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# Teacher professional development and educational innovation through action research in conservatoire education in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

This study aims to increase understanding of the values and outcomes of teacher action research in conservatoire education. Teacher action research has been found to stimulate both professional development and improvement of teaching practice. A multiple-case study design was employed to examine teachers' activities and their perceptions of the value of action research. Findings from the cross-case analysis include teachers' perceptions of action research as a way to stimulate the advancement of both their teaching practice and their professional development. Constructive collaborations and self-reflections related to teacher action research were found to reinforce their learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** Conservatoire education; teacher action research; improving practice; professional development; educational innovation

## Introduction

Music professionals are engaged in a diverse and demanding practice in which they are required to work collaboratively and move between different roles (Gaunt, 2013). Multiple contemporary studies within the field of conservatoire pedagogy have addressed the need for change in the conservatoire curriculum and alignment with the requirements of professional practice (e.g., Forbes, 2016, 2020; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Partti & Westerlund, 2013; Virkkula, 2016). Statements have been made about the inclusion of such elements as reflective practice and collaborative learning to broaden students' education through including other skills next to musical expertise.

Conservatoire teachers need to prepare students for a varied practice even though they themselves were educated very differently, with the focus on becoming a 'maestro performer' (Carey et al., 2013). Moreover, teaching in a conservatoire is individual in nature, without much collaboration or pedagogical exchange between teachers (Gaunt, 2013). Studies on ICON (Innovative Conservatoire – an international learning community of conservatoire teachers) have reported on collaborative professional development through knowledge exchange, reflection and an inquiry stance to support teachers in the practical exploration and elicitation of their knowledge; this included seminars on improvisation, creativity, embodiment, teaching approaches and practice-based research (Gaunt, 2013; Duffy, 2016).

One such seminar was investigated by Gaunt (2013) concerning a participative action research project designed to inspire and support reflective practice among conservatoire teachers. Teachers collaboratively engaged in a process of communication and reflection on various sources

meaningful to them as musicians. This collaborative process was found to build a language for communication among participants and bring tacit knowledge to the surface. Interacting with colleagues led to stronger artistic and professional self-images, as reported by the participants in written reflections and interviews. In line with this conclusion, Borgdorff and Schuijjer (2010) stated that teacher research not only affects professional development and teaching practice but also impacts on artistic development within the conservatoire through more articulated and reflective communication of experiences and understandings. According to Richardson (2001), teacher research refers to a form in which the teacher conducts research on or inquiries into their own practices (p. 15486).

This paper aims to contribute to the knowledge on conservatoire teachers' professional learning through practitioner research on conservatoire teaching practices.

### ***Practitioner research in conservatoire education***

Richardson (2001) posits that an effective research-based approach to staff development hinges upon teachers engaging in reflective inquiry into their tacit beliefs and practices. This process is further enriched through dialogue within a community of practitioners who possess a nuanced understanding of these practices and the specific context in which they operate. Building on this perspective, Guskey (2002) asserts that authentic shifts in teachers' attitudes and beliefs materialize when they witness the tangible impact of implementing new strategies and practices on their students. Similarly, Zeuli's study (Zeuli, 1994) underscores the significance teachers place on the transformative influence of research on their teaching practices. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) advance the notion that teachers should be viewed as "deliberative intellectuals" who consistently engage in theorizing practice as an integral aspect of the practice itself (p. 4). They argue that teacher learning initiatives should aim for the collaborative construction of local knowledge, the challenging of common assumptions, and a thoughtful critique of the utility of research both within and beyond the immediate contexts of practice. Fox et al. (2007) posit that practitioner research provides an obvious means of facilitating change whether through action research or otherwise. Action research as a form of practitioner research is considered to initiate reform of practice, conducted by teachers as agents and insiders, examining their own situations and circumstances in their classrooms and schools (Pine, 2009). Reflection on their practice helps teachers to improve it, to develop their teaching and learning environments, to innovate, to gain autonomy in their professional judgements and to increase their craftsmanship and expertise. Action research provides an opportunity for educators to reflect on their own practices (Creswell, 2012, p. 577). Moreover, according to Kemmis (2009) action research involves changing three aspects: practitioners' practices, their understandings of their practices and the conditions in which they practise (p. 463).

An initial instance of practitioner research within the conservatoire setting is exemplified by Westerlund and Karlsen (2013). Their study delved into the establishment of a professional learning community comprising doctoral music students and senior researchers at the Sibelius Academy. This initiative served as a dynamic catalyst for learning, fostering the development of local knowledge that was not only open to discussion but also subject to critique by external perspectives (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The employed concept of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) allowed for more interaction and negotiation between members and supported collaborations and learning partnerships among junior and senior researchers involved. Empirical data collection included members' reflective essays and questionnaires showing that reflectivity, collaboration and dialogue increased, and that more informal peer interaction created more connections and relationships between students and research staff, feelings of belonging to the community and a shared identity. Furthermore, the community was experienced to function as a hub for continuous learning including joint problem-solving and the creation of knowledge.

Rikandi (2012), an active practitioner within the previously delineated Finnish research community, embraced the idea of a learning community as the foundational framework for devising a course on 'free accompaniment/piano improvisation.' This course was integrated into the curriculum of a Bachelor of Music Education program. Initially, the course comprised individual instruction within a group setting. Dissatisfaction with this method, coupled with the desire to enhance student agency, prompted the practitioner to establish a community-oriented approach. The primary goal was to cultivate a more conducive environment for effective learning and actively involve students in the co-creation of the learning community. The analysis of a rich data collection in two phases, including the practitioner's research diaries, audio and video recordings, student essays, and individual interviews with students, showed that students increased their agency over their own learning processes through dialogue and negotiation and engaged in co-construction of knowledge. Reflective journaling of the practitioner led to insights into the variety of roles the teacher can have in order to promote the agency of all community members.

The third example refers to a report of action research into the effective teaching and learning of breathing techniques in oboe-playing among undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (Gaunt, 2007). Students were free to participate in some, none or all of the learning activities that were part of the practitioner's research. Extensive data collection took place, including video recordings of students playing, stimulated-recall interviews with students, teachers' reflective notes, a student questionnaire and observations of teaching activities by a critical friend (senior colleague) who provided feedback. A broadened range of musical, physical, physiological and psychological activities was included in the action research project providing space for students' individual personal and musical preferences. Students gained self-directive and reflective skills in their approach to learning. The project supported the implementation of a wider range of teaching strategies.

Shaw (2022), a practitioner in the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, conducted insider research into preparing conservatoire students for careers in instrumental teaching by employing an eclectic approach in her research methodology including action research. The research draws upon student, alumni, staff and leadership perspectives. Conducting insider research enabled Shaw to reflect on her own practice and adjust her teaching approaches inspired by perspectives that emerged from questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observations and textual narratives.

### **Current study**

Practitioner research, and more specifically action research, can be understood as an effective way to innovate teaching practices in higher music education, but it is not yet a very common approach. According to Guskey (2002), two factors are important for the effectiveness of an innovation: (1) the motivation of the teacher to engage in it and (2) the effects of implemented strategies or practices they perceive in their classroom. Therefore, we seek to contribute to insights into how teachers in higher music education perceive action research as an approach.

Although the literature on teachers-as-researchers in conservatoire education suggests that there is a relationship between teachers' professional development and innovation of teaching practice, few studies have connected teacher's professional development and the innovation of their teaching in one study on action research in conservatoire education. We aimed to acquire a rich and in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions regarding their teaching practice and professional development as a result of conducting action research projects. Our questions included the following:

- (1) How do teachers perceive their professional development through action research?
- (2) How do teachers perceive improving their teaching practice through action research?

## Methods

### *Research design, approach, and context*

In the underlying study, a multiple-case design (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003) has been applied, with two cases of conservatoire teachers (practitioners) conducting practical action research (Mills, 2011) into their own teaching practice. Practical action research involves a small-scale research project, focusing on a specific problem or issue, and is undertaken by individual teachers or teams within a school or school district (Creswell, 2012). Action research typically includes a ‘plan – act – evaluate – reflect’ cycle (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) after which the cycle can be repeated again and again. Similarly, Mills (2011) developed a dialectic action research spiral moving between four stages: (1) identify an area of focus; (2) collect data; (3) analyse and interpret data; and (4) develop an action plan. In the various stages, self-reflection, study of literature, raising questions, seeking advice with critical friends, contextualising theory and literature, and reviewing the process are included.

### *Position of the researchers*

With three out of the five authors holding insider positions within the institution (including two teachers and the first author), the analysis and writing of this study have been influenced by their firsthand perspective. Consequently, the research benefits from ecological validity, aligning with the principles outlined by Robson and McCartan (2016). Researcher bias was reduced by adding the academic lens of the two external supervisors who followed the process and took part in conceptualisation, methodology, overseeing the transcription and the anonymity of the collection of all data and review. See Figure 1. for the set-up of the research team.

The collaborative approach in this research project is supported by the description of Fuller and Petch (Fuller & Petch, 1995) cited in Robson and McCartan (2016) stating:

initial thoughts about researchable topics and priorities may have been developed collectively in formal or informal discussions with professional colleagues or with groups of users or carers. The latter may then be involved in collecting and analysing data, or (perhaps more often) in discussions about the interpretations of findings and their dissemination. In this way, both the choice of topic and the processes of research are democratised, the research has wider ownership than the researcher alone, and there is an extra level of commitment both to its successful completion and to acting on the findings (p. 6).

### *Research context*

The research context was a conservatoire located in the Netherlands with around 500 music students. At this institute, studies are offered in classical, jazz, pop and world music genres. The two practitioners applied a practical action research design (Mills, 2011; Creswell, 2012); the two cases are under investigation in the underlying study.

The first was a first-year integrated music theory class (including Western European jazz-oriented solfège, harmony, counterpoint and analysis) within the world music department. The class had nine participating students. The teacher aimed to adopt a more student-centred approach and establish stronger connections between music theoretical subjects and students’ practical music-making.

The second case concerned a team of four teachers of a second-year band skills class within the pop music department. The class had twenty participating students. Small groups of students (three or four) performed and practised skills in band formation while other students in the class were listening. All four teachers present in class gave the performing students feedback, which was organised in an informal way. The action research aim of the teacher in the second case was to co-construct a team vision of education in band skills and to engage colleagues in peer-mentoring, collaboration, critical friendship and reflection.

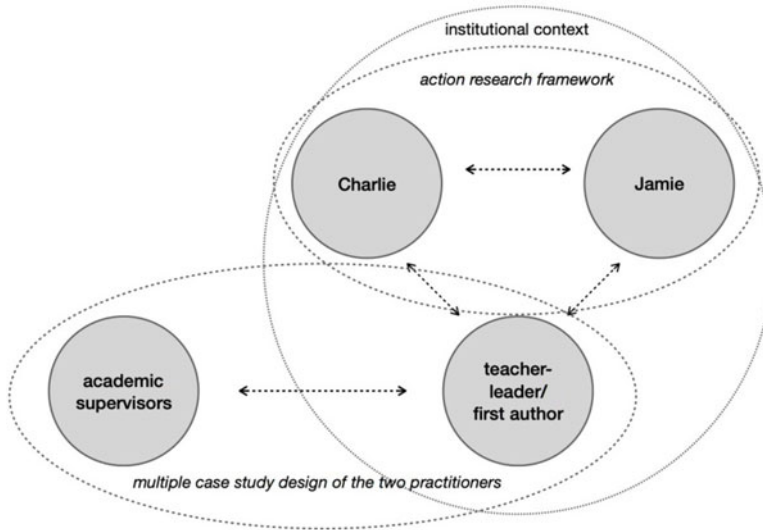


Figure 1. Setup of the research team.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the on-site classes of both teachers were cancelled due to COVID-19 regulations and replaced by online teaching and classes. The research aims of the two teachers remained unchanged.

### Participants

Prior to the underlying research project, larger-scale round-table discussions on course innovations within the conservatoire took place, led by a teacher-leader (a professionally and academically trained musician), in which the two here included practitioners identified their areas of focus and reported on their plans for conducting action research into their own practice. Through various subsequent conversations with the teacher-leader, ideas arose to share research experiences with colleagues and beyond. The teacher-leader suggested to the two practitioners to include their respective action research projects in a study on their projects. The teacher-leader as first author of the study informed leadership of the institution and involved two academic supervisors. The division of tasks in the research project is described in Table 1.

The two practitioners gave their informed consent to being part of this study. Also, all students in the respective classes were informed and consent forms were distributed and returned in class, by the two practitioners.

The Participant Information Leaflet contained information on the objectives of the study, why participant was invited, what would happen if participant volunteered, confidentiality, benefits and risks, right to withdraw, how provided information would be used, and how and with whom to request further information. Furthermore, participants agreed on and appreciated the involvement of two supervisors. Subsequently, practitioners were informed regarding all information collected as part of the study would be stored securely on password-protected computers and servers. The research project was described to be conducted in such a way that reports of the collected data and findings could not be deduced to any person or personal data. In reporting, any reference to persons or individuals has been removed. The Participant Information Leaflet was followed up with a consent form indicating and confirming that participant had read the Participant Information Leaflet, had had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study, had received satisfactory answers to all their questions, had received enough information about this study, understood that withdrawal could take place at any time until transcripts were

**Table 1.** Division of Tasks in the Research Project

Teacher researcher (Jamie)	Teacher researcher (Charlie)	Teacher-leader/first author	Supervisors
Action research concept development	Action research concept development	Conceptual framework; structure and methods	Providing guidance on conceptual framework and methods
Writing reflective reports and final project report	Writing reflective reports and final project report	Data collection: interviews, classroom observations, field notes	Overseeing the transcription and the anonymity of the collection of all data
Discussion and reflection on data analysis	Discussion and reflection on data analysis	Data analysis	Discussion with first author on data analysis
Reading and discussion among authors	Reading and discussion among authors	Manuscript writing	Reading and discussion among authors and reflection on manuscript
		Finalising and submitting to journal	

anonymised, understood anonymised data would be archived and kept for possible future research with a maximum of 5 years. By signing the consent form, participants fully understood what they were agreeing to.

The two teachers conducting action research had nearly twenty years of teaching experience in higher music education and backgrounds as musicians. They started their action research projects with the aim of improving their courses and were also co-researchers in each other's projects. They both had obtained an educational master's degree. The two teachers have been given pseudonyms (Jamie and Charlie). Jamie and Charlie co-worked and exchanged on their respective research projects.

### **Data collection**

Data collection regarding the two teachers took place over a period of eight months and included two interviews, classroom observations and field notes, reflection reports and final reports. The observation forms included a three-column table keeping track of the time in the left column and on the actions of teacher and students in the middle- and right-hand columns.

The reflection reports teachers wrote individually were based on the ALACT model (Korthagen, 2001, Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). This model includes a cycle with five stages: (1) Action, (2) Looking back on the action, (3) Awareness of essential aspects, (4) Creating alternative methods of action and (5) Trial in a new situation or lesson. Teachers received an information leaflet including instruction on how to use the model. The topic of reflection was chosen by the teachers. After the entire project had ended, the teachers wrote a final report and a final reflection and participated in an interview. The final reflection was again based on the ALACT model, and the topic was chosen by the teachers. The final reports of both teachers were based on a journal-style paper, including an introduction, context description, conceptual framework, research questions, methods, findings, discussion and conclusion.

The interviews took place after the reflective reports had been written. A semi-structured approach was applied: the teachers were asked to reflect on what they perceived they had learned from their research projects, how they perceived themselves to have developed professionally, what activities they had used and what they considered important factors in improving their practice. The interviews took place in the building of the institution or via Zoom and were



**Table 2.** Two Cases of Teacher Action Research in a Conservatoire

	Case study Jamie	Case study Charlie
Topic	Music theory	Band skills
Department	World music	Pop
Aims	1) Develop student-centred teaching 2) Establish stronger connections between music theory and practical music-making	1) Develop a team vision of education in band skills 2) Engage the team of teachers in peer-mentoring, critical friendship, and reflection
Context	Realising educational goals for which students worked individually and collaboratively. Assignments were distributed and made through an LMS. Portfolios were kept. Part of classes took place online.	Realising educational goals through reinforcement of reflective skills and the in-class feedback strategies of band skills teachers, and through increasing their ownership of the process.
Findings	Applying a variety of pedagogical approaches was helpful. Collaboration with colleagues and between students was highly valued. Jamie developed a completely different concept of what student learning comprises.	Increasing pedagogical content knowledge assisted Charlie in gaining more insights into student learning processes. Developing a team vision appeared to be more difficult due to the different stages of development and reflection among the team members.

recorded with permission from the teachers. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using Amber-script software and edited by the first author. The interview topic guide was derived from the classroom observations and field notes and included the following topics: (1) perception of the lessons in general ('how do you look back at your lessons?'); (2) perception of own learning ('what did you learn in/from those lessons?'); (3) reflection on own learning ('how did you learn in/from those lessons?'); (4) context ('what were important factor of influence on your learning?').

### Data analysis

We performed a thematic cross-case analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) driven by a grounded-theory approach (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interviews and reflective reports were coded using Atlas.ti software. This data-driven stage of analysis was used to generate a preliminary codebook, including a code name, description and example from the text. The analysis of the data focused on thematic discovery from the transcripts and was achieved through open and axial coding. Interview transcriptions were read and re-read to collect open codes. We kept reading and collecting until no new codes occurred and saturation was established.

Using labelling, colouring and grouping in Atlas.ti, we discovered relationships and we kept re-grouping until a logical order had emerged and seven higher-level axial codes were established: *teaching practice*, *student learning*, *collaboration*, *professional development*, *research project*, *institution* and *pandemic* (including lockdown and closing of the institution's buildings). Subsequently, grouping and re-grouping of these axial codes led to the construction of two overarching selective codes: *teacher professional learning* – what and how teachers learned and how they developed professionally, including text coded with collaboration, professional development and research project; and *improving practice*, including text coded with teaching practice, student learning, institution and pandemic.

As a validity check, the analysis was read by the teachers, who reflected on the codes, the grouping of codes and the interview fragments. Reflections and suggestions from the practitioners were discussed until mutual agreement was reached, and the preliminary codebook was adapted accordingly.

### Two cases of teacher action research in a conservatoire

The two cases are summarised in Table 2. Next, we employ a narrative to synthesise the research.

### **Case study Jamie: music theory in the world music department**

The aim of this action research project was to develop student-centred teaching and establish stronger connections between music theoretical subjects and the students' practical music-making. From annual evaluations, Jamie had concluded that students experienced theory as being separated from practice. Jamie sought ways to address (1) students' personal, sometimes intuitive relation to music; (2) communication about music with peers; and (3) formal descriptions of musical events in the lessons.

Jamie's objective was to adapt music theory lessons to be more practice-based and student-centred, based on input from the students' and their own experiences in class. The research project focused on allowing more space for students' personal experiences with music and facilitating conversations between students about what they perceived instead of forcing them to apply formal descriptions. Helping them to develop a vocabulary to speak about music other than with formal descriptions, but avoiding shallow statements such as 'I like it', 'It sounds nice', etc., Jamie remarked:

I always presumed students understood what I told them, that when I explained something only once they had the abilities to handle it. I probably misjudged them. I find it quite hard to genuinely relate to their experiences.

Jamie developed a framework based on embodied music cognition (Leman, 2008), comprising both cognitive and physical experiences related to music perception, through which students were encouraged to express themselves regarding their listening encounters; in this way, different listening and learning experiences among students were acknowledged. According to Jamie,

It was quite shocking to notice that I could dismiss the transfer of knowledge – as in a traditional music theory lesson – from the classroom. It appeared to be possible to focus on students' personal intuitive reflections on music; to share and communicate about their experiences during class. Students worked and collaborated in this new approach and had similar results in their exams to before. I found that there was an incredibly large amount of flexibility in applying pedagogical approaches; much more than I thought.

The students worked both individually and collaboratively in the classes. They received and worked out assignments digitally in a learning management system (LMS). Jamie reflected:

I have an urge to work more with a flipped classroom. Ideally, students would acquire the necessary knowledge themselves, through the LMS. Knowledge in their own time, and collaborative explorations of their personal experiences, perceptions, and reflections in class. Also, I aim to connect the stuff we do in class to competency-based education, having students work with goals and objectives, relating to other subjects and courses. Ultimately, it is my wish to terminate the subject 'music theory' and see it included in all other subjects.

Students kept portfolios of their learning goals, assignments and reflections. Due to the lockdown, on-site lessons were replaced by online sessions via Zoom. Although many adaptations had to be made, according to the students the online sessions were successful. They especially valued working with peers, in pairs or small groups in breakout rooms, and they perceived the environment as one of trust and safety, due to a culture where they were not judged on right or wrong answers. Assessment included writing a final reflective report to conclude their portfolio. Jamie evaluated these reports and analysed them using a coding protocol, together with colleague Charlie. Jamie stated:

It has been so valuable to collaborate with my colleague. Also, I really needed to read about pedagogical approaches and concepts; what is knowledge, what is learning. My perceptions



have changed completely. I held this stance for twenty years: I have knowledge. When I open my mouth and speak, I communicate my knowledge; it will then be in the minds of the students and they will grasp it. Now, I have a completely different perspective of what learning is . . . I had to knock myself off my own pedestal.

Conclusions from the analysis of students' reflective reports comprised their evaluations of the value of this new approach to teaching and learning music theory for (1) the extension of their vocabulary to speak about music, (2) the increase in self-regulation and (3) the safe learning environment. Jamie concluded:

Collaborating and learning collaboratively affected the students' and my own development. Dialogues, peer-mentoring, cooperation with colleagues, with co-researchers. Social constructivism seems to work. But we have to consider the vulnerable side of collaborations. Opening up to other people. Daring to let go of certain features of control. It requires a safe learning environment, trust, support from leadership. It occurred to me that, as old school, old paradigm teachers, we have been working far too hard, on the one hand, trying to control everything, and on the other hand, not hard enough because we were not really concerned with how the students were learning.

#### **Case study Charlie: band skills in the pop department**

The aim of this research project was to develop a team vision of education in band skills and to engage the team of teachers in peer-mentoring, critical friendship and reflection. Charlie was dissatisfied with students' annual course evaluations, which showed low evaluations of teaching approaches, assessment, guidance and feedback. Based on the final competencies and indicators of the Bachelor of Music (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2017) and personal experiences from professional practice, Charlie argued that more attention should be given to the development of students' self-regulation and reflective practice. Charlie said:

Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1983) is very relevant to our practice. We do need a new paradigm to regard our working place, including those we work with, in a much more reflective manner. Everyone should read that book.

Charlie started with the idea that co-construction of a team vision was needed, in which the education of reflective and self-regulative students formed the core.

Charlie's motivation for undertaking the action research project included the assumption that these educational goals would be attainable through reinforcement of reflective skills and the in-class feedback strategies of teachers and through increasing their ownership of the process. The teachers in the team were already close collaborators in lesson preparation and could be regarded as one another's critical friends. Charlie undertook several team interventions, such as interviews and peer-mentoring sessions, using Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008) and Korthagen's reflection models (Korthagen, 2001; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Charlie found,

It was of major additional value that we had time and space to have conversations about the lessons, their purpose and goals. We had to make these more explicit. There is so much that is implicit in the pop department. By gaining understanding of how colleagues are involved, sharing our preferences, interests, perspectives, one becomes more aware of how others are engaged and it becomes easier to cooperate.

The collected data were analysed through a coding protocol, together with Jamie.

Furthermore, a model of Elshout-Mohr (2000) was adapted in order to draw conclusions regarding the levels of reflection present among teachers in the team. As regards learning, Charlie remarked:

A whole new world has opened up: educational science, theories, concepts . . . So much is applicable to our education and organisation. We are too focused on the subject matter and not on the underlying learning processes. I became aware of that.

Charlie concluded that the willingness to reflect did exist among participating teachers, although reflective skills were missing or very basic.

Building a team vision stagnated due to different opinions on the student competencies to be developed. Conversations were focused on the content of music and skills instead of on the process and pedagogical aspects. Charlie reflected on this:

My team members are willing to innovate. They are flexible and do wish to change aspects of our course. However, they focus on the content, whereas I am trying to involve them in the learning processes of students. Yeah, I think that's what I mean, that I am trying to make them more aware of the learning process.

Peer-mentoring sessions within the team were perceived as positive and conversations as constructive, and the collegial feedback felt as if it had been given by critical friends. Charlie concluded:

I recognise that I have my own blind spots. They have not yet been resolved. I want to create richer learning experiences for the students, continue to improve my feedback skills, use a flipped classroom . . . The need for educational innovation is enormous. The institution could be more demanding, for example, regarding teacher professional development. Leadership has to be more involved in innovation and should support peer-mentoring and professional development in our schedules.

### ***Cross-case analysis***

To increase our understanding of the complex, dynamic and interactive process of teaching (Fautley & Savage, 2008), our cross-case analysis centred on practitioners' perceptions of their own research projects and included two themes. First, what and how they learned and how they developed professionally, as captured in teacher professional learning, and second, important factors that influenced the improvement of their practice.

#### ***Teacher professional learning***

One of our aims was to gain an understanding of the relation between teacher action research and professional development. Teachers initiated studies of pedagogical topics and literature in their action research projects and thus started to see and understand where they lacked knowledge. Being facilitated by the institution to conduct research and investigate materials close to their practice was perceived as very valuable.

Teachers engaged in much self-reflection to identify the relevance of their teaching. Through self-reflection and the study of various sources, teachers noticed that they had shifted from having a primary focus on musical content to having a greater focus on the processes behind teaching and learning. Moreover, they recognised that they had acted in teacher-centred ways in the past, which they now regarded as 'old school' or 'old paradigm' teaching.

Feeling a strong urge to become better teachers, they discovered they had to change perspectives and give up previous conceptions, opinions, and thoughts on what is important in teaching. Their comprehension of what knowledge to transfer to students changed and they consequently understood that merely talking about content knowledge does not automatically mean that students will understand or even learn to use that knowledge themselves. They regarded this partly as a process of awakening and becoming aware of the need for their own professional development, for peer-mentoring, and educational change and innovation.

In recognising the need for change, teachers valued greatly constructive collegiality from critical friends: they experienced that a collegial companion with whom to discuss, negotiate and exchange experiences was a valuable asset to their own professional development.

### *Improving practice*

Our second aim was to gain understanding of the relation between teacher action research and improving teaching practice. Teachers stated that their present teaching practice appeared to be very different from their practice of fifteen years ago. Due to their experiences of their respective action research projects and from talking about these projects with each other, the teachers perceived that their conceptions of teaching and learning had shifted from a focus on the transfer of knowledge towards a focus on students' learning processes. This change of conceptions was described as carrying more weight than adapting the curriculum.

In the period of the lockdown, emotions such as anxiety and fear of losing control over the work situation arose, but the teachers continued to work on improving their teaching and their own professional development. The lockdown and related changes in the entire teaching situation were perceived as both positive and negative. Feelings of insecurity were present, but quick changes due to the pressure cooker effect were experienced as positive, exciting and inspiring, speeding up the need for new, creative insights into pedagogical approaches such as activating students, supplying collaborative assignments, using breakout rooms in Zoom and including video-recorded reflections.

Important aspects of improvement included (1) structural implementation of reflection and feedback, for both students and teachers, and (2) implementing a variety of different teaching and learning strategies, including collaborative learning and blended learning approaches. Teachers expected to continue working with the different technologies that were used during the lockdown. Both blended and collaborative learning were found to create a rich learning environment.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Two practitioners conducted action research projects, which resulted in advancing both their teaching practice and their professional development. From our cross-case analyses, we conclude that, as an outcome of doing action research, the practitioners developed an inquiry stance as part of their professional learning: (1) they developed their pedagogical knowledge and skills through accessing and reading various sources on teaching methods; (2) they gained new insights into their teaching and learning; (3) they developed understanding of their roles as teachers; (4) through reflection they became aware of what skills they had and what skills they still needed and wanted to acquire; (5) they developed new perspectives, and moreover changed their conceptions of teaching and learning. An inquiry stance has been found to induce a transformative and inclusive conception of the nature of learning, the practice of teaching, and the construction of knowledge (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). As a result of our analysis, teachers conducting action research can be regarded as an organic and significant component of professional development (e.g., (Bartlett & Burton, 2003).

Regarding their teaching practice, practitioners mentioned having improved or aiming to improve the following aspects: (1) they created a more student-centred learning environment; (2) they activated students through collaborative learning approaches, peer feedback, and reflection; (3) they integrated blended learning approaches in their course; (4) they included working with portfolios and reflective journals. While their perceptions of their own teaching had previously remained tacit, the teachers in this study were now able to reflect on the changes in their teaching practice and professional learning. This comprised understanding a shift from mainly transferring their own knowledge to focusing on students' learning processes.

The perceived changes in the practitioners' conceptions of teaching and learning supported the application of more and more varied teaching and learning approaches and were reinforced

through personal and contextual reflections. Previously, their teaching expertise could be regarded as tacit and their professional behaviour as intuitive; through action research, metacognitive thought processes had become leading in their professional behaviour and their learning had become deliberate as opposed to implicit (Eraut, 1994, 2004). According to Schön (1983), reflective practitioners involved in professional communities constantly question and reflect on their practice, ultimately resulting in professional learning based on self-criticism and the involvement of critical friends. This was the approach taken here.

Based on these findings, we conclude that the practitioners engaged in reflection on the nature and purposes of teaching and learning in a conservatoire. Furthermore, the practitioners expressed a desire to share their acquired knowledge and skills through teaching and learning with colleagues in a supportive and collaborative environment.

### **Limitations**

We focused in this study on a small selection of teachers from only one conservatoire. The two teachers who participated were highly experienced, having taught for nearly twenty years. Both completed their master's degrees on educational topics, prior to the research projects presented here. We are aware that this forms a specific background. Thus, generalisation to a broader concept of conservatoire teachers should be considered carefully. Another consideration is the COVID-19 pandemic: the regulations and lockdown related to this had an important influence on the teachers' educational practice as a whole.

### **Practical implications**

In the rather young research tradition within conservatoires and higher music education, teacher action research can potentially have a positive influence on improving teaching practice as well as teacher professional learning. Also, for conservatoires in the process of becoming research-based institutions according to the conditions of the implementation of the Bologna process, it might be valuable to support those teachers who wish to engage in research.

From the findings of the current multiple-case study, we see that not only did these teachers develop their knowledge and understanding, but also other competencies like collaboration, negotiation, experimentation, and self-reflection. As a workplace, the conservatoire has a variety of teachers and leaders with different preferences for teaching and learning approaches. However, for the sake of current and prospective students, it is necessary for institutions to take responsibility for the professional development of their teaching staff and educational innovation.

The demands of professional practice will not cease to be more diverse; future musicians will need to possess an explicit understanding of their talents and competencies. Teachers are role models for students and should, therefore, demonstrate how to learn professionally through deliberate reflective practices. In this respect, they are required to understand and explicate their own teaching practice, employ deliberate learning and apprehend various teaching and learning approaches, including support and development of self-regulated learners and reflective practitioners.

### **Concluding remarks**

The findings presented above suggest that teacher action research within conservatoire education can be a valuable approach to address the aims of increasing teachers' professionalism, improving teaching practice and opening up to conversations on teaching and learning. Moreover, teacher action research can form an impetus for professional, educational, artistic and organisational development.

**Acknowledgements.** The authors would like to thank the teachers and students who were involved in the research projects and the institution involved.

**Funding.** This work was supported by NWO – Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research [grant number 023.003.094].

**Competing interests.** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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**Cite this article:** Rumiantsev T, van der Rijst R, Kuiper W, Verhaar A, and Admiraal W (2024). Teacher professional development and educational innovation through action research in conservatoire education in the Netherlands. *British Journal of Music Education* 41, 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051723000414>