

SONG-LEADING: AN OVERVIEW ON CONTRASTING DIDACTICS

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Abstract

Music and song singing is a widely used mean of expression and of cultural transmission between adults and children. In many institutions, this practice is led mainly by generalist teachers as one of the different parts of the children's school curriculum. Children's songs can be analyzed as specific objects that sum up and exemplify a coherent use of musical structures and rules, showing how they can be considered, as such, a cornerstone of the music education dispensed by generalist teachers in schools.

Previous studies focus on the teacher's actions during music lessons from an evaluating standpoint. In our research, we focus on describing and understanding the phenomenon from a didactic standpoint: we question what rules underlie the actions, what aspects of the actions are relevant for the teacher, what insight guides our observation as researchers. In the framework of the Swiss National Fund research project (2018- 2020), The song leading capacity: developing professionalism in teacher education, carried out by PH Schwyz and HEP-BEJUNE, we observe and characterize the development of pre-service teachers as well as the work of experienced teachers, through video analysis of lessons, interviews while viewing the filmed lessons, and field notes.

In this presentation, I report on two contrasting case studies of experienced generalist teachers, by analyzing their approach in teaching a children's song. Using the transcription system "Lesson Activities Map" (LAMap), created by our research team, I visualize the most important actions in a music lesson's sequencing, focusing on how the teachers organize the lesson, and how they implement classroom activities and visual supports relating to musical learning. In-depth analysis of important episodes, contextualized within the entire lesson by the LAMap, allows us to characterize the appearance of meaningful events: the way a specific song element is introduced provides detailed insights on the teachers' ability of explicitly or implicitly navigating the different rules and norms of each stratus of the song leading phenomenon in a way that allows them to follow, or fall out of, their self-determined course of action.

Keywords: *Song leading, interview analysis, video analysis, pedagogical content knowledge, core practices.*

1. Introduction

In this paper I present two case studies on song leading in the classroom. I have collected and analysed data of experienced generalist teachers introducing a new song to children from four to eight years old during a music lesson in school. The data collected consist of a video recording of one lesson transcribed through the LAMap system and the teacher's interview audio recorded after the lesson, while watching the video of the lesson, and then analysed contextualising the sequence of actions transcribed in the LAMap. In this paper, I will present the cases of Jenny and Norman as two examples of contrasting didactics in teaching children a new song.

2. Jenny's case study

Jenny is a generalist experienced teacher that regularly teaches music, among other subjects, in a primary school in the French speaking part of Switzerland. She does not have a specific music training, but she is familiar with music reading and writing, playing the piano, playing the guitar, and singing.

The LAMap of Jenny's Lesson (Figure 1) shows a very rich and varied set of music activities that precede or follow the introduction of the song or, better to say, some music elements of the song chosen by Jenny at this occasion. If we look at Jenny's sequence of actions, we'll be able to observe that Jenny performs, on one hand, some activities that pertain to a music lesson, such as singing a repertoire previously learned songs, performing and reading rhythmic patterns, performing melodic patterns such as the scale in

the Major mode, using classroom material for different kinds of music activities such as duplo to conceptualize and visualize rhythmic notations, cards to picture and metaphorize musical features like the tempo, legato or staccato lines, etc. On the other hand, Jenny performs activities that pertain directly to the song that she's set to introduce to the children. We'll see that the song, or elements of the song clearly appear in four occasions, separated in time but positioned in very specific moments of the lesson: the first time during an activity on the rhythm the second time before introducing an activity on singing, the third time in a long sequence that she considers demanding in terms of the children's ability to concentrate, before going into a very energetic activity of dancing and singing and at the very end for example, where she chooses to sing the song once again because, as she says herself, she wants the children "to calm down and go back home with that song in their minds", as if she's creating a haunting melody that resumes the musical experiences and rules of the day.

Figure 1. Jenny's LAMap.

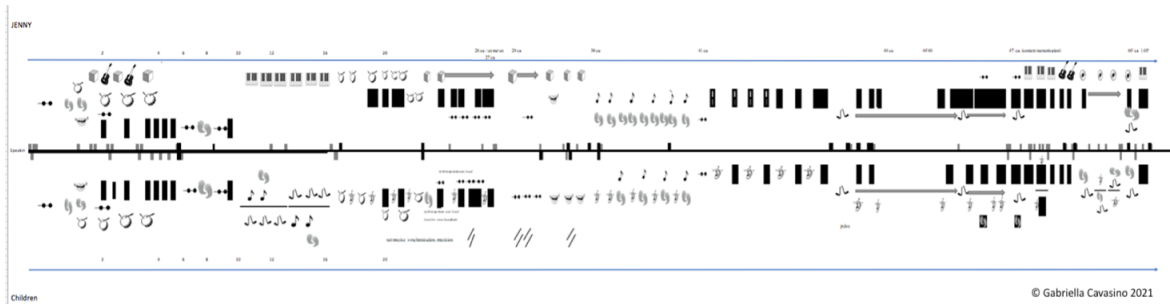
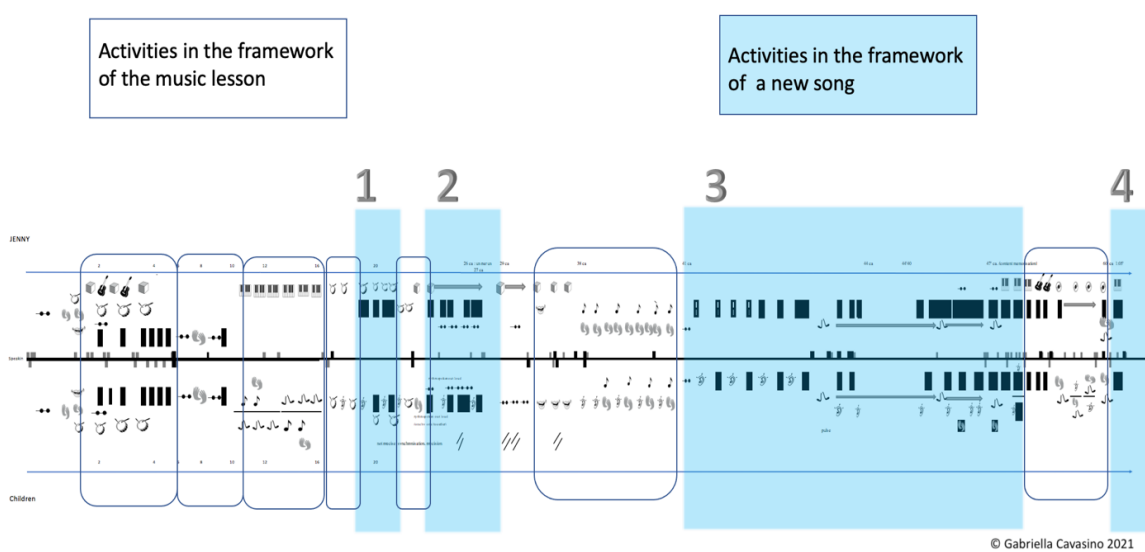


Figure 2. Differentiated sequences in Jenny's lesson.



We will now analyse the first episode in which the song appears, in order to gain more insight on Jenny's style of teaching.

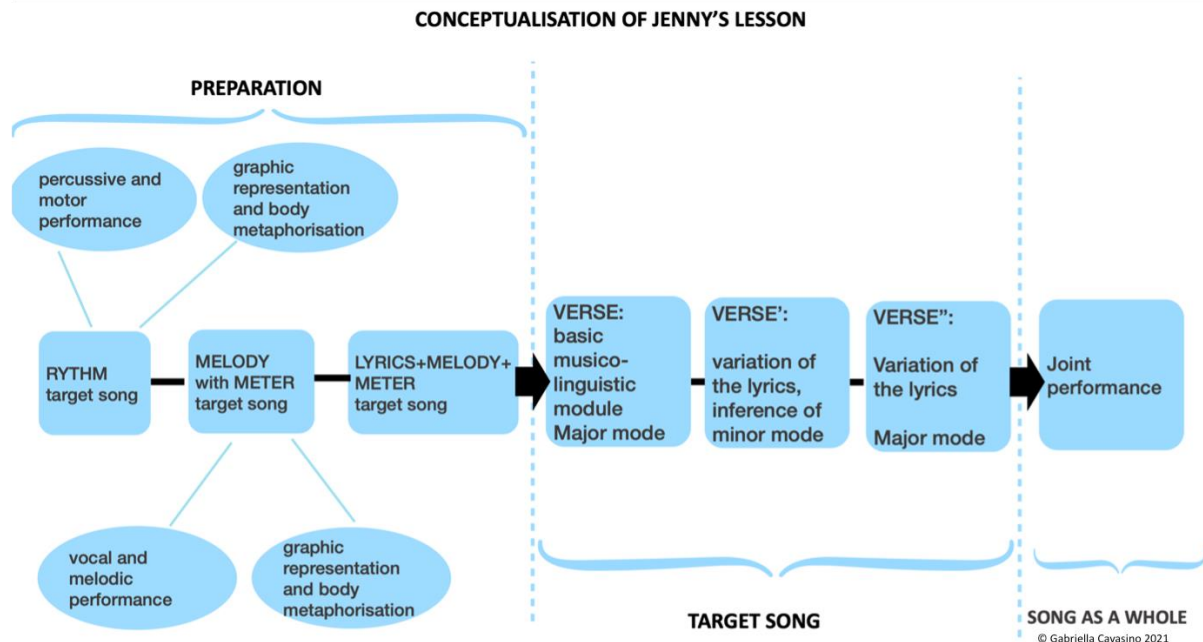
After a short verbal interaction (see grey rectangles on the speaking line), Jenny starts an activity with some percussive instruments (see drum icon) and she specifically demands the children attention before performing alone or together with the children (see the ear icon). Then, as highlighted in the blue rectangle, she introduces the rhythmic pattern of the song's verse. What's happening here is the occurring of two modalities of conducting an activity pertaining rhythm: Jenny performs a series of pattern in a flow together with the children; every time that she changes pattern, she keeps repeating it observing all the children until she reaches a certain degree of synchronicity and then she changes to another pattern without stopping. At the very end she starts changing from a binary pattern into introducing a ternary pattern, which finds itself to be the pattern of the new song, then she stops and deliberately ask the children to listen and pay attention to the new pattern; eventually she performs it again along with the children, switching from the flow to a model/repetition mode of teaching. When commenting on this very episode of the lesson,

Jenny tells us: “When I introduce a new song, I first try to live it in the body, and I wanted that they listened to this specific rhythm. Not that they listened to it, but that they feel it in the body. I don’t use the words because I want them to acquire it like a dance, something natural, that is already there, like a lullaby that they had before...I dissociate it (the rhythm) from the words (of the song)”. We can observe that her words are reflected in her actions and that the flow mode of teaching during a known activity to the children, is used to introduce a specific element that is then made the focus of study through a model/repetition modality of teaching, highlighting the character of novelty and meaningfulness of a new music feature: the ternary tempo exemplified by the ternary pattern of the new song.

Figure 3. Picturing and singing.

On the second episode she shifts from the “performing” into the “picturing” of the pattern, through the use of Kodaly method’s syllables and classroom material that introduce the canonical western written notation of notes lengths, and at the end of the second episode, eventually, she introduces the melody. It’s only during the third episode that Jenny introduces the words and explicitly works on the song alternating once again the modalities of flow and model/repetition.

Figure 4. Conceptualisation of Jenny’s lesson.

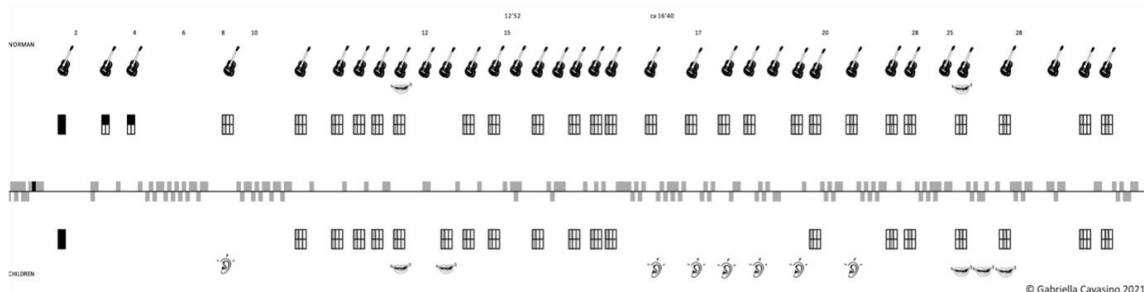


From this example, we can see how the internal rules of a children’s song can be isolated, embedded into general activities around general music features and deliberately stratified one upon the other until they are recomposed in their original structure, putting in relation, through seamless transitions, a specific song to the general context of western music’s norms and rules.

3. Norman's case study

Norman is an experienced generalist teacher, mostly self-taught guitarist, that regularly teaches music as well as other subjects in a French speaking Swiss primary school.

Figure 5. LAMap of Norman's actions.



As we can see from Norman's LAMap, in this case the song is, early in the lesson, introduced and maintained as the principal object until the end of the lesson.

At the beginning we see the joint performance, between Norman and the children, of a known song. Then we can see Norman and the children talking back and forth, until Norman deliberately asks the children attention (see the first ear icon) to introduce the new song through singing while playing along at the guitar. A conversation follows, in which Norman analyses the lyrics of the song with the children, pointing out words that are new to them in the meaning and the spelling; the scaffolding of the first and second verse follows, leading to performing one last time the first and second verse of the three verses song at the very end of the lesson.

A striking element in the LAMap transcription is the use of the guitar, an almost omnipresent element throughout the whole lesson, whether it accompanies the singing or is played while speaking. When asked about this detail, Norman comments: "I often play the guitar, at the beginning when I welcome them for the lesson or when they tidy up their desks for example. So, it's true that the guitar is not something separate, as to signal "now we make music".

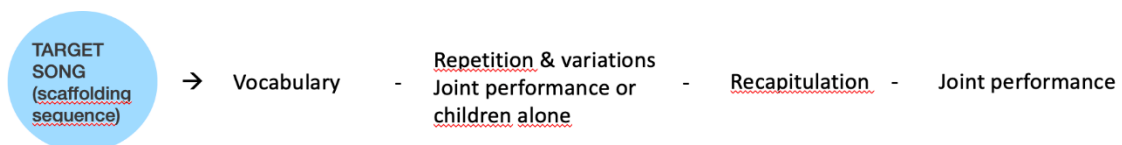
"The guitar is there all the time, the children play the guitar all the time, I have one especially for them, I give instructions while I play the guitar. It's very natural. It might not be always very clear, if you observe from the outside."

When we observe Norman's actions in detail, we see that the melody played at the guitar is a variation or a repetition of the song's melody or turn of chords: on one hand, the song is constantly implicitly reminded to the children through an immersive acoustic environment created by Norman. On the other hand, there's an explicit work on the words of the song. During the interview, Norman points out: "I like to sing to them first, so that they can hear what it's going to sound like, but it's true that vocabulary is important, so that they understand what it's about.

It's a work on vocabulary, on what it means, understanding what we're singing, to be more in the mood of the song".

The new song is an object to discover, first of all, as a whole, as it is presented at the beginning. It's for the children an evocative playground through the story that it recounts and the new words that it contains. The musico-linguistic grammar – the tonal, timing and poetic rules – remain implicit although ever present, structuring the course of the action.

Figure 6. Norman Scaffolding sequence.



Norman comments: "I don't have any formal goals about music, it's all about awakening their interest in musical instruments... To give them a taste for music, to experiment with the voice too. This is something that is very important to me. I also do musical activities but not around songs. It can be typing in rhythm or reproducing movements, or doing more percussive things, where I'll have other objectives, but for the songs, my aim is that they really enjoy singing, being together and also listening to one another."

When analyzing Norman words in relation to his actions, we see a deliberate intention to concentrate on immersing the children into the sound of the guitar and following the structural elements of the song, such as its chords sequence, its meter and the meaning of its lyrics. Very few activities are performed around the song: Norman asks the children to sing slower or faster in order to bring a variation into the constant repetition of the verses.

4. Conclusions

In the cases presented above, we see two different ways of teaching a children song: one that contextualise the song within a whole series of musical activities and one that focuses the children on the song as a whole. The two styles face a similar challenge: how to keep the children's attention, and the two teachers aim to a similar goal: taking pleasure in doing an activity together, reproducing a song to a certain degree of fidelity to its intrinsic norms and rules.

In the first case, Jenny achieves this goal through organising the lesson into several activities that allow her to switch the children's focus to different topics, all the while following the *fil rouge* provided by the structure of a chosen song. In the second case, Norman keeps the children focus on the song through the use of the guitar. We can see how the strictly ruled musico-linguistic structure of a song can result in very different strategies for teaching. When analysing the two interviews, we see several emerging themes that guide the teacher's actions such as:

- a. the teacher-children way of interacting,
- b. the teacher's professional duties in the institution,
- c. the teacher's own goals, experience, values
- d. the subject matter inherent rules (i.e. the children's song grammar)

Through the interview analysis, we can define Jenny's and Norman's teaching capacity in the ability to explicitly or implicitly navigate the different rules of each stratum of the phenomenon that is song-leading in the classroom, so as to follow a self-determined course of action.

In Jenny's words:

“I know what my goals are, actually. Working on the rhythm, feeling the meter with the body. Learn the melody, discriminating higher and lower pitch, learning the scale. All my goals on the music theory level itself. It's also: to be able to synchronize myself to the group with simple gestures. Also performing rhythmic patterns. But also, for the students to sing in a group and to sing alone.

Making music, having fun making music.”