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Maybe Gabriel wasn`t so bad after all?

How educational anthropology can serve as a research approach in the field of music education

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to highlight the potential of educational anthropology *as a research approach in the field of music education. The article is based on my doctoral work: an ethnographic study in a Norwegian music classroom (Kamsvåg 2011). The empirical foundations of this article are from that particular study, and the discussions in the article are based on observations and interviews with one particular boy. The discussions of this student are linked to two key anthropological concepts: the theoretical term* meaning *and the methodological principle of* the ethnographic astonishment*. Through the discussion, I will illustrate how educational anthropology can help us gain new perspectives on taken-for-granted truths and assumptions in the field of music education. Such perspectives can serve as the starting point for new discussions surrounding music education practice and research.*
Keywords: educational anthropology, ethnography, cultural perspectives in music education research.

Introduction

This article is written out of a commitment to increase the influence of cultural perspectives in the field of music education in general, and anthropological perspectives in particular. According to the British musicologist Richard Middleton (2003), cultural perspectives have been marginalised traditions of knowledge in music studies. Although music education research in recent years has displayed an increasing interest in cultural perspectives, the "cultural turn" in music education progresses slowly, Middleton claims (ibid.). This argument is supported by the Norwegian musicologist Even Ruud (1996), who claims that social and cultural approaches to music education could offer valuable knowledge about the meaning dimensions of music in people's everyday lives. In this article, I will lean on these arguments. Specifically, I will emphasise anthropological theory and methods as suitable and interesting forms of research in the field of music education. My main argument is that this research approach represents a broadening, deliberative and critical form of research.

The article builds upon a discussion of a particular student from my own fieldwork in a 9th-grade class in a Norwegian lower secondary school: Gabriel. In Norway, music is part of the curriculum in all grades during the pupils' 10-year compulsory school. By drawing upon the story of Gabriel and his activities in music lessons, I will demonstrate how constructions of a "good music student" derive from well-established truths and assumptions of "good" music education. It is important to identify such assumptions because they have consequences for teaching practices, including categorisations of students. By describing Gabriel, I will demonstrate that educational anthropology can help to call into question assumptions in the field of music education.

First, I will offer a brief presentation of educational anthropology and the two key anthropological concepts to which the discussion of Gabriel is linked: 1) the term *meaning*, which leads to a theoretical approach, and 2) *ethnographic astonishment*, which refers to specific methodological reflections.

Educational anthropology

Educational anthropology focusses on people's educational *practices* (Madsen 2004: 11). As research objects, educational practices are understood as *social and cultural practices*. In its theoretical and methodological approaches, this field is linked to anthropology in general.

The Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup (2003: 403) states that the main purpose of anthropology is to locate imaginations that connect experiences, narratives, actions and truths to one another—imaginations that create a sense of community and a certain goal of predictability in the social field. The anthropological research interest is directed towards *people* and, more specifically, towards *people as social beings*. Society is a research object insofar as it comprises people, and the anthropological researcher seeks to identify the many communities and relationships in which people participate. Anthropological knowledge concerns *dynamics and reciprocity between individuals and complex social communities.*

The Danish anthropologist Eva Gulløv (2003: 71) claims that pedagogical institutions can be seen as social microcosms, and I wish to build upon that statement in this article. This means that to study childrens everyday life in school, concerns dynamics and reciprocity between each pupil and the multiple social settings they are part of inside school.

Meaning

The term *meaning* is central to anthropology and also in this text. The Norwegian anthropologist Odd Are Berkaak (1983) discusses this fact and claims that the anthropological understanding of the term meaning can challenge a definition of meaning as something attached to the music or artwork itself. He claims that we should study musical activity and music education as cultural and social practices. Meaning cannot be found in the music itself, according to Berkaak. Meaning can be found in the *relationships* between people who listen to and practice music. He claims that music is a way of interacting, and to understand this interaction, a research approach that focusses on human interactions is required. Berkaak (ibid.) emphasises the importance of a change in research focus in music studies: from the sound qualities/traits to the *qualities of the social settings where the sound is created* (ibid. 73). The meaning of music is not an essential substance, according to Berkaak. It cannot be described as a morphological quality, unattached from contextual factors such as time and space. Different actors construct different meanings. Based on this understanding of the term meaning, Berkaak encourages a turn in the formulation of the research question, from “What is music?” to “What can music performance mean?”

The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1993, 1994) describes meaning as the relationships between people and between people and the *cultural stock* that they possess. These relationships are inextricably attached to the context in which the actions are performed, Barth (1994) asserts. The term cultural stock can be understood as a *reservoir* of cultural content, for example, music videos on YouTube. We can

use such reservoirs as tools in our own activities, such as a 9th grade pupil's use of music videos. We must seek meaning dimensions in these relationships, claims Barth (ibid.)—between people, such as 9th grade students, and different cultural stocks, such as music videos on the internet. We must always study actions in relation to the cultural context in which the actions unfold.

The ethnographic astonishment

The ethnographic astonishment is another key anthropological concept, and it draws upon methodological reflections. In particular, the term reflects certain qualities of ethnography as a methodological strategy by focussing on the production of anthropological data. In using this term, I lean on Hastrup (1995, 2003) when she claims that the key to good ethnographic data lies in the ethnographic astonishment, understood *as the events in the field that the researcher cannot automatically understand*. In this article, I wish to emphasise the importance of such uncertainties in the field. The field always displays a form of resistance towards researchers' assumptions—in terms of theoretical understandings and common-sense explanations. As a methodological key concept, the ethnographic astonishment leads the ethnographer and the research strategies, which are chosen. As the Danish anthropologist, Charlotte Baarts claims (Baarts 2003: 41), the fieldwork can offer answers to questions the fieldworker didn`t know existed.

I will now move on to the story of Gabriel—an illustrative and dynamic example of a 9th-grade student's multiple actions in the music classroom.

Gabriel

Gabriel was a 15-year-old boy and a student who piqued my curiosity at an early stage of my fieldwork. He acted differently from the other pupils, especially from the boys. He rarely sat quietly, he walked around in the classroom, and when he actually sat down in a chair, he rocked it back and forth. He jumped up and down and encouraged fights. He grabbed the girls' hair and pulled their bras. When the class had tests, he wrote approximately half of a page, and then he submitted his work with an indifferent attitude and went home. He had dark, thick, long hair, which I rarely saw because it was usually hidden under the hood of his sweatshirt.

Gabriel loved rap in general, and he was a dedicated fan of Eminem in particular. I often saw him with his MP3 player, walking around as if he were living inside his

own head. He had mood swings, and he was the boy who most often talked to girls; at the same time, he was the class clown. Gabriel wrote his own rap lyrics. He told me that his dream was to become a professional rap artist. Actually, he told me this dream after six months because it took him approximately that long to trust my presence in the classroom. At the beginning of my fieldwork, Gabriel looked at me with dark, angry eyes. He often told the other students to close the door to the room if he saw me coming, and in many ways, he displayed resistance to me and my presence. After six months, Gabriel allowed me to conduct an interview with him. During this interview, I found myself wondering if I was sitting next to the same person whom I had observed in the classroom. Gabriel talked a lot during this interview. He talked about his deep connection to and love of his mother, and he talked about how he used to go with her to her choir practice and sit and listen to the adults sing. In particular, he talked about Eminem, but it seemed to be important to him to establish a distance towards Eminem`s violent reputation to postition himself to me:

> I am not *like* Eminem, even though I like him. I don't walk around, hit people, being violent—I'm not like that. I'm not good in school, but I will improve. I have to. I'm a good boy (my translation).

When I asked him if he wanted to pursue more of his own passion, rap, in his music lessons, he hesitated. However, he wanted to talk about the other boys' idol: Metallica. Amongst the other boys in his class, there was an extensive admiration of Metallica and other heavy metal bands. From a visual standpoint, this type of music pervaded the school. There was a wall mural of Metallica in one of the hallways, the classroom had Metallica posters and the many guitars in the school seemed to appeal to the boys' guitar-hero culture. Gabriel wanted to play more Metallica instead of rap, he told me. Moreover, like the other boys, he wanted to play guitar. He especially wanted to learn to play "Nothing Else Matters", one of Metallica's greatest hits. He presented himself to me as a verbal student. He articulated and expressed himself in terms of feelings and relationships.

Gabriel as an ethnographic astonishment

When we enter the field, we cannot know what is going to happen. We cannot know who the people are, what kinds of thoughts and imaginings create order and predictability (Hastrup 2003: 403) in their world or how these thoughts and imaginings operate as normative with respect to the individuals' actions. When we begin fieldwork, the ethnographic astonishment is directed concretely towards the many and

complex everyday life actions—the routines and rituals as well as the actions that suddenly break or challenge the routines. Particular actors may do things that capture our attention, and these events may possess qualities or intensities that emerge as a contrast to other events. As Baarts (2003: 41) states, the anthropologist must adjust his/her methods according to the events in the field that surprise the researcher. Based on this line of reasoning, we must remain present in the events and not create meanings prematurely.

We must *commit to the astonishments* and allow them to lead the research process in terms of the methods, points of focus, analyses and interpretation. I had to commit to Gabriel. He and his interactions with the other students in the class had to be given a place in my work, but I could not create meanings about him early in the fieldwork. Moreover, I had to ask myself why this astonishment of Gabriel took place.

First, he captured my attention because he acted differently than the other boys. Second, his actions were contradictory. He could resist participating in music lessons and simultaneously express his own passion for music. I was surprised by the other students' reactions towards Gabriel; however, Gabriel acted increasingly like the other boys as the fieldwork progressed. I was surprised by his own verbal self-representation as a liberated individual, detached from the class' social justice. In his own words, he could be whoever he wanted and he had the freedom to create his own identity. This example illustrates that there is nothing static about the ethnographic astonishment, as the astonishment is as mutable as the actors. This finding reminds us of an important quality of the anthropological research object: it *resists fixation* in many ways.

During the first semester, Gabriel was part of a music group that did not act in accordance with the teacher`s wishes. The group members fled the school, resisted rehearsals and did not seem to be able to cooperate. They were two girls and three boys, and if they were in the rehearsal room, they often sat in their own corners, strumming and playing instruments on their own. The next semester, the groups changed, and Gabriel worked with three other boys. In this group, he played the guitar. From that moment, Gabriel sat quietly in his chair, played with the other boys and even wanted to pursue guitar lessons as an extra-curricular activity. The music teacher was satisfied, and even I felt happy for Gabriel from the moment he sat quitly together with another boy and played guitar. However, I had to reflect on my own reaction. Why did I interpret Gabriel's resistance, negotiations and interruptions as negative? Why did I automatically and in an unarticulated way consider the sudden consensus between Gabriel and the other boys to be something good and almost deliberate? In these reflections, I became astonished by myself most of all.

The astonishment pertained to the researcher, not to the actors studied. This point may seem banal, but it is important. Gabriel was not an astonishment to himself;

rather, the use of the term “astonishment” pertained to me and was my categorisation. We may immediately think of an astonishment or a surprise as an intuitive reaction, but a central notion is that *what surprises us depends on our own social and cultural learned thinking and reactions* (Gulløv & Højlund 2003). According to this definition, ethnographic fieldwork is not a participation in other people’s lives that is free from conditions. It is a reflexive process negotiating between people’s actions and researchers’ *preconstructions*.

In that respect, the ethnographic astonishment reminds us of our inadequacies, when our own thoughts fail to correspond to the field “out there”. Barth (1994: 9) states that every fieldwork experience is a resocialisation, whereby the actors in the field force us to be a part of their world—whether we like it or not.

Gabriel and my preconstructions

In the beginning of my fieldwork, my fieldnotes about Gabriel were heavily populated with words such as noisy, restless, problematic—even special. I described him using terms of difficulty and even social deviance. After a while, I realised that these words belonged to a particular pedagogical form of thinking based on my own educational background as a teacher. My words were rooted in a rhetorical form that could not account for his motives, norms or rationales. Moreover, I was trapped in a way of description that did not include the relationships and social situations of which Gabriel was a part. I had to change my descriptions and decided to write the fieldnotes as specifically as possible. I could not write that Gabriel was noisy; instead, I had to write what he actually did, for example, that he walked across the classroom and gave a girl a hug. To give another student a hug cannot be characterised as a negative action in itself. What makes that action negative is connected to the school’s conventions, disciplinary framework and rules—it depends on the situation and context in which the action unfolds (Barth 1993, 1994). My way of describing Gabriel was not merely diagnostic, but it also belonged to an *individualistic mode of thinking*.

Individualistic and diagnostic modes of thinking about children in school, including in early childhood education and daycare institutions, are a well-known problem in the educational system (Askland 2011; Corsaro 2011; James, Jenks & Prout 1998; Jensen 2008, Pettersvold & Østrem 2012; Thorne 2010). The works of Corsaro (2011), James, Jenks & Prout (1998) and Thorne (2010), presents studies and theoretical framework, which unfold this problem, and they claim that the focus on individuals without including their relationships is deeply problematic. As Askland (2011) and Jensen (2008) encourage us, to solve this, we have to think in relational terms and to contextualise the children’s actions within the social settings in which they unfold.

This line of reasoning leads us to rethink the language we use. If we ask how the school's conventions regulate the children's bodies, we will obtain different answers than if we ask how to stop Gabriel from rocking in his chair. If we ask for constructions and imaginings of "the good music student", we will obtain different answers than if we ask what we can do about "the problem" of Gabriel. We must view Gabriel as a part of multiple relationships and *place his actions within their different social and cultural contexts*.

Anthropology belongs to the social sciences (Hastrup 2003), which means that we must change our focus from the individual to the social, also by using social and relational terms.

Valuations of "good" music activity in school

The 9th-grade pupils that I observed enjoyed great freedom of choice in their music lessons. They got an assignment to divide themself into groups and work together on a long-term project. They could compose a piece of music or rehearse a dance number or piece of music. The music teacher intended for this form of practice to develop the students' ability to become independent and responsible human beings and to help the students become highly motivated to take music lessons. The music teacher wanted the pupils to sing and play different instruments and encouraged the students to pursue practical activities to gain experience as music performers.

This mode of thinking about music in school has been highly valued over the last twenty years. The American music educator Bennett Reimer (2003) claims that in some way, we have come to appreciate students' singing and playing musical instruments as more valuable forms of musical activity in school than to listen to, read about and write about music. This situation is the same in Scandinavian countries. Moreover, there has been a change in the Norwegian field of music education, which now emphasises the use of electro-acoustic instruments, such as electric guitar and keyboard playing and microphone singing. This tradition of practice was also embraced by the music teacher in my study.

The Swedish report *Kulturens aspløv* (Hanson & Sommansson 1998) presents a general discussion of aesthetic projects in schools. The authors claim that in most of these projects and in the curriculum, children's own artistic expressions are embraced as a positive and active force, preventing passivity and providing skills that help the children become active and engaged participants in society.

Gabriel did not automatically embrace this practice, and his actions resulted in sanctions, including reprimands and social exclusion. He also received a low grade in music for the first semester. When his behaviour changed during the second semester,

he received a higher grade in music, and the teacher expressed satisfaction. As I wrote earlier, in an unarticulated way, I became happy for Gabriel myself. The question is, what constructions and imaginings of “the good music student” are implied in these reactions towards Gabriel? Why was it automatically a “good” thing for him to sit down and play Metallica songs on the guitar like the other boys? Why was it not as good when he listened to rap on his MP3 player? Finally, why were his resistance and negotiations not valued?

For something to be upheld as “good”, something else must be considered “less good” or even “bad”. As noted above, the use of an MP3 player was not a valued form of musical activity in school because of its background music function. It was characterised as a passive activity because of its ability to be used while performing other tasks. This way of using music has also been criticised because of its contribution to background sound (Ruud 1983).

However, according to Barth (1994) and Berkaak (1983) and in light of the above-mentioned definition of meaning, such forms of explanation are inadequate. To understand the meanings of background music, we must examine the relationship between the music *and the actors who use it*, and we must observe the actions within the *contexts where they unfold* (Barth 1993, 1994, Berkaak 1983). This approach also requires setting aside the preconstructed valuations of the use of background sound.

The Danish sociologist Ida Winther (2009) describes the mobile phone as a phantom or imaginary wall that can create distance from the world outside but simultaneously establish a connection to something else: a calm and individual inner sphere. Everyday school life is complex. The children are surrounded at all times by 20–30 other students in their classes, and breaks take place outside in a nearby schoolyard with, in this case, approximately 450 other students. Given this context, the need for a phantom wall may not be difficult to imagine.

With these forms of interpretation, whereby we set aside preconstructed valuations, we can identify other dimensions of meaning. The anthropological perspective cannot determine whether, for example, the use of background music is good or bad, but it offers a way of exploring the use of different cultural stocks in the classroom and to understand the actors’ construction of meaning in relation to particular cultural stocks.

Music as reproduction of social positions

The fieldwork amongst the 9th-grade students revealed a greater astonishment than any other, namely, that the students’ work in the music classroom reflected extensive *gender* issues. First, I was surprised by the substantial differences between the girls and boys. They chose to work in different genres and in different ways. Second, I was

surprised by how the work in the music classroom seemed to establish a consensus regarding how to act in "normal" and accepted ways as girls and boys. As some youth research claims, music is one of many activities in which young people express their individuality. My fieldwork did not support that claim (Kamsvåg 2011). To the contrary, I observed the students' musical activity as a kind of conformity, as they struggled to act similarly. It was not necessarily a conformity of which the students expressed dislike; rather, it was a conformity connected to the relation between the students and the music that challenged the individualistic discourse about music and identity (ibid. 207). The reciprocity and dynamic between confomity and individualisation in young peoples lives are essential discussions within youth research (Krange & Øia 2005; Ziehe 1989, 2004). It will not be discussed any further in this article, but it is important to highlight how the anthropological perspective can show connections between music education research and other research fields, such as youth research.

The gender issue—that is, the increasing similarity amongst the girls and boys during the fieldwork—can provide additional insight into Gabriel's participation. Gabriel's actions and changes during the second semester resulted in a different social position, as mentioned above. As Gabriel sat down in his chair, played guitar and expressed his wish to learn Metallica songs, an increased social inclusion took place. This shift may not be related to Metallica itself but rather to norms of masculinity in the heavy metal genre in general, represented by Metallica in particular. The connection between Metallica and masculinity is not new. The American musicologist Glenn T. Pillsby (2009) analyses Metallica and musical identity according to Judith Butler's (1990) theories about performative gender. According to Pillsbury, the masculine characteristics embodied in Metallica can lead to topics such as sovereignty, personal control, controlled and accepted forms of rebellious attitudes and an overall white, middle-class male dominated practice. Accordingly, another question could be directed towards Gabriel's guitar playing as something exclusively good. His adjustment and guitar playing could be seen as a way of *establishing social acceptance*. Gabriel's guitar playing could be a good thing, but it could also reflect Gabriel's efforts to avoid social exclusion. He adapted to "tacit" norms concerning what a boy could do musically. His effort to learn guitar and to play "Nothing Else Matters", like the other boys, could illustrate a form of social discipline. Gabriel set aside Eminem and kept that side of himself quiet; he instead acted in ways that the other boys accepted.

Achieving the ability to act in ways that are accepted by a community is an important part of socialisation and is necessary in society. However, it is important to note that all kinds of fellowship, such as admiring a rock band, also entail exclusion mechanisms. In this case, the exclusion mechanism is the "tacit" understanding that Eminem's importance to Gabriel should not be expressed. According to Pillsbury's

(2009) gender discussion, Gabriel's growing admiration for Metallica could be seen as a gender socialisation process.

The music curriculum expresses that students' verbalisation of feelings related to music is an explicit goal. The curriculum's intention is that the students should develop the ability to put their own feelings, generated by the music, into words. According to Gulløv (2009), this goal is an interesting articulation. Gulløv claims that educational institutions such as school and early childhood education and daycare institutionss contribute to the reproduction of accepted and legitimate ways of expressing feelings. Most valuable are the children's abilities to verbalise their feelings, she argues. Verbalisation involves an implicit task of self-control connected to the body. Moreover, as Gulløv claims, discipline of the body is essentially concerned with social distinctions, which can be understood as another dimension of Gabriel's adoption of guitar playing.

This discussion of gender and social distinctions leads us to a concern connected to the music curriculum for the school. The Norwegian curriculum for music in school states for example, that "Music is (…) a source of both self-knowledge and understanding between people without regard to time, place or culture" (2006: 119, my translation). This statement describes music as an interpersonal yet decontextualised phenomenon.

All humans are linked to their structural positions, according to Barth (1994). This statement refers to categories such as gender, class, generation and age—categories that have cumulative effects on us, that operate through our actions and that constitute our reality. We are all positioned, according to Barth, and we cannot dissociate human actions from these positions. If we do, some of the most important motives underlying human actions are lost. I suggest that the curricular understanding of music has lost these perspectives and that the anthropological project could contribute by examining how daily activities in the music classroom unfold in light of the actors' structural positions. Otherwise, according to Barth, we cannot understand why human actions unfold as they do.

Music education as socially and culturally constructed practices

The perspectives on Gabriel's actions presented in this article illustrate how constructions of the "good" music student depend on notions of "good" music education and "good" education in general. The main point in that respect is that such *ideas are socially and culturally constructed*. They are developed over time and have achieved the

status of taken-for-granted truths in the field of music education. When pupils such as Gabriel challenge these truths and act in opposing ways, there is a risk of defining these pupils as "problems" and not as good students. If we who have an anthropological perspective can identify the ideas that define our definitions and truths about "good" music education, we can gain new and nuanced perspectives on pupils such as Gabriel. If we can view musical activities as social and cultural constructions, Gabriel's movements from Eminem to Metallica, from being "noisy" to quietly playing guitar, may just as well illustrate a 15-year-old boy's struggle to adapt to accepted social norms and behaviours. For this reason, I believe it necessary to question the notions that constitute educational practices.

As mentioned earlier, Gulløv (2003: 71) claims that pedagogical institutions can be seen as social microcosms. Additionally, according to Barth (1993, 1994), people's actions and social lives are strictly attached to their tasks and the cultural stocks that they operate. Thus, I claim that music, as a subject in school is a suitable anthropological research object because social action is partly specified through activity and overall specific forms of cultural *reproduction*. Music education practices can, in that respect, be viewed as social microcosms with their own forms of rhetoric and with accepted and non-accepted forms of social behaviour. An anthropological study of children's daily experiences in a music classroom has the ability to highlight different conditions for learning and acting, which is valuable knowledge in the field of music education. In relational terms, anthropology can turn the research focus to the field of music education, broaden the research field itself and thus initiate new discussions and ways of understanding.

Taking an anthropological research approach, we can also reveal disparities between the goals of the school curriculum and what is actually taking place in the classroom. In response, we note the critical and deliberating potential of anthropology, which is one of Barth's (1994) most important points. Gaining insights by studying people interacting with music may add an important actor perspective to the field of music education research.

Educational anthropology can show us how life in school unfolds. However, we must follow Barth's (1993) requirement for contextualisation. If we look for the different trajectories between children's lives in school and outside of school, as well as in their use of different cultural stocks, we may discover new perspectives on life inside school. In this particular example, we could see how Gabriel made an important part of himself quite inside school, while he continued to performe rap outside school. I believe that educational anthropology can be a starting point for such ambitions. Barth (1994) argues that in a changing and globalised world, it is equally important to observe and consider multiple ways of living and acting as it is to understand

ourselves. Anthropological data can open such perspectives and identify the different ways that people live their lives—ways that are not necessarily extensions of our own approaches to the world.

Educational anthropology may not primarily address normative aspects of music education. Its main potential is not its ability to say what practices are good or not as good in music education and pedagogy. Instead, educational anthropology has the ability to highlight actors' potential, to identify different meaning dimensions and to observe how meaning is constructed within different social and historical contexts. In this article, I have highlighted one particular student and his actions in a music classroom. This student had been partly excluded by the teacher and by other students. From an anthropological perspective, I could seek meaning outside the music, and I had to take my ethnographic astonishment seriously. I was able to locate truths and assumptions in the field of music education that labelled Gabriel. When we fail to articulate the norms that constitute our practices, objects that fall outside our understanding of "normality" will be labelled as problems or deviations. Social and cultural research perspectives have the potential to reframe the questions; according to these new perspectives, Gabriel may not seem so bad.

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