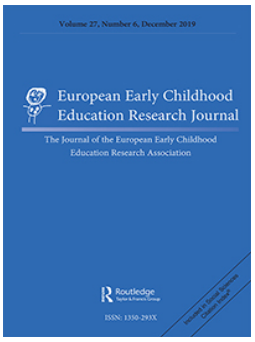

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Dutch early years classroom teachers facilitating and guiding musical play: problems and opportunities

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ABSTRACT
Musical play is an activity in which young children more or less freely explore and create with sound with limited guidance from a teacher. This study explored the occurrence of musical play in Dutch early years education (4–5 year olds). Twenty early years classroom teachers were interviewed about the content of the music education taking place in their classroom, and about a possible facilitation and guidance of musical play. Findings showed that ten teachers were unfamiliar with musical play, whilst nine experienced it as too difficult due to limited experience and knowledge. One teacher successfully included musical play, due to additional pre-service training. We argue that musical play may be a valuable addition to early years music education, one that enables young children to learn about music more consistent with their age and interests. Based on our outcomes, we advocate the provision of additional teacher education around facilitating musical play.

KEYWORDS
Early years; musical play; classroom teachers

1. Introduction

In this article we focus on the music education which Dutch early years classroom teachers working with 4–5 year old children, provide in their classrooms, and more specifically we explore the extent to which this includes musical play. In distinguishing between teacher-directed, whole-group-based music education and a more free form of 'musical play', we assume, on a theoretical basis, the advantages of musical play in early years music education as a form of pedagogy that is more suited to the way young children learn, and we explore the extent to which musical play exists in Dutch early years education. This paper first gives a brief overview of early years music education in The Netherlands, resulting in the study's research questions, followed by a review of the relevant literature on musical play and the role of the teacher therein. After elaboration of the methodology for this study, the main findings of the research are reported and discussed. Finally, we consider the implications deriving from our findings, and argue that the use of musical play is

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both an attainable and desirable approach to music education for early years classroom teachers.

1.1. Music education in the early years: framing the issue

In The Netherlands, the first two years of compulsory early years education (4–5 year olds) are largely play-based tending to be dominated by an integrated thematic approach (Van Oers 2013). Music education in Dutch primary schools predominantly remains the responsibility of generalist classroom teachers, as the majority of schools do not employ music specialists (Kruiter et al. 2016; Schilt-Mol et al. 2011). More specifically, research by Hoogeveen et al. (2014) reports that Dutch early years classroom teachers tend to offer music education consisting largely of singing, and listening to music; a finding supported by other international studies (Cerniglia 2013). Additionally, Gillespie and Glider (2010) found that early years teachers use singing and listening mainly to scaffold social and academic skills, or to facilitate transitions between activities. Kim and Kemple (2011) found that whilst early years teachers tend to value music education for its aesthetic, quality-of-life, and social-emotional benefits, they rate it as being less important than other academic subjects, such as literacy, math, and science. Accordingly, the previous literature suggests that most early years music education consists of teacher-directed, whole group-based musical activities, in order to achieve extra-musical objectives.

Whilst most teacher-directed musical activities are inherently valuable and efficient, they may also minimize the child's role in their own learning processes and do therefore not entirely fit in with the way young children learn, given that young children learn largely by means of play (Vygotsky 1978). A form of music education that more fully meets the nature of children's meaningful learning, may well be 'musical play'. In the literature, musical play is generally defined as an activity in which children voluntarily and independently explore, improvise and create with sound. The role of the teacher is less prominent, acting more as a facilitator, observer or guide (Marsh and Young 2006). Overall, children can benefit from the musical play, as it allows them to learn about music in personally meaningful ways, consistent with their level of development.

Previous studies emphasize the importance of teachers engaging in musical play (Bartel and Cameron 2007; Smith and Montgomery 2007) but they tend to focus on educators with a musical background, working with small groups of children, rather than generalist classroom teachers working with whole classes. One essential issue here is that music specialists, both in The Netherlands and elsewhere, are frequently part-time, often with limited knowledge of individual children within a limited context. Classroom teachers, however, benefit from daily interaction with children, resulting in a fuller picture of their ability and interest. Therefore they may have additional opportunities to engage in musical play, enabling them to recognize the musical learning possibilities of children's spontaneous and ongoing musical play throughout the day (Jeanneret and DeGraffenreid 2012). As childhood musical experiences may have significant impact on adult's musical attitudes (Ruismäki and Tereska 2006), engaging in musical play offers classroom teachers the possibility to lay important foundations for children's future musical engagement.

To date, limited research has explored the experiences of early years classroom teachers with offering and guiding musical play. Therefore, we aim to answer the following research questions:

- What is the content and objectives of Dutch early years teachers' music education?
- To what extent do Dutch early years teachers facilitate and guide musical play?
- What value do Dutch early years teachers place on the musical play?

1.2. Theoretical framework

1.2.1. Play

Play is often characterized as a children's activity that is 'intrinsically motivated, with no externally fixed outcome' (Burghardt 2010). Most young children enjoy play and learning takes place extensively within the context of their play activities (Berk 2010). Hence young children's play and their development can be said to be strongly related (Dewey 1933; Fleer 2010; Piaget 1951; Vygotsky 1978). In their exploratory play, young children experiment with and manipulate objects in order to become acquainted with their attributes and make them their own (El'konin 1977). In their role-play, through imitation, young children freely reconstruct the socio-cultural practices from the adult world around them and the roles that go with them, acting as highly involved, intrinsically motivated learners (Vygotsky 1978).

For their role-play to resemble cultural practices, children must also include rules such as social rules, on how to interact with each other in social role-play, (e.g. doctor vs. patient, performer vs. director), technical rules ('this item – what will it represent?', rules for how to play an instrument), or strategic rules (role division, planning, agreed rule for all musicians to start simultaneously, etc.). Although these rules are restrictive as they aim to maintain common values, they can also be flexible, allowing children a certain amount of freedom to interpret them according to their own understandings and interest (Van Oers 2013).

In responding to their individual needs, teachers can enhance children's role-play by participating in children's play, adding tools and modelling new situations and corresponding actions. However, teachers are advised not to interrupt children's play, or impose rules that go beyond the activity needs of the children (Van Oers 2013).

1.2.2. Musical play

As participants in the cultural practices of their community (see Rogoff 2003), children will also bring musical experiences and vocabularies to their play and make meaning out of them by drawing on the musical encounters in their daily lives (Barrett and Tafuri 2012). In a range of settings, for example at school, at home, or in places of worship, children experience and participate in musical practices with people singing, playing, or conducting. In their play, using cultural tools (e.g. musical instruments, a baton, props), children can imitate the general outlines of those situations and actions, taking on roles, living through them and making meaning out of them (Barrett and Tafuri 2012; El'konin 1977). Their musical play is thus a socio-cultural activity modelled on the adult world they experience.

Over the last decades, several researchers have studied children's musical play. Some observed children's 'free musical play': spontaneous musical behaviours in naturalistic environments such as the schoolyard or other out-of-classroom play spaces (e.g. Campbell 1998; Marsh and Young 2006). In this paper, we focus on research conducted on children's musical play in specific musical environments, i.e. spaces equipped with musical instruments, props, recordings, etc. Findings from such research demonstrate that in these encouraging musical environments, children show various forms of musical play: they sing known songs and make up their own (Marsh and Young 2006), using all kinds of vocalisations and language (Huisman Koops 2012). When playing with musical instruments or sound-makers, children can show both exploratory behaviours, and more purposeful soundmaking and patternings, often paired with body actions (Dansereau 2015; Wright 2003). They move rhythmically to their own and other's singing and music making (Moorhead and Pond 1978; Young 2003). If regularly exposed to experiences with sound exploration, 5–6 year old children may demonstrate interest in inventing various forms of notation, thus showing their understanding of musical features (Carroll 2007; Kenney 2012). Over time, children's musical play may increasingly reflect their developing understanding of the musical practices (their rules and conceptual tools) surrounding them (Barrett and Tafuri 2012).

Engaging in musical play, therefore, supports children's musical development and creativity according to music education experts (see for instance Barrett and Tafuri 2012; Littleton 2015) as well as helps their gross and fine motor control and eye-hand coordination (Tarnowski 1999). It may support children's creativity, exploration and problem-solving abilities (Burnard and Murphy 2013; Pound 2010), whilst their musical exploratory behaviours reflect their developing understanding of the music of their culture (Mialaret 1997 in Barrett and Tafuri 2012).

Children's engagement in musical play also appears to impact on other development areas. Putkinen, Saarikivi, and Tervaniemi (2013) suggest that engaging in musical play promotes a general enhancement of children's auditory processing, which may positively affect the later development of language skills. Research by Zachariou and Whitebread (2015) shows the emergence of more self-regulatory behaviours after musical play, due to its inherent opportunities to make choices. This corresponds with findings by John, Cameron, and Bartel (2016) who additionally identify increased social regulation during musical play.

To summarize: musical play enables children to learn in a meaningful way about music and themselves as musicians, with tangible, positive effects on their musical and overall development.

Based on the foregoing, in the present study, we define musical play as follows:

Musical play is a cultural activity that takes place in a prepared musical environment in which young children, with limited guidance of a teacher, intrinsically learn about music through highly involved, multi-sensory play with voice, movement and sound (makers), paired with or consecuted by musical role-play in which they more or less freely reconstruct the socio-cultural and musical practices of their culture, based on the roles, rules and tools that go with them.

1.2.3. Adult participation in musical play

Although musical play as such is important for the emergence of children's initial musical skills, as in all play contexts, for the child to stay involved and to develop, it may at a certain point need adult involvement for challenge and support. The adult then serves as a facilitator, participant, observer and guide of children's musical play (Campbell

1998; Marsh and Young 2006). Literature concerning the adult's role in children's musical play highlights the following themes (chosen by the authors):

Facilitation: The adult provides for a learning environment rich in musical opportunities, where children can become immersed in a broad range of music-making experiences (Barrett and Tafuri 2012; St. John 2006). Here, children are allowed to play voluntarily and freely for prolonged periods, as time and repeated exposure to musical play are conditional for children to move through a range of play behaviours (Bartel and Cameron 2007; Dansereau 2015).

Teacher expectation: Children's early musical play behaviours may be compared to the scribbling stage of drawing (Littleton 1998). Many adults, however, label these beginnings as 'noise' (as it does not sound like 'real' music) or disruptive behaviours. Being without adult intervention or guidance, they assume that children are unfocused and exploring instruments haphazardly (Ouvry 2004; Tafuri 2009 in Parker 2017). Listening to young children's music can be quite unnerving, as most adult listeners have a different perception of music due to maturity and musical enculturation. It demands a shift of perspective as well as some musical experience to recognize, understand and react to distinctive musical features in young children's music (Glover 2000). Indeed, what children actually do is a deeply physical and multi-sensory exploration of the possibilities of sound, inherent in the young child's temperament (Bartel and Cameron 2007). Moreover, young children's interests mostly lie in the moment of creation, not in the anticipation of a product to be reproduced by themselves or others (Barrett and Tafuri 2012; Wright 2003). Adults, therefore, should not impose their own rules or pre-conceived musical expectations, as this appears to inhibit children's musical play (Huisman Koops 2012).

Support: Even though children go through various musical play behaviours in a process 'that is fluid, boundless and transcendent', as there is no 'stage theory' of musical play (Littleton 2015, 52), for any subsequent, effective support, the adult does need some general knowledge on (musical) activities of children, in order to identify their musical intentions and subsequent needs (Young 2005; Smith and Montgomery 2007). This knowledge enables the adult to act as an 'observer-collaborator' (St. John 2006): observing children's self-initiated musical play whilst participating – following their lead. Based on such participant observations, she can offer various forms of adult-responsive, non-verbal support, such as joining the child's play, copying specific musical features, singing them back or exaggerate, 'answer' or record them (and listen back together) – thus reinforcing children's actions and stimulating their musical/aural awareness (Huisman Koops 2012; Young and Glover 1998). Observation may also lead to adult-initiated forms of temporary, adjusted support ('scaffolding'), such as the introduction and demonstration of new instruments and objects, to stimulate children's actions and interest, and expand their means of musical expression (St. John 2006; Wright 2003). The modelling of meaningful musical play situations with corresponding roles and actions also enhances children's play (Bartel and Cameron 2007). Adults' feedback should focus on the process rather than on the outcome of their musical play (Smithrim and Upitis 2007), and include 'descriptive' feedback. This does not only helps children to understand their own music making, but it also offers them a musical vocabulary that in time will allow them to articulate and discuss their musical meanings, as the first move towards metacognition (Glover 2000; Wright 2003). All of these forms of support require an 'improvizational pedagogical approach' (Ben-Horin 2016; Sawyer 2011) instead of rigidly following a pre-conceived plan, the adult – in collaboration with the children – offers informed and adequate responses to their (musical) needs and interests in the moment of play itself. Hereto, teachers do not only need to have 'a playful attitude, an affinity for improvization, and willingness to let children lead' (Littleton 2015, 52), such 'navigation-in-action' also requires (musical) knowledge and experience (Huhtinen-Hildén and Pitt 2018, 61).

2. Materials and methods

In order to answer our research questions, we did an exploratory interview study. Details of this study are described and justified below.

2.1. Sample

The sample for this study consisted of twenty Dutch early years classroom teachers (19 female, 1 male), aged between 29 and 63 years, equally qualified and geographically located throughout The Netherlands. The respondents were recruited by members of a national music teacher network, and therefore unknown to the researchers. Participants consented to participate in an interview on a topic generally described as 'early years education', in order to rule out any unwanted preferences or aversions for music education or play.

The sample size ($N = 20$) was evaluated by the concept of 'information power' (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016). The more information power (IP) a sample holds, the lower N is needed. Malterud et al. identify five items that impact the IP of a sample. Here, these items are briefly discussed and we explain how they have guided our evaluation of the sample size.

In general, the power of a study relates to its sample size: to offer sufficient IP, a broad study aim requires a larger sample than a narrow one. Further, the specificity of the sample (with respect to experiences, knowledge or properties) impacts its IP. Thus the more specific the participants are for the target group, the less extensive sample is needed. Also, a sample's IP is related to the study's theoretical background: limited theoretical perspectives usually require a larger sample than an extensive theoretical framework. Additionally, strong interview dialogues by a skilled interviewer result in data higher in IP and therefore require a smaller sample than a study with unfocused dialogues. Finally, IP is related to the chosen analysis strategy: a purposive sample of a few participants can be sufficient for single case analysis, whereas an exploratory cross-case analysis requires more participants to offer sufficient IP.

This study's research sample was relatively high in IP considering the parameters that impact IP. The study was underpinned by an elaborate, theoretical framework, with a narrow study aim looking at only a small component of early years classroom teachers' education. The sample was highly specific for the target group as it met most of the characteristics relevant for this study. Finally, the interviewing researcher was a highly experienced teacher with a thorough knowledge of the field. Hence, we judged that the sample size was acceptable for drawing conclusions from our analyses, enabling us to construct empirically verified hypotheses for future research.

2.2. Materials

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted, with an average duration of 50 minutes. Open-ended questions were thematically grouped in a literature-based interview schedule. A conversational style of interviewing was adopted to encourage comfortable and fluent dialogues that were rich in detail. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.3. Ethical considerations

Prior to the interview, respondents were informed about the study's aim and on their rights to withdraw from the study at any time. All respondents gave consent and agreed on audio recording of the interview and on the anonymized use of the gathered data.

2.4. Analysis

Analysis of the interviews utilized the framework method (Ritchie and Spencer 1993). A conceptual framework, based on literature and concurrent with the interview schedule, served as the a priori coding scheme for data analysis. In this framework, 23 codes were categorized into 2 key themes, namely: (a) content, form and objectives of teachers' current music education, (b) the occurrence and possible guidance of musical play in teachers' current music education.

Prior to coding, code validity was checked by two independent music teachers who developed their own codes for two randomly chosen interview transcriptions. Comparison with the existing code set led to one additional code. Subsequently, all interview data were coded with the revised set. To ensure reliability, after the initial coding, two independent pedagogues from a teacher training institute coded two randomly chosen interviews each, using the existing code set. No differences with the initial coding were found.

Finally, the external validity of the main findings concerning music education was cross checked by means of a questionnaire in a group of 32 Dutch music teachers in teacher education (hereafter abbreviated as: 'MTTE') who worked at one of 21 (of a national total of 32) teacher training institutions, which makes them representative of the occupational group. The questionnaire was verbally explained at a national conference and completed by respondents on site.

3. Results

This section reports on the results of the interviews according to the study's research aims.

3.1. Content, form and objectives of generalist teachers' current music education

Results showed that all respondents ($N = 20$) offered whole-group based, teacher-directed music education with an emphasis on singing and movement. Teachers who themselves were musically active, offered some instrumental music making. Regarding the objectives for their music education, three teachers indicated to have none, twelve mentioned (after prompting) objectives related to social and academic benefits, whilst five stated more general musical objectives such as 'understanding the concept of pulse' or 'high and low'. Most respondents indicated they lacked knowledge to assess children's musical performances, some merely noticed children who stood out musically. Two respondents claimed to recognize children's actual musical abilities and needs: one of them was musically active herself, the other regularly attended the school's music specialist's lessons.

The external validity check with MTTE showed close agreement with these findings, especially concerning whole-group based and teacher-directed forms of music education in early years education, and a focus on singing.

3.2. The role of a musical play in teachers' current early years music education

Having been informed of our definition of the musical play, teachers were asked if they ever offered such a form of musical play in their classes. Ten teachers indicated never having thought about this. Nine teachers had presented musical activities for children to do independently, albeit as an assignment, e.g. by playing ready-made song cards or making music with water and bottles. Their guidance varied from none to joining in and the modelling of actions. When asked about their experiences, all of them expressed frustration, as they found children 'only made a lot of noise'; 'just stopped after a while' or 'didn't do what was intended'. Thus, not knowing how to proceed, they had simply ended the activities. In conclusion, none of the nineteen teachers felt sufficiently capable of offering and guiding musical play, due to a lack of knowledge in this area and an understanding of children's musical performances and needs.

One teacher, however, regularly offered and guided musical play. Equipped with additional early years music training, she offered musical play opportunities in which children could play voluntarily. Her guidance consisted of demonstrations of materials and the modelling of actions, in whole or small-group settings. She described how in their play, children explored and manipulated materials, using the modelled actions. They engaged in role-play (e.g. conductor and orchestra) and invented simple notations for their music. Neither the teacher nor the children experienced any noise disturbance, as she stated:

> When you're aware of what children are doing, it's okay: children are exploring and learning.

Finally, all teachers were asked to reflect on the value of adding musical play to their own music education. Respondents mentioned positive effects on children's social and musical skills (e.g. cooperation, concentration, auditory development or rhythmic skills), more frequent musical experiences for children, greater involvement, as well as better insights into children's musical actions and needs.

However, the study's results suggest that, with the one exception, none of the teachers appeared to have the knowledge or skills to offer and guide musical play. They could neither manage the children's activity effectively nor productively deal with the children's need for freedom in the context of a rule-governed practice of musical play. This chimes in with our findings from the survey amongst MTTE, suggesting that only 10% of the MTTE teach on a musical play, whereas 60% indicated musical development is a neglected topic in their programmes, mainly because of a lack of time. The remaining 40% offer this as extra-curricular optional courses.

4. Conclusion and discussion

The present exploratory study set out to investigate if and how Dutch early years classroom teachers include musical play in their music education and address the practicalities of doing so. The small number of participants ($N = 20$) preclude empirical generalization, but nonetheless some important, but tentative conclusions are offered.

We have argued on a theoretical basis that musical play can be a valuable addition to meaningful early years music education, not to replace whole-group, teacher-directed forms of music education, but as a way for young children to explore, improvise and create with sound, and therefore, positively affect their musical needs and overall development. In order for such musical play to flourish, the teacher should be able to guide children's play.

Along with studies by Kruiter et al. (2016) and Schilt-Mol et al. (2011), we argue that participants' music education consisted of mainly whole group based and teacher-directed activities with an emphasis on singing. In accordance with international findings, their learning goals for music education were mainly social or academic.

Concerning musical play, however, our findings suggest a different picture. Ten respondents had no experience with musical play, due to unfamiliarity. Nine offered limited musical play but had experienced difficulties, stating that children acted in un-intended ways, or that children's play simply ceased. These experiences might be explained by the fact that their guidance did not meet the necessary conditions essential for (musical) play to flourish, namely that children need freedom. However, whether or not from a deeply rooted assumption that children's learning mainly takes place under adult guidance-, teachers gave assignments (including instructions, rules or increased attention) which did not meet children's direct musical needs, restricting their freedom instead. Secondly, teachers' disappointment over the outcome of the activities with some of them referring to it as 'noise', suggests a mis-match between children's musical actions and teachers' ideas of what 'real music sounds like', indicating a possible lack of knowledge on young children's musical actions and inherent explorative musical behaviours.

The one teacher who regularly offered musical play might have been successful for a number of reasons. By offering frequent musical play activities, she allowed sufficient time for children to play musically. She recognized and accepted children's early musical explorations, without constricting their freedom by imposing unnecessary rules, or her ideas of what is 'musical'. Children engaged in exploratory – and socio-dramatic play with personal rules. She guided children's play by means of modelling, in order to increase their play repertoire and musical actions. The teacher attributed these successful experiences to knowledge gained from additional early years music courses during her vocational training.

The above seems to indicate that early years teachers may indeed be capable of facilitating and guiding musical play, following appropriate training. Such training then should focus on how to facilitate musical play, how to recognize young children's musical needs and on subsequent guidance of children's play to answer these needs. Given the fact that all respondents in this research indicated an appreciation of the additional value gained from musical play for their music education, we argue that such training is attainable as well as desirable for most early years teachers. Similarly, Cerniglia (2013, 72) advises: 'Offering professional development workshops or specific training would be helpful as would hiring an early childhood music specialist as a consultant for teachers'. We conclude that further research is needed, to examine what professional development (pre-service or in-service) should look like, in order for early years classroom teachers to learn how to include musical play in their music education successfully.

The study reported in this article is unique in the sense that early years classroom teachers working with musical play have never been subject of research before. It identifies a thus far unrecognized ignorance of musical play amongst teachers, and a lack of knowledge and skills of the phenomenon, most probably caused by a limited music educational offer during their pre-service training. Given the fact that Dutch classroom teachers' music pedagogical initial conditions resemble those of teachers on an international level, it is to be expected that findings of this study will also apply to early years teachers in other countries.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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