

## The music in Swedish preschools

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*This article is a field investigation of the musical memories of preschool teachers and child minders, their experiences and interest in working with music in preschools. It is part of a larger international research project at Mälardalens University, Sweden. The original component of analysis is adults' memories of play. (Sandberg, 2001.) Participants also interpreted their own musical memories and defined music. Under the umbrella entity, WRP (Women's Researchers in Play and Disability) participating project partners were from the USA, Brazil, South Korea, Taiwan and Sweden. Participants reported their memories using an instruction sheet, a drawing sheet and a questionnaire.*

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe the musical memories and experiences of preschool teachers and child minders. The research questions were: What level of interest do teachers and child minders have in working with music in preschool? What are the preschool teachers' and child minders' own memories and experiences of music? In which way have these memories and experiences influenced their interest in working with music in preschool?

The national curriculum for preschools in Sweden states a mission to develop children's own adoption of differing cultures and to mediate a cultural heritage. It aims to create and communicate different ways of expression in the arts as well as in spoken and written language. It constitutes both content and method in the efforts of preschools to support children's development and learning (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998). However, the curriculum does not state how these goals should be reached. This is a question for the professionals working in the preschools.

Previous research about musical memories (Gustafsson & Halblaub-Oddsottir, 1986; Halblaub-Oddsottir, 1989; Sundin, 1989) has shown that fundamental experiences of aesthetic activities occur during the preschool years. If the surroundings at this age promote positive and creative aesthetic activities, children will have the opportunities to preserve and further develop their interest in arts. According to this research, the personnel in preschools have an important role to play in introducing children to music and other aesthetic activities.

Gabrielsson & Lindström (1984) investigated positive experiences of music and how these have influenced people. The starting point of their research was Maslow's peak experiences. However, since music also can arouse negative feelings, as opposed to Maslow's solely positive peak experiences, Gabrielsson and Lindström concluded that

Strong Experiences of Music (SEM) was a better concept. The results showed that each SEM is unique, but that some common features could be found constituting seven different categories. The first category, 'general characteristics of SEM', describes the strong experience of music in general, estimating terms. The second category, 'physical responses', describes physical reactions to music. The third category, 'perception', describes experiences that relate to hearing, seeing and feeling vibrations. The fourth category, 'cognition', relates to changes of attitudes in relation to SEM. The fifth category, 'emotion', describes the feelings that occur in relation to SEM. The sixth category, 'transcendent and existential aspects', describes experiences that exceed ordinary life or in some way relates to living and existing. The seventh category, 'personal development', describes experiences of new insights and possibilities, confirmation of identity, increased self-confidence, and a feeling of connection with other people.

The research project 'aesthetic socialization' (Gustafsson & Halblaub-Oddsottir, 1986; Halblaub-Oddsottir, 1989; Sundin, 1989), investigated how we form aesthetic preferences and how the art forms gain different meanings for individuals. Most of the memories come from home and often originate from an experience with an adult, which is affected by joy, community and pleasure. From preschool, examples are given of the role that children's own culture plays in starting creative activities. Preschool personnel have in most cases managed to take care of and further develop children's aesthetic experiences. The memories from school, however, have a more mixed or negative tone. The negative memories relate to a rule, a forced way of teaching, demands of achievement and/or uneasiness and lack of motivation. Criticism and repeated experiences of failure create shame, embarrassment and a negative attitude towards singing. Sorin (1996, 1997) investigated the musical memories of adults and the means by which negative memories relate to feelings of being shut out and positive memories relating to feelings of being involved.

## Method

This study has a qualitative, explorative character. According to Kvale (1997), one of the main purposes of an explorative study is to discover new dimensions of the subject of the enquiry. The analysis in this study had as its starting point hermeneutic thoughts, where the analysis rotates between part and whole, and where the researcher returns to the material in the light of new facts or theoretical knowledge (Kvale, 1997).

A retrospective method was used to find out about the musical memories of preschool teachers and child minders. The respondents looked back on past events, seeking to discover something that influenced their future situation. This meant questioning preschool teachers and child minders about their musical memories at different points in time. Modern theories of memory tell us that experiences that have been emotional or have had any future value to the individual have the best chances of remaining in the memory (Christiansson, 1994; Linton, 1982; Strander, 1997). The interviews also included questions about the present, asking what music meant to the preschool teachers and child minders as adults and in their work with children.

Henninger (1994), Kim (1990) and Sandberg (2001) described a method where adults were asked to remember, draw and discuss a favourite memory from their childhood play.

It is not important to draw 'well', but it is the discussions that come with the drawings that are important.

*Group of respondents*

The respondents consisted of twelve preschool teachers and child minders working at six different preschools in a mid-size Swedish town. This cohort was sorted with convenience-selection (Cohen & Manion, 1994)

*Group interview*

Kvale (1997) defines the interplay in group-interviews as leading to spontaneous and emotional discussions about the subject in question. Patton (1990) describes the group- or focus interview as a 'guided' discussion, where an interview-guide is suitable to make sure that all important aspects are dealt with.

Group-interviews were performed at each selected preschool, in a room separated from the children. The respondents were first asked to recount their musical memories from different stages of childhood and as adults. Next the adapted instruction-sheet 'Music through Life' was used along with the adapted drawing-sheet. The respondents were then asked to reproduce and discuss their musical memories with each other.

After this, the respondents were asked to categorize their musical memories from their earliest recollection, their most important memory for adulthood, a negative memory, and persons or places of importance in relation to music. These activities sought to discover the importance the respondents themselves placed on the musical memories. The respondents were also asked to describe their work with music, along with the positive and negative aspects of this. The interviews concluded with the adapted questionnaire to collect background facts and the definition of music. The interviews lasted for between forty-five minutes and an hour.

**Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and amended by the respondents. The transcripts, drawings and questionnaires were then sorted into individual 'maps'. The contents of the maps were then summarized into individual descriptions where a comprehensive picture was created of the musical memories and experiences of each preschool teacher and child minder.

Data was next sorted into the age categories of three to six years, seven to twelve years, thirteen to eighteen years and adult. A summarizing analysis of the content was made to seek themes, patterns and categories. The identified categories were further analysed, placing like categories together, leading to a lesser number of distinct categories.

Finally, a further analysis of the material as a whole was made. At this stage, we disregarded the earlier categories and found new, wider aspects such as joy, community and pedagogical usefulness.

## Results

### *Definitions of music*

Some examples were given of what music 'is'; that music 'is' singing, listening, rhythm, movement, dancing and playing of instruments, or a euphonious sound. Others defined music in a more personal way or placed a level of importance on music, such as music is something that has been with them all their life and that it is a part of them, that music has always been important, that music is a necessity in life, a delightful experience or something that gives an extra 'spice' to life. Some gave examples of the inclusive characteristics and functions of music – that it is something that everyone can take part in, something that is always much fun and something that is developing in the individual. All respondents expressed a positive attitude towards music and gave examples of musical experience that they regarded as fun, important and useful, both in private life and at work.

### *Positive and negative memories*

The positive memories and experiences of every respondent clearly outnumbered the negative ones. The negative memories focused on difficulties or unmet needs of some kind in relation to music. Some had negative memories of music from school settings that focused on music lessons that they believed were bad, boring or did not 'give' anything. Other negative memories concerned music that had a bad influence or aroused a bad reaction. Other memories emphasised disappointment, difficulties and demands, and mixed feelings about being on stage during a musical performance. Here the negative experiences left considerable traits, but in a positive way, in that respondents wanted to make it better for the children in preschool. The negative experiences did not, however, seem to have a major influence on the work of the respondents. None of them expressed any insecurity in working with music in preschool.

### *Lack of memories and 'compensation'*

Examples were given of how people reflected over the different kinds of places or periods that lacked memories, why this was the case and that they 'ought' to have musical memories associated with these places and times. Sometimes this was associated with poor education. Even if there were negative memories, difficulties, barriers or few experiences with music, they have in all cases gained positive experiences in another way or later in life. For example, if people had negative experiences or no experiences at all of music in school, their interest in music could have been stimulated through playing an instrument, singing in a choir and in making music together with their own children or the children in their work setting at a preschool. There has in these cases been a kind of 'compensation'.

### *Most important musical memories*

When it comes to the task of categorizing or 'measuring' their experiences and meanings, the experience of music as an adult seems to have been most important for a majority. Music has always been important and they carry the whole musical heritage with them.

Interesting examples were given of how working in preschools stimulated the participants' interest in music. Other persons or experiences that were significant in maintaining interest in music included family and relatives, children and grandchildren, school and university, strong experiences with music, teachers/leaders, playing an instrument, singing and experiencing music in a faith-based setting.

Table 1 *Preschool teachers' and child minders' musical memories and experiences*

	3–6 YEAR	7–12 YEAR	13–18 YEAR	ADULTS
Quotes Together (8)	To start playing an instrument (12)	To listen to music, to dance (10)	Music in preschool (30)	
To perform (5)	The music in school (7)	The music in school (8)	Together with own children and grandchildren (12)	
Festivities (4)	To listen to music (3)	To play and to stop playing an instrument (6)	To listen to music (8)	
Alone (2)	To sing (2)	To sing (4)	To play, to sing and the music in preschool teachers education (6)	
To start playing an instrument (1)	To dance (2)			
Total (23 quotations)	(26 quotations)	(27 quotations)	(52 quotations)	

*Musical memories from the three- to six-years period*

Musical memories from the three- to six-years period resulted in the categories 'together' and 'to perform'. These memories referred to respondents gathering for musical events within the community. In the category 'festivities', the memories related to atmosphere and community, which are closely connected in that the atmosphere experienced was created from both music and community. In the category 'mixed feelings', examples were given of how the music aroused feelings and thoughts. In the category 'alone', there were examples of how music could be both a companion and an activity. When it came to the category of 'beginning to play an instrument' examples were given of how a lack of contact between teacher and student, along with demands on the respondent, resulted in a loss of interest in playing the instrument. Many of these particular memories were about the functions and abilities of music in creating warmth, partnership, community, getting attention and influencing moods. Music worked as a companion, an activity, or as a source of calm. The music also had an ability to arouse feelings and thoughts, where the lyrics of the songs were important.

*Musical memories from the seven- to twelve-years period*

From the ages of seven to twelve years, most of the memories were about playing an instrument or of music lessons in school. These memories evoked mixed emotional tones:

more so than in the earlier recollections. When it came to playing an instrument, the positive memories mostly related to performing in a group. When the group lessons later turned into private lessons the students lost interest because it was no longer a fun activity and there were more demands in private lessons. Both concerts in school and at the breaking-up day were related to positive attention from parents and with strong feelings of atmosphere and solemnity. The community and preparations for these occasions also had great importance. When it came to the memories of music in school, the positive memories were about teachers or lessons that the respondents enjoyed. The negative memories related to lessons that the respondents did not think gave them much or anything at all: they recalled 'struggling with notes that didn't turn into music'.

*Musical memories from the thirteen to eighteen-years period*

Memories from the thirteen to eighteen-years period included many memories related to the category 'to listen to music and to dance'. Friends, teenage idols and the lyrics of the songs are especially important at this age. The lyrics were perceived to have the ability to provide the answers to problems and thoughts, give comfort and a feeling of partnership. In the category of 'music in school' the experiences have a certain negative predominance. The negative memories dealt with feelings of unfairness of grades or that the musical experiences from school did not give them very much. The positive experiences were associated with music lessons that they thought were good, fun and important, and related to specific teachers. When it came to the category 'to play an instrument' there was a decrease in interest and other activities took priority over music, or they experienced competition in a negative way.

*Work-related experiences of music of preschool teachers and child minders*

Our study reported a wide variety of musical experiences from adult life and we divided these into five subcategories. The first subcategory 'the functions of music' illustrates the respondents' thoughts about music as a useful function in their profession. They regarded music as a good, calming way of gathering the children, which gave a sense of community and feelings of joy. They thought that music suited children and provided an outlet for their feelings. The second subcategory, 'the adult benefits from music in the preschool setting', showed that the preschool setting had much to offer the professionals involved. It is fun to have music in preschool. It elicits responses and is a source of joy and community. The third subcategory, 'the adult's role when it comes to music in preschool', showed that the respondents had a great number of thoughts about their role in sharing music with children. Most important to the respondents were joy, community and the reviving powers of music, which inspires children and gives them the courage to sing whenever they like. The fourth subcategory, 'insecurity', showed that the insecurity of the preschool teachers and child minders in working with music in preschool was minimal. Even if they did not think that they were professional or even 'good at music', they still provided musical experiences for the children. They sang for the children's sake and because they thought it was fun. The fifth subcategory, 'tradition and renewal of music in preschool', showed that further education was something that they feel a need of and considered to be positive.

The musical experiences with their own children and grandchildren were seen as important and the respondents experienced a sense of carrying on a tradition and wanted to foster this effort. They learnt from each other and experienced an increased interest in music through their children's interest in music. The memories of strong experiences of music provided examples of the power of music to help deal with or arouse feelings. Many of the preschool teachers and child minders stressed the social connections that arose through music. They listened and danced to music with friends, children or family. The playing of an instrument was seen as important, even if they experienced difficulties in doing this. For several preschool teachers and child minders, the musical experiences received during their formal education at the university were positive and stimulating. It inspired them to discover their own musical abilities and gave them courage to use these in their work.

'Joy' is a word that the respondents often used in relation to music. Another frequently used word was 'community'. These two words also seem to be related in that joy creates community and community creates joy. Music was also considered pedagogically useful in that it was developmentally appropriate for children in preschool age. The themes of joy, community and pedagogical usefulness are central in both previous and past experiences.

*How the musical memories and experiences have influenced the interest of preschool teachers and child minders in working with music in the preschool setting*

When it came to categorizing or 'measuring' their experiences and the indications of their future interest in music, the experience of music as adults seemed to have the most importance for some respondents. Others could not say that one part had the most influence to them or that they thought that music had always been as important to them. Others noted that their interest in music had been most stimulated by their work in preschools. Other experiences or persons that were given high priority for the future interest were family and relatives, children and grandchildren, strong experiences of music, teachers and leaders in the music school, in private tuition or school, along with the church.

## **Discussion**

The memories from three to six years were often about community and attention, but also about the functions of music in creating warmth, partnership, community, attention and atmosphere. The music could also work as a companion, an activity or a 'calmer'. It had the ability to arouse feelings and thoughts. Previous research (Gustafsson & Halblaub-Oddsottir, 1986; Halblaub-Oddsottir, 1989; Sundin, 1989) showed that most memories from this age come from home and are about being together with an adult, which is characterized by joy, community and pleasure. The memories that have been carried into adult life are characterized by feelings of community, connection and atmosphere, but are also of mixed feelings in relation to the music. According to modern theory of memory (Christiansson, 1994; Linton, 1982; Strander, 1997), those occasions that have been emotional, or in other ways important to the individual, have the best chances of remaining

in the memory. In this study, those memories that stayed to adult life were indeed characterized by factors such as community, atmosphere and music's ability to arouse feelings. Even as adults, the preschool teachers and child minders spoke about music in this way.

Many of the memories from seven- to twelve- and thirteen- to eighteen-year periods were about lessons in playing an instrument and music in school. Here the emotional tone was more mixed than in the earlier memories, with a certain negative quality. When it came to playing an instrument, the negative memories were often associated with a change from group lessons to private tutoring that was experienced as less appealing and more demanding. Many of the difficulties in playing an instrument related to difficulties in practising. The positive memories related mainly to the social aspect of playing and participating in concerts that were characterized by attention, atmosphere and festivity. Sorin (1996, 1997) emphasized particularly the social aspects as the part of playing that leaves positive memories, while the negative memories related to feelings of being excluded in some way, most often by being criticized. In this study, the negative memories related to experiences of demands rather than criticism, along with experiences of not feeling good enough to be able to play for others or for fun. The preschool teachers and child minders experienced a need to be good to play for others and the need to develop these skills.

When it came to recalling music in school, the negative memories related to absence of a sense of fulfilment. The music did not give anything; it was boring, they did not like the teacher or they thought it was mostly annoying songs that they considered meaningless. Other negative memories of music in school were about testing and unfairness that they deemed as unpleasant resulting in a bad atmosphere. Previous research has shown that musical education is experienced negatively as it often does not relate to the student's way of looking at things (Halblaub-Oddsdotir, 1989). This means that the music is not experienced as meaningful and useful to the student: 'it is nothing for me'. In this context the teacher's role in awakening the student's interest, to 'reach' the student, is of vital importance. The negative memories of music in this study relate not just to music and lessons that did not have any meaning for the student, but also to situations that had been unpleasant in some way.

Sundin & Andersson-Stellnert (1978) give examples of how repeated musical failures have left negative traces like not wanting to sing or play an instrument anymore, or deep inhibitions among preschool teachers in working with music. Billinger (1984) and the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs (1982: 5) give similar examples of how negative experiences of music have had an offputting effect on preschool teachers. Such experiences have made them insecure in their work with music. In this study, the negative experiences have not had any such influence on the musical work of preschool teachers and child minders. However there was a certain reservation towards playing instruments. In previous research of the project 'aesthetic socialization', examples were given of the children's cultural role in establishing aesthetic activities. In this study, the youth's cultural role in relation to music stands out. At both the ages seven- to twelve-, and particularly thirteen- to eighteen-year period music, friends and teenage idols are central. The importance of lyrics provide interesting examples of aesthetic socialization as they have perceived ability to solve problems and give answers to thoughts, provide comfort and give



a feeling of partnership. Examples of the importance of the lyrics and their ability to arouse feelings and thoughts are given as early as three to six years of age. The interest in listening to music and dancing has lasted until adult life for all of the respondents. The music functions as relaxation and as an aid in everyday life. Even as adults, the respondents reflected about the abilities of music and lyrics to both arouse and help in dealing with emotions.

Several respondents reported strong experiences of music. Of Gabrielsson & Lindströms (1984) categories of strong experiences of music the memories of preschool teachers and child minders in this study indicated examples of all but one of the seven categories. In the category of 'general characteristics' there are examples such as 'it was strong', 'special', 'it was important' and 'I almost died!' In the category of 'physical responses' there are examples like: to cry, to laugh and to dance, but also examples of 'quasi-physical' experiences like smelling the same scents and hearing the same birdsong as then. In the category of 'perception', there are examples of auditory perceptions like: to 'know' the music, to take it in, and of visual perceptions as remembering all of the surroundings. In the category of 'cognition', there are examples of changes of attitude, for example, to discover new music. Most examples are given in the category 'emotion' where there are examples of feelings such as warmth, partnership, joy, atmosphere, mixed feelings and thoughts, sadness, sorrow, peace, unpleasantness, amusing, nervousness, boring, anger, sensuality and happiness. In the category of 'personal development', the preschool teachers and children's nurses gave examples of having experienced new insights and possibilities, confirmation of identity, an increased self-confidence and feelings of 'belonging'. These experiences often related to further education or in training. The feelings of belonging permeate the work with music in preschool in general. The respondents give many examples of Gabrielsson & Lindströms (1984) categories of emotional and personal development, even if they did not always mention it in terms of SEM. In terms of Gabrielsson & Lindströms (1984) categories, the respondents' experiences of music can be best described as emotional experiences that contributed to personal development.

In the memories and experiences of music from adult life, all the respondents expressed a positive attitude where music was considered both enjoyable and useful. Previous research (Billinger, 1984; Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs, 1982; Sundin & Andersson-Stellnert, 1978) has highlighted preschool teachers' insecurity in working with music. In this study, such insecurity must be considered to be minimal, with a certain reservation about playing instruments. The respondents seemed to have the potential to encourage musical activities with children.

The respondents' interest in music was positively influenced and stimulated by the music in preschool and the music as an adult. Previous research from the project 'aesthetic socialization' emphasizes childhood experiences as the most important factor for a future interest in music, while this study shows that it is mainly the music in adulthood in the work setting that is important. Further education is something that is considered to be stimulating and hopefully something that will be given attention and encouragement in the future. The respondents' interest in music was characterized by an interest in the abilities and functions of music, and also by the adult's own profit and joy given to them by the music in their work in preschool, along with reflections over what it is they should

encourage in the musical experience of children. With such an interest in the abilities of music to create joy, community and the pedagogical effectiveness of music, preschool children will surely benefit from adults with an interest in music and a desire to share it with others.

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