

***Jong geleerd...* creative music education for young children**

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Introduction

In 2010 TOEVAL GEZOCHT launched its three-year research project *Jong geleerd...*¹ which aims to develop a form of creative music education for pre-school children. Year one concentrated on conducting a survey of theoretical concepts and practical examples in the Netherlands and abroad. In the second year (the pilot year) we developed pedagogical principles based on the research findings, which were piloted in six reception (children in the age 4 - 6 years) classes. We integrated these experiences and reflections into an adapted working method and structure. The third and final year centred on developing this working method into a tangible form, and putting the entire method into practice. We are also developing a coaching program for school teachers and music teachers wishing to use this approach. This article sets out a description of the structure of the music education that we developed. For a clear understanding of the project, we begin by outlining the pedagogic starting points of TOEVAL GEZOCHT.

¹ The title is derived from the Dutch proverb 'jong geleerd, oud gedaan' which roughly translates as 'What's learned in the cradle lasts till the tomb'.

1. About TOEVAL GEZOCHT

The image of the competent child

TOEVAL GEZOCHT sees young children as natural explorers. Their exploration or learning process is not shaped by what adults teach them – a child's learning is driven by a natural urge for creative exploration. They explore, discover and create, unexpectedly find something different from what they were seeking, and enthusiastically incorporate it into their play. A child steps into the unknown without fear. In this voyage of exploration which is crucial to learning, the child looks for explanations, asks questions, defines problems and forms hypotheses and interpretations. Children are born with all the abilities required to develop within and adapt to the (cultural) environment. They possess a natural curiosity and an innate desire to interact with their peers, adults and their environment. Children have an hundred languages – not only verbal languages, but the language of image, music, movement, logical thought, metaphor, and so on. Using these languages to express themselves and communicate is a way for children to engage with and understand the world and, as such, is an active way to learn.

Giving children the lead

To do justice to this image of the child, and inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach, we developed a working method and system in which we closely observe the children, and document and interpret their processes of exploration. By integrating this system into projects we are able to gain a clearer picture of the children themselves, and the kind of learning strategies they employ. Documentation is

fundamental in allowing us to trace the child's learning and discovery journey. In turn, this means that we can allow the child to take the lead in his or her learning process. With this we don't mean a 'laissez-faire' approach whereby everything is determined by the children. Giving children the lead means that the child 'generates' the content. The subject and the content 'belong to the children'. The role of the adult is to support this.

Children always develop and learn in interaction with 1) their peers, 2) adults and 3) their environment. Drawing on the Reggio Emilia Approach, we also focus specifically on these so-called 'three pedagogues'.

Peers: This means that interaction between the children is always a key aspect of our projects.

Adults: The term 'adults' refers to all the grown-up people in the child's environment. Educators, neighbours, (music-making) parents and (professional) musicians.

Environment: This generally refers to the actual space that children use at school such as the classroom and music workshop. But it also implies the children's home, the village, and the context within which the children live.

The focus on and significance of these three pedagogues are vital to the process, which is led by the children.

Pedagogic principles

TOEVAL GEZOCHT is based on the principles of the image of the child set out above, and fundamentals of social constructivism. Learning is not a one-way, directed process; knowledge and ideas are constructed through interaction. A pupil is the

protagonist in his or her learning process. We base our approach on the ideas developed by thinkers such as Dewey, Vygotsky and Bruner as well as drawing inspiration from by the Reggio Emilia Approach. We also conduct an on-going debate on views about music. One such fundamental question, for instance, asks 'when do sounds become music?' This discussion also offers a basis for observing children's learning processes.

Learning as a creative process

We consider learning a creative process in which the individual who is learning guides the learning process, and where learning occurs on the basis of interactive knowledge building, co-construction. This contrasts with the model in which learning is seen as being transferred from adults to children, where the initiative and choice of teaching material primarily lies with the adults. Because the setting and context within which children grow up is continually changing, children growing up in today's world build a different kind of knowledge and need to find solutions different from those of the adults who teach them. The job of adults is to encourage children to explore their initiative, curiosity and creativity from an early age so that these abilities are enhanced rather than lost.

Working as a team

In the TOEVAL GEZOCHT projects, the children are always guided by a team. This means that the class teacher plays an important role in the music lessons. In *Jong geleerd...* the team consists of a music teacher, the class teacher and an intern/volunteer. The staff of TOEVAL GEZOCHT coach and guide the team members.

Because each team member observes the children's processes from the perspective of his or her particular background and knowledge, there is a wealth of reflections and interpretations. Functioning as a team also presents invaluable training opportunities. Every day, the class teacher learns how the music teacher observes the children, how he or she approaches them, works with them, and vice versa.

You see the children having fun. Even the very quiet ones, the ones who stand out least in the class. They seem to soak everything up. (Marjanne Koopman, class teacher)

International consultative group

An international sounding board is involved in the project. Drawing on its specific expertise in music education, the international consultative group offers advice and follows the course of the project. The sounding board group acts as an important stimulus to the music team. The group comprises Dr. Susan Young (Exeter University, England), Nancy Evans (musician and early learning music specialist, England), Prof. Bert van Oers (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Melissa Bremmer (Conservatorium van Amsterdam and Masters in Cultural Education Amsterdam School of the Arts, Amsterdam), Hans van Regenmortel and Sarah Verhulst (both creative music-making specialists, Musica, Belgium), Anja van Keulen (Concertgebouw Amsterdam), Maria Wüst (Masters in Cultural Education Amsterdam School of the Arts, Amsterdam).

2. Aim of Jong geleerd...

Creative music education at school

Jong geleerd... is a creative form of music education we developed for early learning (children aged 4 – 6). It takes an in-depth and versatile approach to learning through music, and music development encouraging children to express their thoughts and feelings in music and, most importantly, to enjoy music. Our mission is for music to become a natural part of their everyday expressive vocabulary. We want children to have opportunities to enjoy all aspects of music, and develop a love for it.

During the last year of *Jong geleerd...* we are working in three schools in Landsmeer for 6 months, providing lessons lasting at least 1 – 1.5 hours to 5 preschool classes each week. Each class is made up of between 25 and 35 children.

Connecting music and school, home and community

Jong geleerd... centres on an active connection between home, school and the community in Landsmeer. In our last year, we again work with different partners: the three primary schools, music teachers trained by TOEVAL GEZOCHT, volunteers, interns, the Amicitia music association, the Amsterdam Sinfonietta professional strings orchestra, Evert Josemanders (puppeteer, musician, composer), a choir teacher and a variety of music groups from the village.





'Zo klinkt Landsmeer' closing performance 2012

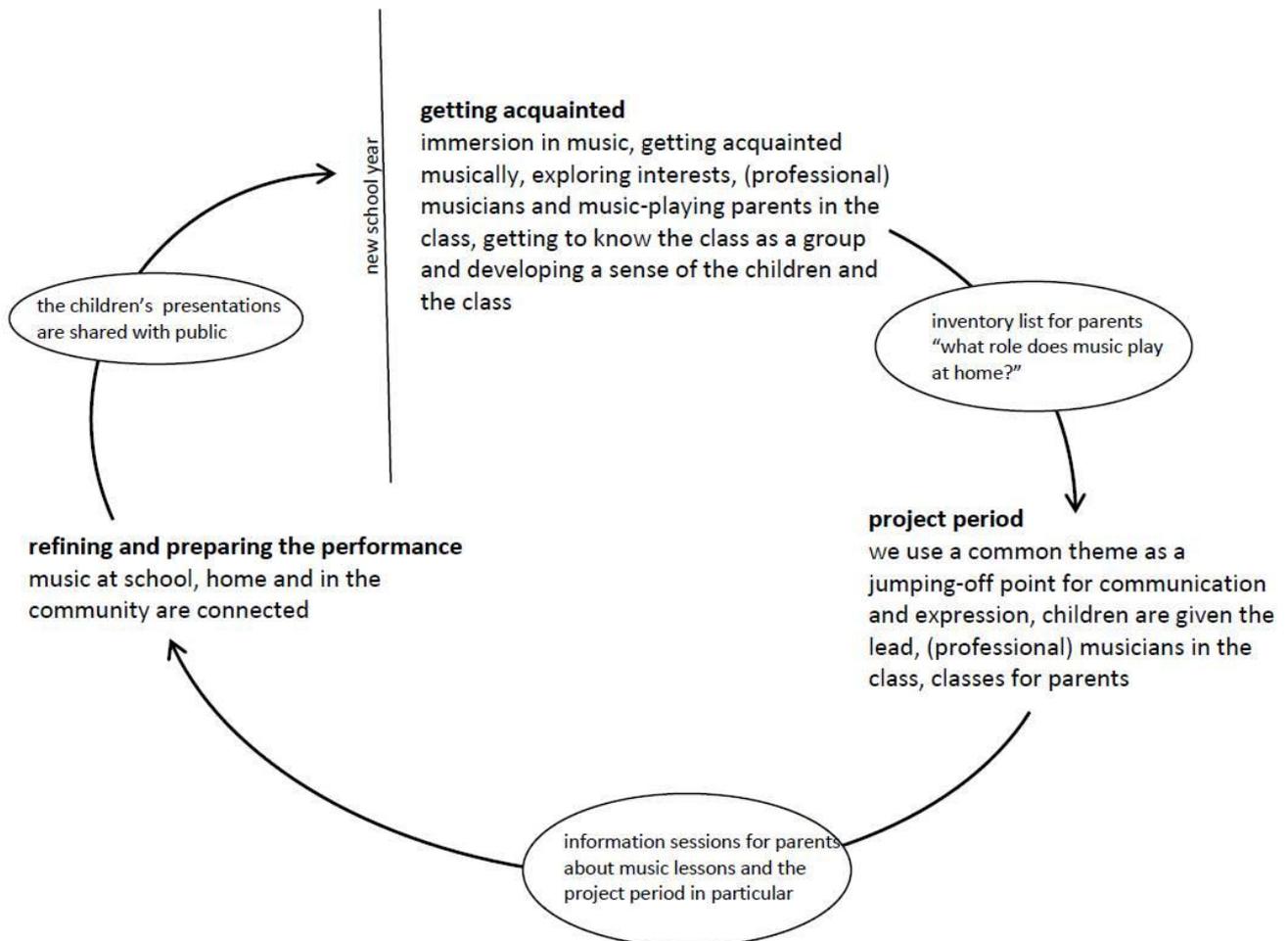
'Coming back' to school in the second year was amazing! From what the children remembered – big things and sometimes tiny details – you can tell that last years' project left a lasting impression. It was amazing to see how many children were having fun and engaged with music quite naturally, with confidence and creativity right from the beginning. (Debby Korfmacher, music teacher)

3. Jong geleerd... in practice

The music sessions are designed to take different forms throughout the school year. We break them down into three different periods that form a logical, alternating sequence. Our intention is not, however, to keep these three periods strictly separate. Depending on the situation and circumstances, each period can be longer, shorter and/or overlap.

The different domains 'singing, playing, listening, moving, composing and improvising, presenting and reflecting and talking' feature quite naturally in each of the three components. The focus lies on musical skill building, centring on personal expression and musical communication. The specific TOEVAL GEZOCHT approach interlinks playing music with other receptive and reflective skills. Throughout the

various components, we build links between home, school and the community in a variety of ways.



The first period – getting acquainted

Length of music lesson: 1 hour

Throughout a period of: 8 - 10 weeks

Type of lesson: frontal, in collaboration with the class teacher, the music teacher prepares the music lesson, (professional) musicians and parents who play music participate in the class.

The music sessions in the first period focus on immersing the children in music, getting acquainted, exploring interests and telling – and hearing – about the things you know and what you enjoy. The children's input plays an important role. They are encouraged to talk about music, to be imaginative and improvise, bring music from home, sing along with it and dance to it. The emphasis lies on improvised singing and stimulating children's aural powers of imagination.

The children are accompanied by the class teacher and the music teacher. The music teacher and, preferably, the class teacher, present themselves as musician and music-lover.

We have identified a number of building blocks for the music lessons in this component:

Singing, movement

A broad repertoire of (children's) songs, movement to music, experimenting with voice, inviting children to talk about their favourite songs and music.

Improvising

The children are invited to improvise in the moment, based on free-form improvisation. Rhythmical and melodic improvisation, body percussion and group improvisations.

Shared opening (ritual)

The lesson starts off with a ritual that is particular to the class, such as singing to each other.

Talking about music, listening and watching joint compositions and improvisations

In group discussions, we encourage the children to talk and philosophise about music and musical concepts. We also give time and attention to listening to and watching recordings of previous music lessons.

The stage

From day one, the children have a chance to perform 'on stage' like real musicians.

(Professional) musicians visit the class

Professional and amateur musicians regularly take part in the lessons and are actively involved in them.

Instruments

We set up a music corner in the classroom. This is a place for children to listen to music, draw music and play music instruments. Like the doll or building corner, the music corner is one of the activities children can choose from each day.

The aim of this period is to create a safe, inspiring and musically rich environment in which music is a part of everyday life. Music as a mother tongue (mother music) that you communicate with and about, and that you develop in interaction with others, just like any other language.

The second period – project period

Length of music lesson: 1 – 1.5 hours

Throughout a period of: 10 - 12 weeks

Type of lesson: frontal and in groups, children lead their own musical exploration journey. Guided by the whole team (music teacher, class teacher and/or intern), (professional) musicians and parents who play music participate in the class.

This phase of the project explores a theme collectively embraced by the group. It also consists of setting up a special music workshop. The music workshop can take any form – it should reflect the children's interests, and be a place they can identify with. The theme is the basis for musical expression and communication in the group. The children are invited to give voice to their feelings, stories, experiences, opinions, fantasies, hypotheses and opinions about the topic, and express them in music. The children can also make drawings, tell stories or come up with movements about the theme – there is always room for the children's other 'languages'.

This school year, the theme is: **How does home sound at school?** During the project period, we invite children to explore their home in a musical journey and share it with the class in music lessons. The children can talk about it, are given recording equipment to take home and are encouraged to visit each other and listen. The sounds and music from home act as the binding factor in the group and provide the starting point and inspiration for their musical research, expression and communication. The music teacher selects his material, instruments and interventions to match the content provided by the children. In the music workshops, recordings of how children express their home in sound, drawings, photos and videos, re-enacted situations and recordings of conversations are a visible memory for children and educators, and are used as a basis for in-depth research.

Even in cases in which the theme is pre-determined, we will not be able to predict how this focus will develop in the music lessons.

In this period, we work according to the system of observing, documenting and interpreting. The observed (musical) process, musical concepts, views and ideas of the children direct the development of the project and determine which interventions the team will use to stimulate and guide the children.

To best prepare the team for this, we organise sessions at the start of this project period in which we work with the team to explore what our home sounds like. We also try to make this audible for ourselves by translating it into sounds or rhythms we can share together. Because this theme directly relates to home, we tell the parents about it, and involve them. Organising a parents' evening proved difficult, so instead we send parents a letter outlining our plans, and a series of drop-in information sessions. We also publish reports on the TOEVAL GEZOCHT website so that parents can follow developments in the group.

The third period – refining and preparing the performance

Length of music lesson: 1 hour

Throughout a period lasting: 2 - 4 weeks

Type of lesson: frontal, in collaboration with the class teacher and volunteer/intern, the music teacher prepares the music lesson. Dress rehearsals in concert halls or other spaces that have a central cultural function in the children's environment. (Professional) musicians visit the class.

Every cycle closes with a performance in which the children perform alongside different musical practitioners in the environment. We close with a vibrant music festival - *Klankenparade Landsmeer*.²

This is a way to connect music at school, at home and in the community on a large scale, and takes the form of a festival. Everyone taking part in the project is involved in the festival and, using their own particular skills and potentials, they perform alongside the children. Musical performances are held at different locations throughout Landsmeer – on the street, in schools, in the village hall, in the church, near the river de Gouwe, and in family homes. All participants, and members of the general public, can take a route through the village and visit the (living room) concerts and performances. The children perform in their own concerts and are invited to join in with other performances.

We hope that the concluding music festival 'Klankenparade Landsmeer' will illustrate how connections can be forged between music at school and music in the community and in the home.

4. Outcomes and the future of *Jong geleerd*...

At the moment of writing this article, the music lessons are in full swing at three different schools. For four of the five groups taking part, this is the second consecutive year. Half of the pre-school children from the previous year have since started the first year of primary school. Despite that, we are amazed to see how concentrated, expressive, engaged and joyous the children are in music lessons.

² Landsmeer Festival of Sound

The children regularly talk and share memories about the previous year, which excites and inspires the new children to engage with this creative form of music education. With a natural energy and joy, the children sing for each other, listen to each other and take the time and space to express themselves creatively by playing music.

When the project begins in the second year, the children take more initiative. They take the lead in playing music, are not afraid of making mistakes and play the instruments with verve. They are also more comfortable with singing and improvising than last year. As a teacher, it is exciting to embark on a musical adventure again with the children. I can't wait to see what this school year will bring. (Iris Oltheten, music teacher)

In the first instance, *Jong geleerd...* was devised for the youngest primary school children. In light of our experiences, these lessons can be used to develop a music education continuity pathway for children aged 4 to 12. This is a step that TOEVAL GEZOCHT intends to work on in future. For instance, in the 'getting acquainted' and 'development' phases, greater emphasis can be placed on the children's acquisition of musical skills and encouraging them to take up an instrument (also as an extra-curricular activity). Our collaboration with the Amicitia music association provides plenty of opportunities for this. For classes of all ages, the project periods in which free expression and communication are central in the music workshop are at the heart of this working method. Thanks to this, making music together can become integrated into school activities and may eventually lead to the formation of a school orchestra or school choir.

We are currently in negotiation with the governing boards of the schools we have regularly consulted, to discuss the form in which *Jong geleerd...* can be continued once the project is over.

Jong geleerd... argues that music should be a normal part of expression and communication in everyday life at home, at school and in the community, in which children draw on and develop their own music sources and potentials. In addition to inspiring articles about early music learning, TOEVAL GEZOCHT is preparing a publication setting out practical examples and tools, to be released at the end of the project. In addition to this, TOEVAL GEZOCHT is also developing a training and coaching trajectory for schools, training institutes, music teachers and educational institutions.