Professionalism in action – Music teachers on an assessment journey

Johan Nyberg

The points of departure in this article are questions regarding assessment in music education. These are related to issues of professional responsibility and accountability as well as a holistic view on education as conceptualized in Deweyean pragmatism and concern the risk of criteria compliance. A participatory action research project in a Swedish Upper secondary school focusing on assessment of music is presented, where the purpose of the research was to develop knowledge about music teachers' experience and conceptualizations regarding assessment practices within the frame of the National Arts Programme. This is enabled by asking the following research questions: In what ways do teachers conceptualize musical knowledge and learning and educational communication in relation to assessment? What qualities appear within the teachers' conceptualizations regarding knowledge, learning, communication and assessment of students' knowledge? Aims from the field of praxis were integrated in the project, with focus on equivalent assessment and legal certainty. Results from the research project show the music teachers' ability to shift between atomistic and holistic perspectives but at the same time keep their holistic view of assessment and learning. Equivalence is according to the teachers something different than uniformity, and is only possible through reflection and collaboration, internally as well as externally with other practitioners.

Keywords: assessment, John Dewey, music education, participatory action research, upper secondary school

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Introduction

Student 1: But what score did I get?

Teacher: As we talked about beforehand, I haven't given you scores. Instead, I have given you written responses. We will do a 'walk-through' of the test all of us together, and after that, we'll do it again – this time individually.

Student 2: But did I pass the test!?

Teacher: You won't get a grading until you have finished the course. This time I want to know in what ways you have been thinking to reach your conclusions. In those places, I have given you written comments.

Student 3: I counted myself! I got 38 points out of 47! I think… Depends on how many points you get for each answer. But that should at least amount to an E!?

The above conversation took place during a Music Theory class, where a group of students attending the national Arts programme in a Swedish upper secondary school[1] got a test returned. In this situation, different experiences of assessment are conceptualized[2], i.e. experiences of assessment communicated quantitatively or qualitatively. It also highlights the obstacles the teacher has to face attempting the chosen approach of assessment, conceptualizing and communicating knowledge in words rather than in numbers. The possible impact of this is not only connected to sharing of experiences internally within a music education, but also to external demands upon such praxis as part of the shaping of a democratic society (Dewey, 1916; Englund, 2000).

Strong demands on educational accountability have an impact on teaching and learning (cf. Apple, 2004; Liedman, 2011). One aspect of controlling education by means of such a demand is the risk of deprofessionalization (Beach et al., 2014; Broady, 2012; Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Lilja, 2014) as well as *criteria compliance*, i.e. "achievement without understanding" (Torrance, 2007, p. 293). The issue of compliance concerns students as well as teachers' learning, the

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1 The national Arts programme is one of six higher education preparatory programmes within Swedish, non-compulsory upper secondary education.
2 In this text, *conceptualization* encompasses describing, explaining, putting into words, text, gestures or sound how something is apprehended and understood. e.g. musical qualities in an educational setting.

latter for instance through professional development efforts. Another aspect is the confusion between quality and quantity for measuring educational "outcomes". This leads to a use of what Liedman (2011) calls *pseudo quantities*, i.e. carriers of all external traits connected to a quantity but lacking its "defining positive character" which is "to more exactly than any other attempt of verbal description characterize an object or the relation between objects" (ibid., p. 62, author's translation).[3] Demands for accountability also concern the issue of equivalent education[4] becoming one of standardization. This affects both teachers and students since such a development "can limit teachers' ability to make pedagogical decisions that accommodate the wide range of learning needs of diverse student populations" (Smylie, 1996, p. 9).

Therefore, questions regarding equivalence and quality in relation to assessment as a part of the teaching profession are of interest for research in music education as well as for practitioners. The topics of quality concepts in syllabi and equivalent assessment caught the interest of a group of Swedish upper secondary school music teachers, deciding to embark on an assessment journey by initiating a research and development (RD) project.[5] This project was connected to a research study in music education regarding music teachers' conceptualizations of knowledge and learning by the use of participatory action research (PAR) as method.[6] In this article, the results of this joint RD/PAR project will be presented and related to John Dewey's philosophy regarding education and the area of assessment in music education. With focus on music teachers' process of communication within the RD/PAR project, the specific research purpose is to develop knowledge about music teachers' experience and conceptualizations regarding assessment practices within the frame of the national Arts programme.

3 As an example, the latest grading system in Swedish upper secondary education can be mentioned, where qualities in the knowledge requirements (i.e. criteria) are summarized by the use of letters (from F to A) (The Swedish Agency for Education, 2011).
4 In Sweden, equivalence of public education is legislated in the Education Act (SFS2010:800).
5 This was part of a municipal effort aimed at developing teachers' assessment practices, in which schools were able to apply for funding of projects connecting professional development with research/scientific knowledge.
6 See *Method and design of the empirical study*.

This is enabled by asking the following research questions: In what ways do teachers conceptualize musical knowledge and learning and educational communication in relation to assessment? What qualities appear within the teachers' conceptualizations regarding knowledge, learning, communication and assessment of students' knowledge?

Background

Focus in this article lies on music education as an assessment practice, which is connected to, and therefore influenced and affected by, the prevailing educational policy and politics and those executing it – teachers themselves included. Therefore, aspects of assessment of music and the surroundings in which assessment is taking place within the project – including questions of professionalism – will be presented along with the participant travellers on the assessment journey. To conclude the background, the theoretical framework of the research will be presented and connected to the issue of teacher agency.

Assessment

Educational assessment is a hot topic, where aspects of qualities in relation to quantities are in focus (Liedman, 2011). This is in no way a novelty. The roots of assessment within the Swedish educational system can be traced back to the progressive movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pending between pedagogical and psychometric views on educational progress as represented by Dewey and Edward L Thorndike (Lundahl, 2011; Sandberg, 1996). The interest for assessment within music education is partly due to the intrinsic quality aspects of music (Davidson, 1980) – that could be considered as *secondary qualities*, i.e. connected with human, sensory perception (Liedman, 2011) – but also to the notion of teacher professionalism in relation to accountability (Zandén, 2011, 2013). Regardless of subject matter, the interest for assessment in education has boomed, leading to research efforts as well as educational debates regarding types of assessment and their impact on learning and knowledge.

Educational assessment

The view of learning and assessment found within the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum is holistic (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). With an increasing demand on educational accountability and measuring of learning outcome, such a view is at the risk of being replaced by an atomistic counterpart (Fautley, 2010; Liedman, 2011; Lundahl, 2011; Vinge, 2014).[7] The impact of this shift from holism towards atomism regarding educational assessment is therefore of interest.

Later research on assessment in music education highlights the risks of criteria compliance with such a shift – e.g. ticking of criteria using tick-box forms – leading to assessment *as* learning and thereby a fragmented understanding of a phenomenon (cf. Ferm Thorgersen et al., 2014). This can even lead to assessment *for teaching*, focusing more on teacher than student agency (Fautley, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). Other aspects of concern when it comes to assessing (musical) quality in an educational setting are related to curricula and teachers' role as officials. Here, legal certainty[8] as well as equivalence, standardization and the risk of uniformity is of importance – the latter aspects put forward not least by Dewey (1916, 1938a) in relation to education and democracy.

Professional assessment and assessment of music

What does it take to make professional assessments in an educational system built upon a holistic view? Sadler (2009) puts it like this:

> Determining the quality of complex works requires skilled, qualitative judgments. A qualitative judgment is one made directly by the appraiser, the person's brain being both the source and the instrument for the appraisal. The judgment is not reducible to a set of measures or formal procedures that a non-expert could apply to arrive at the 'correct' appraisal. (p. 160)

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7 One axample being the weight put on reports like the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

8 Legal certainty concerns assessments being performed in accordance with educational legislation, but also making teachers' assessment and grading practices "as transparent as possible" (Klapp Lekholm, 2010, p. 23) regarding what teachers base their assessments on and how.

As an art form, music is closely connected to assessment, e.g. in the form rankings and reviews. Unlike performance measurements including sheer quantities, assessment of music concerns qualities that include both issues of taste (i.e. secondary qualities) and existential dimensions (Ferm Thorgersen, 2011; Franzén, 1959; Nielsen, 2002; Varkøy, 2007). To aid assessment of music, Fautley (2010) suggests thinking of quality as "centred within three interlocking domains" (p. 80): *technical*, *conceptual* and *aesthetic qualities*. These appertain to the area of skills, notions of musical structures and aspects of "expressiveness [and] musicality" (p. 80) respectively. Therefore, music education as an assessment practice is a professional arena different from for instance music reviewing. It demands professionally trained assessors with adequate, esoteric knowledge of both the subject and the area of assessment – including communication of exoteric matter (Regelski, 2009; Sadler, 1989; Zandén, 2013). What does this arena look like for the participating teachers of the joint RD/PAR project?

The surroundings, pt. 1 – the national Arts programme

In 2011, a new curriculum for upper secondary education was introduced in Sweden including a new grading scale (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Assessment is goal-related, and subjects and courses are hierarchically constructed from subject specific *Aims* and *Goals*, via course specific *Core contents* to *Knowledge requirements*. In relation to the curriculum, the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) stipulates that all school education in Sweden "shall rest upon a scientific base and proven and established experience" (§5, author's translation). The attempts being made to uphold this paragraph are connected to both external control (e.g. the creation of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate) and internal development of the teaching profession and its status – one example being the possibility for municipal funding like the one for the joint RD/PAR project.

The surroundings, pt. 2 – educational policy and politics

The question of professionalism and professional development within education is a topic of great societal interest, and has been so for some time (cf. Apple, 2004; Stedt, 2013; Timperley et al., 2007). Assessment

is one aspect of teachers' professional tasks, which has been widely discussed within media and political debate but seldom in dialogue *with* but rather *about* the profession. What, then, can be done by professionals to come to terms with this? Regarding research literature on assessment in music, Colwell (2003) goes as far as comparing "the actions by professional organizations [to a] series of fig leaves adopted to hide our nakedness", thereby finding "ourselves without substantial clothing and appropriate tools necessary to detail what constitutes valid assessment of teaching and learning" (p. 12). He raises the question of resistance and unwillingness to participate in an open discussion and thereby avoiding "serious questions and discussion" (p. 12). According to Stanley (2009), the latter is sometimes related to an avoidance of "pragmatically messier [professional development models]" (p. 22) – including practitioners as well as authorities and policy makers.

Regarding assessment in Swedish music education, Davidson (1980) and Sandberg (1996) trace the demand for professional assessment to the 1950s and the need of selection and how this could be made equal and fair. Regardless of a pedagogic or behaviourist view on assessment, this problem was put in relation to the assessor (Davidson, 1980; Franzén, 1959). In Davidson's (1980) words:

> It is possible that [the problem of equal and fair assessment] stems from us [educators] not knowing how to define the criteria for the goals of education, and being uncertain of what we really wish for regarding our musical lives. (p. 152, author's translation)

This then overlaps the differences in educational assessment as pedagogical and/or psychometric/behaviourist – historically being the two prevailing views of the Swedish educational system (Liedman, 2011; Lundahl, 2011).

Within the frame of said system of today, Zandén (2011) puts it equally blunt as Colwell by proposing music teachers to professionalize or to perish, not caving in to what he labels as a doctrine of verbal clarity (Zandén, 2013). This is related to the shift towards accountability mentioned earlier, e.g. labelling professional interpretation as a threat to equivalent assessment (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2012). The research project described in this article can therefore be placed among the attempts to balance professional responsibility with the prevailing

demands on accountability (Allsup & Westerlund, 2012; Liedman, 2011; Nordin, 2012; Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Zandén 2011) – the latter leading to a deprofessionalization within the educational system (Englund, 2011; Oxenswärdh, 2011; Torrance, 2007; Zandén, 2011).

Theoretical base: a Deweyan perspective on education and its implications for participatory action research

According to Dewey, the goal of education is human growth. The pioneering trait of this notion was his formulation of education as *communication*, as opposed to *mediation* (Boman, Ljunggren & von Wright, 2007). Since Dewey considers human growth to be a question of transformation where the fruits of education lie not only in the present but also in the future, it is something he finds difficult to measure (Dewey, 1916, 1929; Lundahl, 2011, Väkevä, 2007; Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007). Dewey criticizes the use of assessment in the form of rewards or punishments within an educational setting, i.e. as means to gain interest from the assessed, particularly if the purpose is to "induce the person who has a mind (much as his clothes have a pocket) to apply that mind to the truths to be known" (Dewey, 1916, p. 208).[9] The "truths" Dewey describes are seen as the stagnated criteria for learning, used in public education for separation between knowledge as either theoretical or practical and therefore as an instrument for labelling and dividing citizens. Dewey is not opposed to assessment in relation to value per se, but argues that the underlying theory of educational assessment is one of *critique*, "a method of discriminating among goods on the basis of the conditions of their appearance, and of their consequences" (1958, p. 396), i.e. an examination of possibilities, prerequisites and limits connected to a phenomenon (Burman, 2014). He sees values as values alone. We always experience intrinsic values and qualities, depending upon previous experiences and the situation in which things are experienced and put into action. Judgment of values is according to Dewey also an act of transformation,

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9 This is a theme currently surfacing in the Swedish educational debate regarding grading in early years of compulsory schooling, but is also relevant in the case of teacher accountability and teachers' professional development – i.e. teachers as learners and the types of effort connected to this (cf. Carlgren, 2013).

> [transforming] an antecedent existentially indeterminate or unsettled situation into a determinate one. As such, judgment is always individual in a sense in which individual is distinguished from both particular and singular, in that it refers to a total qualitative situation. (1938b, s. 220)

Therefore, he concludes, there are no different kinds of judgement, only distinguishable phases or emphases of the same in relation to what is being assessed and in what context. Quality and quantity in judgment, for instance, can according to Dewey only be distinguished by discourse, but not be fully separated.

When it comes to education, Dewey acknowledges and emphasizes that there is value also in processes and not only in final achievements: "It is self-contradictory to suppose that when a fulfilment possesses immediate value, its means of attainment do not" (1958, p. 397). For to reach the full potential of growth in such a process, there needs to be a type of action on behalf of the participants that is not purely mechanical or physical but also reflective. Therefore, Dewey developed the concept of *intelligent action*, where physical and reflective actions are seen as interconnected and balanced (Dewey, 1915, 1929, 1938b). In relation to this, Bresler (1995/2006) sees action research as an opportunity for music teachers (as professionals) to be aware of reflection "because the act of teaching is […] oriented toward doing as opposed to reflecting" (p. 19). This view of teaching music, where a separation between "doing" and "reflecting" is a kind of standard procedure, is important. It could also be problematic. Who is deciding how to balance these aspects? Why is there such a separation? This is also a reason why Dewey's holism and notion of intelligent action are important when conducting PAR, as is his view of education based on such a type of action as a foundation of a democratic society (1916, 2004).

Another aspect of using intelligent action is that the confusion of impulses with purposes can be avoided. According to Dewey (1938a) there is no purpose if an immediate execution is not postponed until you can anticipate the consequences of the impulse being realized. This anticipation is not possible without observation, information and assessment (Dewey, 1987, 2004). To create enough "moving force" (Dewey, 1938a, p. 490) for an idea to be carried out, there not only needs to be an intellectual action to form it into a plan but also an executional force such as desire and impulse. Therefore, a dismissal

of interest in educational settings is devastating for the individual's possibility to reach her full potential (Dewey 1916). These thoughts are valid not only when it comes to different types of assessment or assessment as a professional educational practice. It could also be applied to the apprehension of teachers as learners and ownership of and designs for teachers' professional development.

Teacher agency

In relation to professional development, Allsup and Westerlund (2012) call for a "revitalized notion of teacher as neither scapegoat nor saviour, but as *agent*, a person who does adapt to change […] but who can flourish in the moving landscapes of learning" (p. 127, italics original). This notion mainly regards classroom activity. Improving assessment as a professional practice by agency needs to be regarded also as a communicative act outside the classroom since connecting with professional peers – and others operating in significant role-relationships to these – is crucial for teachers to significantly improve their practice (Handal, 1999). This is also a way for teachers to become agents from within their own profession. Without teacher agency, external input and control also risk compromising the professional notion of quality in education (Biesta, 2007; Carlgren, 2013; Liedman, 2011) – for instance when it comes to assessment of music (Zandén, 2010).

In order for learning to be meaningful, Dewey (1916, 1958) argues the need for learners' experiences, prerequisites and interests to be known. Communication enables a balance between these aspects and the demands that surround an educational practice. If teachers in their striving for change through professional development do not want to end up as rogue agents, to paraphrase Allsup and Westerlund (2012), such a development needs to be a communicative one including the sharing of experiences with peers as well as others included in forming the school practice. Where assessment is in focus, the sharing of values and views on quality concepts – personal as well as curricular – is also of importance.

Methodology

In the previous parts, the environment surrounding the teacher profession, a Deweyan perspective on education and aspects of teacher agency has been outlined. What tools can be used address these aspects and help bridge a practice/research divide that mainly seems to emanate from either a lack of communication or an unwillingness to communicate – thereby not understanding, or trying to understand, "the other" (Ferm Thorgersen & Schwieler, 2014)? In what way can a theory of science emanating from and within the practice of music education be developed? To shed a light on these issues, such a tool must be of a type that not only acknowledge teachers' as creators of professional knowledge, but also allows and challenges them to conceptualize and communicate to and with others what they see as important.

Method and design of the empirical study

One tool for teachers and researchers to use that covers the necessary aspects for a mutual professional development as presented above is interactive, collaborative practice-based research. As such, participatory action research (PAR) is a possible link between the fields of practice, research and employers/government. PAR creates a possibility for research to aid and strengthen issues concerning a professional practice where the fields of practice and research converge, and at the same time preserve as well as guard its independence and objectivity (Evaldsson, 2003; Irwin & Chalmers, 2007; Phillips et al., 2013; Reason, 2006; Svensson, 2002). Where assessment is in focus, the sharing of values and views on quality concepts – personal as well as curricular – is also of importance. Through PAR, teachers can in some ways be seen as learners – learning from each other or from others. Continuing along Dewey's line of thought concerning education, a researcher within a PAR project in music education needs to understand and learn about the participating teachers' experiences and views on value and conceptions of quality and their interests in professional development. This is also true about the researchers' own experiences and motives.

Participatory action research – an orientation to inquiry

In this part, the orientation to inquiry of PAR (Reason, 2003) will be outlined in relation to Deweyan pragmatism as well as the design of the joint RD/PAR project described in the introduction. The type of inquiry labelled action research (including PAR) can be described as "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action" (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). As an orientation to inquiry, it is "of great importance in the exploration of day-to-day school practice from 'within' [pointing to] meanings, structures and built-in dilemmas that we often assume to know beforehand" (Evaldsson, 2003, p. 26, author's translation). This puts demands on researchers to look beyond an academic, traditional and maybe even hierarchical environment, i.e. to conduct research *on* or *about* a practice, and instead see the possibilities of (and strive for) researching *with* the practice and the degree to which researchers relinquish and share control of the knowledge production process (Lewin, 1946; Phillips et al., 2013; Rönnerman, 2000). Inherent in the addition of "participatory" to action research (Holmstrand, 2006), this also alludes to the aspect of (teacher) agency as described earlier.

PAR brings out a process with contents that enable participants to become aware of their own practice. This demands that they conceptualize and share their experiences and opinions, but also allowing them to do this over a longer period of time (cf. Winther Jørgensen, 2008). According to Winther Jørgensen (2008), by sharing experiences and knowledge gained within the practice in interactive research, different types of knowledge are integrated in the development process. Equal cooperation between researchers and other participants are necessary, and hence the researcher must not be regarded – or regard him- or herself – as the one with (all) the answers. The research initiative shall contribute to processes of change, which calls for participants to conceptualize issues they regard as problematic within their practice. An expressed striving for change also contributes to the taking of responsibility within a project – practitioners and researchers alike. Depending on type of project, this can be done with multiple aims as long as the process is collaborative.[10]

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10 One example is the joining of research and development and music education research purposes by the use of PAR method as described in this article.

Action research can be described as an approach or an attitude, where apprehension and action appears in an iterative, cyclic process (Reason, 2006). This traditionally includes four steps: *plan – act – evaluate – reflect* (Cain, 2008; Rönnerman, 2004).[11] This process has no finite end, and therefore offer the practical conditions to enable *intelligent action* as described earlier. Thereby, new questions can arise and cause the researcher and participants to focus on the need of further actions, which makes the input of time from all participants crucial.

Design of the empirical study

In relation to the project aims, funding demands, time limitations and the choice of PAR, the length of the RD project was set to a school year (autumn 2013 to spring 2014). The action research cycle span was set roughly to a month, allowing participants time to reflect and prepare for the next cycle.

Within the project, the music teacher staff and I together chose a set of questions and connected these to the curriculum and some of the overall goals of the school: to enhance and develop students' goal-related achievements, reach a higher level of inter-rater reliability and working with pedagogical development in relation to subject(s) and scientific knowledge. The main focus fell on equivalent assessment within the courses *Instrument and singing 1* and *2* – being shared syllabi for all instrument choices (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011).[12]

The next step was to create a core group of music teachers. Participation was decided to be voluntary, adhering to aspects of collaborative, interactive and participatory research as well as organizational development (cf. Carlgren, 2013; Timperley, 2011).[13]

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11 Therefore it is compatible with the Deweyan notion of purpose as being dependent on anticipation by the sequence of observation, information and assessment (Dewey, 1987, 2004).

12 These are two of several courses within one of two subjects, *Music*, connected to the national Arts programme (the other being *Music theory*). The curriculum and course syllabi are the same regardless of choice of instrument.

13 To minimize the risk of causing a division into "us and them" within the staff and getting the opportunity to gain valuable peer-feedback and information, teachers opting not to participate actively within the project were updat-

The aims and plan for the RD/PAR project were presented for the staff, including a call for issues regarding assessment and information on the responsibilities connected to participation: to set aside time and allowing the researcher access to information.

In addition to two coordinating teachers, five music teachers volunteered. The core group thereby included seven out of thirteen music faculty members, representing the instruments voice, guitar and bass.[14] All participants were informed about the aspects of participating in a research project, and signed an agreement to let me as the researcher record and collect data in accordance with research ethics (The Swedish Research Council, 2002). A total of eight core-group and eight administrative meetings were held.[15]

As a method example, the first core group meeting will be described a little more in detail. The aim was to set a first goal in relation to curriculum and assessment, thereby setting the stage for intra-rater reliability, i.e. to use commonly agreed upon criteria "to be in agreement with oneself" (Sjöberg, 2010, p. 7, author's translation).[16] The tools for this were to create a dialogue within the group of participants, decide upon a subject matter and then make written reflections to be shared with the researcher before the next meeting.

During the first PAR cycles, it became clear that the balance between the *what* and the *how* of the teachers' assessment practice was lopsided. There was also a risk of getting stuck in details, veering away from a holistic view of learning as intended in the curriculum, heading towards the atomistic and the earlier described criteria compliance.

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ed about, and welcome to inquire into the project development. This entailed the participating teachers to keep eventual information from the core group anonymous. The purpose was to be able to share knowledge and learning related to the profession, and not specifically to other participants. Regarding the research data, getting input from "inside" as well as "outside" of the project could be of interest.

14 For further information regarding participants and instrument groups, see Fig. 1.

15 Two external presentations of the project were also performed. Public publishing and/or presentation were one of the demands for funding. The coordinating music teachers and I held these presentations together.

16 In this case, the term was included and used by the teachers, alluding to them understanding each other.

Although the dialogues were always constructive and described as rewarding by the participants, the project goal was at risk of being lost. Therefore I mapped a suggestion that was discussed, altered and then accepted by the core group. This contained a core of equivalence, setting of E-levels[17] and reaching legal certainty with connections to aspects of what and how to assess, and other aspects planned and/or performed (see *Fig. 1*).
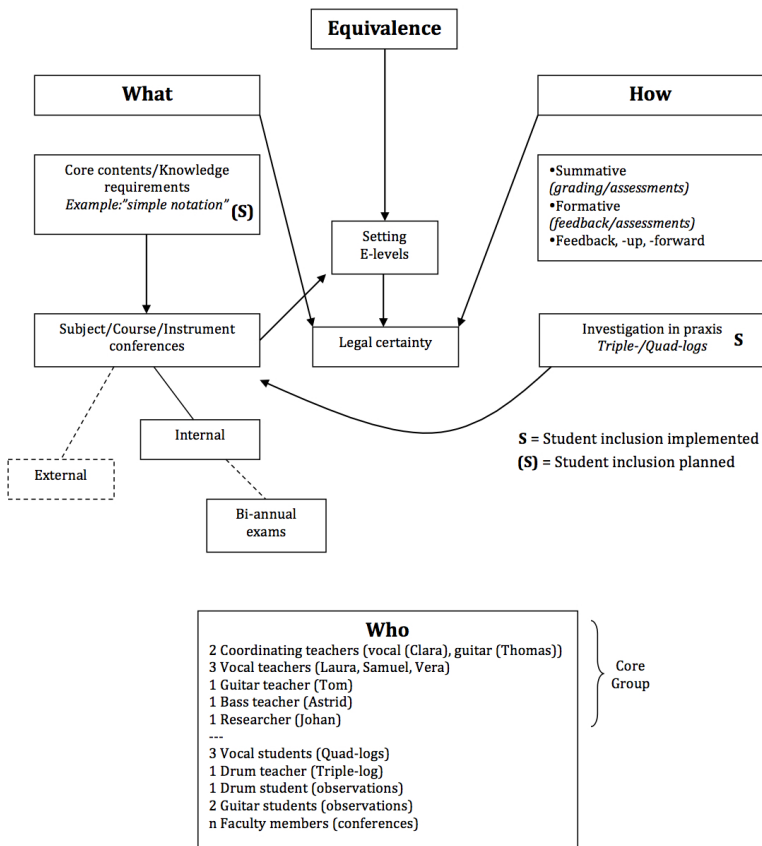

Figure 1. Overview of RD/PAR project – planning, execution and participation[18]

17 I.e. course criteria for the grade *pass*.
18 Dotted lines in the *What* section mark planned but not performed/non-existent actions/interconnections. The names of the teachers are fictitious.

To enable a focus on how assessment was performed and on student inclusion, the group opted for participatory observation using logbooks. The decision fell upon two types: *triple* and *quadruple logs*. These were built upon observations in combination with dual or triple reflections (Björk & Johansson, 1996) where an observer takes notes on actions and events during a lesson and then makes reflections upon these. The observed in turn make their own reflections and finally, students reflect upon the observer's notations.[19] Besides the logbooks, empirical material has been produced through audio recordings (music staff meetings and lessons only) and field notes.

Analysis

All core group and staff meetings were recorded in audio. The data is qualitative and was processed and seen as individual utterances as intersubjective actions (cf. Lerner, 2004). The latter means that consideration has been taken to the type of dialogue (Denscombe, 2014). The recordings were transcribed during the course of the RD/PAR project, using Jefferson's (2004) transcription model. To be able to switch between micro and macro focus, the transcription work was intertwined with listening to the recordings, making written reflections cross-referenced with field notes and logbooks. The data was also fed back continuously to the participants, e.g. as questions, suggestions or explanations and thereby creating new data for analysis. Using musical knowledge and learning as core concepts, gradually a refined set of themes occurred.

Results

The joint RD/PAR project has its roots in long-term development goals regarding student achievement. These are interpreted and realized through perceived and communicated needs of the music teachers regarding their assessment practices – expressed in the work of the core group. During the project, the teachers' conceptions of musical

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19 The latter was performed through semi-structured interviews in direct relation to lessons and based around the following questions: When were you assessed? What are your reflections on that assessment? What is your reflection on the teacher's actions and the observations?

qualities, learning, knowledge and assessment as well as didactical issues have been brought to the fore. These have proven to be complex and multifaceted, and in this part the results will be presented in relation to themes from the analysis related to the knowledge requirement "decode and realise a simple notation", meaning making through different modes of communication and teachers' approaches towards student abilities.

Simple notation – plain and simple?

One example showing the complexity of the teachers' conceptions was the issue of "simple notation". Taken from the knowledge requirements of *Instrument or singing 1*, the group agreed on every participant preparing an example in relation to their own instrument. Reflections on these then formed a background from which a discussion evolved. The examples ranged from short, monophonic pieces to lead sheets of popular songs via etudes. Their level of complexity thereby differed considerably, and the teachers concluded that what they had brought forth as "simple" represented several aspects of knowledge and learning and also of teaching: from difficulty levels of reading, via instrument specific and familiarity aspects to pedagogical considerations regarding the functions of notation in education.

Musical knowledge and learning as instrument specific

All aspects of notation were discussed in relation to assessment and aesthetic qualities by posing the question "What is important in relation to my instrument?" This connected not solely to the notational examples, but also to the knowledge contents to which "simple notation" belong.

> Tom: I think about the definition of "simple", and that it must be something that is familiar and that you have preconceptions of. To be able to experience something as simple, in all likelihood you have to have done it before.
>
> Astrid: It's easy when you know how to do it?
>
> Tom: It's easy when you know how to do it. For the students if they have done it before. And then there is another aspect too. What do we expect

of the students when it comes to something being simple? If I myself am supposed to play something, then it's like "I recognise [it], I'm in a familiar landscape, I have done this before so I know how to navigate in this landscape".

Other reflections that arose in connection to the notation examples were what makes a notation simple for a student, and how do teachers know, and what do teachers expect to be simple for a student?

While the aspect of experience which Dewey would call undergoing something (Dewey, 1934, 1987), teachers' expectations on student ability – what Tom talks about as being the "expected" – could be seen as setting the stage for a relative and not criteria-based assessment practice. From Tom's thought, Samuel proceeded to shift and elaborate upon "simple" as an experience of performing: "After a course completion, hopefully we will have elevated [the students] to the level of what <u>we</u> define as being simple".

The discussion led the teachers into what type of information the students are supposed to be able to decode and realise and in what context: pitch (chords/melodies), rhythm, dynamics, phrasing, form; during solo or ensemble performances? Regardless of how many, all of these parameters and aspects, the teachers concluded, need to be considered when teaching and assessing. Simplicity of notation as a phenomenon was thereby connected to instrument tradition and function as well as possible contexts, e.g. where playing one of the examples on bass – a four bar melody with half and quarter notes in treble clef – was not considered simple nor related to the primary function of the instrument. Chord sequences were seen as possible examples of notation for chord or bass instruments, but not a primary form of notation for singers at this level.[20] The conclusion in the group was that they would probably be able to agree upon a piece of "traditional notation" as an example, but that instrument specifics call for different but equivalent examples of simple notation. This also had to do with different types of reading skills and the didactical *functions* of a "simple notation".

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20 The school offers students to apply on any instrument, but at the time there was only one wind instrument represented (tenor tuba). The main instruments taught are guitar, bass, drums, keyboards and voice.

To decode and realise – functions of music notation for learning

Initially, some teachers consequently connected decoding and realisation to sight-reading.[21] Others brought forth the ability to decode and realise as a tool for learning a piece of music over time, as well as expected skill level after course completion. Although conceptualized as a requirement related to a technical, skill domain of musical quality (cf. Fautley, 2010), this was another explanation for the diversity of notation examples.

While focusing on decoding and realisation, the teachers concluded that the former was a prerequisite for the latter, and therefore also for musical expression when reading music. They saw it as done first by deconstruction and then "putting it together in a passable fashion", consequently (maybe) leading to an expressive, sounding result. A comparison was made to reading. Decoding then means that the student comprehends "what sound [the notations] symbolize", which was considered "the first step of reading":

> Tom: To realise, to me that's to read the words somehow, to be able to read the word. But not reading out loud [fluently], rather like […] no pulse at first, just breaking it down [and] sounding "the word". […] *A prima vista*, that's [like] reading aloud from a novel.
>
> Astrid: The sounding then comes between decoding and realizing.
>
> Vera: Exactly, you take it in steps.
>
> Tom: Decoding is to be able to break it down, seeing what tones are there [and realising] is to play them.

The teachers agreed that for to perceive a musical expression, some form of continuity aspect and fluency was necessary. As an assessment area, this aspect was seen as dependent on course, i.e. skill, level.

Meaning making through modes of communication

While continuity in student and teacher interaction (e.g. regular lessons) was seen as important for learning, attendance in itself was never conceptualized as an assessment quality. Although considered an important prerequisite, it was not seen as the sole key to learning

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21 A knowledge requirement for the highest grade of the course (A) only.

music. The teachers put much more weight into the importance of communicating with their students. But in connection to assessment, they expressed different approaches towards communication with their students regarding aims and knowledge requirements, ranging from use of separate occasions to continuous inclusion during lessons. Understanding and interpreting the *design* and *layout* of the syllabi documents was a first introduction to this theme. The aspect of layout and transformation of syllabi (for pedagogical purposes) thereby became one aspect they connected to both their own understanding and students' learning. One example agreed upon was progression being easier to fathom with the grades in columns, a change from the original layout.[22]

The importance of text and language as different modes of communication was something the teachers expanded upon. One aspect of meaning making was that of aesthetic quality, as described when realising notation – or as Thomas put it: can simple notation really be or represent "real" music? This was seen as possible if the piece of music had some sort of narrative importance for the performer (or listener). The teachers thereby conceptualized music as a sounding as well as written language. Together with the written language of the curriculum, the teachers agreed that this put demands on teachers when *communicating* – with each other as well as with students – e.g. in monitoring of the students' development.

In relation to assessment, the teachers' conceptualizations on communication when teaching can be described as connected roughly to two types: communicating *to* and *with* the students – the former stemming from a master/apprentice approach and the latter to a more collaborative ditto. It is not clear though what effects this has in getting students to reach set goals. Sometimes the teachers, regardless of approach, described the results as similar. Clara brought one example forth when she and her students collaboratively deconstructed a course syllabus to be able to decide what aims, goals and knowledge requirements could be examined and assessed in a written test. Although the students themselves had come to the conclusion that

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22 The importance of this for the students cannot be assessed by analysing this empirical material, but seems to be dependent on the teachers' approaches towards student abilities as described in the next paragraph.

such an examination could only concern E level knowledge, afterwards "they still came to me and asked 'what grade did I get?'" (Clara).[23]

It should be noted that regardless of type of communication, the teachers agree upon their responsibilities as professionals, adhering the responsibility to learn to the students' while the responsibility for the education – i.e. the prerequisites for learning – lies on the teachers and the rest of the school. Every teacher saw it as part of their professional duty to communicate syllabi actively. Not doing so, or disregarding any aims or goals in their teaching was fully rejected as unprofessional and unethical – even though they had different experiences of students' abilities to understand and reflect upon syllabic content. An example relating to this can be found when the teachers and I talked about what the students actually perceive when communicating goals and knowledge criteria through the syllabi:

> Clara: I think it depends on how we present it. Those [students] I have worked with, they got sort of like a week [to read and reflect upon the knowledge requirements] and they have really looked at it. Many of them have deconstructed it, "[This] I can do, and the other not. For example I'm a monster learning by ear, but suck at it by notation". So they made these type of divisions most of them, when given the time.

This approach differs in relation to the conceptualizations foremost made by Samuel and Vera, where they take on a more explanatory and instructive role as teachers. This was based upon the notion of students' abilities to understand and conceptualize the written language of the syllabi.

While some teachers express that communicating syllabi content with students connects to overall learning, others connect it foremost to grading and dialogues regarding assessment and grading. What kind of knowledge this results in was not elaborated upon, only that the goal was to make the students' understand enough to be able to start a reflection process. What became clear was the difference in perceived need of guidance, yet another aspect connected to students' abilities and how the teachers approached these.

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23 This was not a case of the students investigating whether they got an F or E, but of the higher grades D, C, B or A.

Approaches towards students' abilities

The notation examples brought forth regarding the knowledge requirement "decoding and realizing a simple notation" was in one case deliberately made simple "because you have learnt what type of students you have", i.e. it was not constructed in relation to knowledge criteria but to experience of *student* abilities, and as such representing one of several approaches. This division into approaches is one of interconnectedness and can be seen as having one main category: students' ability *to learn*. Echoing the modes of communication, this can also be seen as connected to master/apprentice and collaborative approaches – an example of the former as expressed by Samuel:

> Samuel: But I think, initially if they get to look at the knowledge requirements themselves not many would be able to say, "this means this". But if I go in and explain every sentence, then hopefully – otherwise I would not do it – many more will understand. But initially when they look at this mass of text, they think, "I will never get an A".

Samuel's conception is one of having to take on an explanatory role, to present the students with an optional explanation instead of the students first trying themselves. At the other end of the continuum you find Clara's approach when communicating syllabic contents as described earlier. According to her, students have some independent ability to conceptualize aspects regarding their own learning. She also expressed learning of, and knowledge on, an instrument as holistic, i.e. musical aspects are possible to practice in different learning and musical contexts.

The core group members also had different views of students' abilities to learn in relation to *taking responsibility* and to *reflect*. Samuel, for instance, had the notion of his students mostly being "not overly analytic" when reflecting on their own practicing. Sometimes it was also a question of what was seen as "correct" in relation to knowledge requirements and when to address this, as exemplified by the following exchange regarding learning and performing by notation during vocal lessons:

> Samuel: You have to remind them all the time, "Hey you, this is the same note you just sang, in that sequence". It's like two <u>completely</u> separate worlds, where they during music theory class at least can sort of <u>follow</u>.

> Clara: But I think about what a student said to me today, that, "when Sinatra sings, he sings 'bouncy', but in the notation it's these kind of 'trios'. And I feel it's better with the 'trios' than the dots Sinatra does, so I want to sing as it's written here". It's ((laughs)) it's hilarious, the language is fantastic but it's perfectly clear […] that a reflection has taken place.

Again, it is a difference between (teacher) instruction and (student) reflection but also one of (separation of) contexts and learning goals. The important learning goal in this case seems to be the ability to reflect: in the first case related to contexts, and in the second to musical expression. Samuel's frustration regards the difference his students' show in ability to connect courses and lessons – the result of an atomistic understanding, so to speak – while in Clara's case, a "fantastic" language is used as opposed to a more musically correct equivalent.

Discussion

The specific research purpose addressed in this article was to develop knowledge about music teachers' experience and conceptualizations regarding assessment practices within the national Arts programme. As opposed to the results shown by Zandén (2010), this group of upper secondary school music teachers focus on and discuss all aspects of the curriculum contents, including visual as well as sounding aspects of student performance as well as didactical issues concerning assessment. This was enabled by creating a reflective practice through constructive dialogues inside as well as outside the core group (cf. Isaacs, 1993, 2001; Stanley, 2009; Timperley et al., 2007).

Moving between atomistic and holistic perspectives, the latter was always being considered the goal of music education, knowledge and learning. What can be noticed is a difference within the core group when it comes to experiences of this type of sharing of conceptualizations on musical qualities and assessment of music. Although they not always agreed on ideas or ideals, the music teachers kept a strict focus on the subject at hand and its relations to concepts and contexts.

Instead of defining how teaching and assessment *should* be organized it is according to the teachers more a question of how this *could* be organized in relation to criteria and students' experiences and goals. Like Dewey's (1916, 1958) notion of communication, the teachers' have exchanged experiences based on curiosity and enabled conflicting opinions to surface and be examined. This way, a mutual understanding has been achieved where different interpretations can exist and be regarded as equal when it comes to assessment.

The teachers in this article are as of today not part of a permanent, fixed group. Neither was the project set in every detail. This is part of what Cain et al. (2007) describe as giving the participants the opportunity to reflect upon purposes and theories within a project in relation to their needs. It is also a way to be open for a kind of educational thought. This not to be regarded as similar to an "anything goes" attitude – on the contrary, the big picture along with the frames were set. Or to continue the assessment journey metaphor: the compass was on-board, the vehicle's checklist ticked off, the map unfolded and the route set for the goals. Speaking with Dewey (1916, 2004), choosing tools within PAR that call for intelligent action in the form of reflection, conceptualization and communication has helped pave the way for professional development. This is one way to reach a more balanced level of professionalism in relation to accountability and its deprofessionalizing effects (Englund, 2011; Torrance, 2007; Zandén, 2011, 2013). Or to speak with Allsup and Westerlund (2012): as agents, the teachers are ready to set their professionalism into (further) action.

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