends, home, and the workplace, becomes the space in which our bodies learn to behave in accordance with usual and accepted patterns. However, work with children requires different bodily activity. These are invented, adopted, and we teach ourselves. In their work with children, teachers have a great deal of freedom to move and express themselves in space. During the lesson teachers can choose ways of sitting or moving around in the space. In Jonè's story, the body becomes a carrier of thoughts, it transforms into a character and tells a story.

The role of another body is relevant here: the mode of pupils' physical being beside the teacher is felt and experienced. Jonè experiences the transformation of her body when watching the children's movements and characterising the response of her body to the children's movements ("*My body responds to the children's movements, repeats them and extends them. Our bodies communicate*"). In a phenomenological sense, it is through the body that we are able to feel and see others as well as to find relationships when we not only feel, but also feel the feeling one. Our *I* does not only see the *Other* as an object, but also perceives our own subjectivity, the way the *Other* sees *Me*. Merleau-Ponty (2005) identified this phenomenon of the double sensation as the key condition of communicating with others. The double sensation concerns the simultaneous consciousness of self and other as revealed through the awareness of your own body: that is by simultaneously touching and being touched by your own body. Levinas (2005) also argues that our body is not merely cognizable to itself: it is also perceived by others. He made a point of explaining how a person meeting the *Other* becomes aware of her/himself. That is especially relevant in working with young children. As argued by

van Manen (2012), when children are young, they learn how they are evaluated by others and how others respond to them through the senses of the body. In other words, children experience and respond to everything through their bodies: to the classroom atmosphere, the environment of their home and around home, relationships, and conflicts. The body language of a teacher and children in a lesson become the basis of musical communication.

Discussion

The significance of this hermeneutic phenomenological study lies in its practical orientation, narrowing the gap between theory and practice. These types of studies help us understand teacher's experiences and to see the meaning of specific lived moments in classroom situations. Any generalisation in phenomenological research would contradict the very idea of the methodology, however, one can conclude that the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology proposes a way to discern the daily routine of teachers. Phenomenology tries to avoid any beliefs based on pre-existing knowledge and seeks to understand the essence of the phenomenon through everyday experiences. Merleau-Ponty (2014) argues that the world of science is based on the living world, therefore, we have to constantly look for experience that is perceived in different ways.

The current study presents the experiences of music teacher's work in kindergartens through teachers' stories about the memorable moments of their professional activity. When reading the collected stories, one may think that nothing significant happened in the situations recalled by the teachers. We hardly see any conflict, resistance, or disagreement. However, the inquiry reveals that, despite the smooth process of the work with children, the teacher's inner life is filled with doubt, considerations, and reflection.

The teachers' stories about their bodily experiences in different situations indicate that, for them, memorable moments relate to physical experiences. As argued by van Manen (1990), the teacher's body participates in events and "tells" about specific experiences not only reflecting on them from the perspective of the present, but also revealing how the moment was experienced at that moment. Recalling physical experiences create preconditions for revealing such moments of the teachers' everyday lives, which would otherwise be overlooked or considered irrelevant. Aida feels the children's looks with her entire body and, encouraged by them, "*experiences the importance of being with children and the significance of the moment*". Laura perceives her face as a carrier of emotional information ("*dozens of facial muscles reveal joy, interest, fear, anger, and surprise*"), while Jonė experiences her own different, purposefully transformed body ("*I become something*"). One can agree with Lingis (2010) who argues that the body is not "silent": it keeps talking through a look, facial expressions, and body language.

The dimension of corporeality highlights the role of another body in a teacher's work when the presence of children or colleagues prompts the teacher's self-reflection. To quote Merleau-Ponty (2014), we are not always aware and attentive to the actions and responses of our own bodies. On the contrary, in an everyday environment, our body frequently responds and acts "automatically", subconsciously. However, collisions with what is new and unfamiliar affect our attentiveness and awareness of our bodies. The teachers became aware of themselves when other people appeared next to them. The presence of university students in her lesson made Laura question the normality of her facial mimicry ("*I must look stupid to the students with all my expressions*") and pay attention to the changes in the features of her face ("*mimicry wrinkles are clearly visible*"). Eloquent looks of children noticed by Aida were the non-verbal expression of the children's immersion in music learning. The teacher recognised the meaning of the looks and interpreted them as an indicator of the quality of her performance. The teachers' experiences of their performance in the presence of others stimulated their attentiveness, encouraged them to raise questions about their relationship with the activities, and triggered reflections on the similarities and differences between themselves and other people.

The experiences of the teachers revealed in the study are not finite or leading to unambiguous conclusions that the work of music teachers is characterised by one or another feature. Therefore, the research data should not be considered a final and complete outcome revealing the only truth. On the contrary, specific experiences of each teacher lead to a deeper understanding and reflection on the complex nature of a music teacher's work, while the context of their work in kindergartens relates music teaching to the real practice of music teachers. The search for the essence of a music teacher's work presented in this paper does not aspire to reveal unchanging truths or generalisations. Through phenomenological research we seek to grasp potential meanings, however, not those that would imply absolute universality regardless of time, culture, gender, or other possible circumstances (van Manen & Adams, 2010).

On the other hand, the research reveals several unexpected aspects that expand the understanding of a kindergarten music teacher's work. The presented descriptions of the meanings of music teachers' work and their interpretations encourage me to continue discussing what it means to teach music to young children. The research outcomes may inspire further research in the field of early childhood music education. It might include the following topics: bodily experience of music related to teachers' social and cultural environments, the body as a means of musical communication in early music education, or the competence of music teachers to use bodily experiences in musical learning.

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