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Parental conceptualisations of participation in musical culture as exemplified by parents of first level music school students in Poland. A phenomenographic reconstruction

The paper presents the results of research conducted among parents of children attending music school. Its aim was to phenomenographically reconstruct the ways of conceptualising participation in musical culture. The analysis of the collected research material allowed for the identification of a number of categories indicating the individual and social contexts of this participation. The issues related to cultural competences, different ways of perceiving the music by the surveyed persons are of particular interest. The contexts relating to the family, its mechanisms and establishment of family ties also deserve special attention.

Keywords: pedagogy of family, culture pedagogy, parents, participation in culture, music school, musical culture, phenomenography

Rodzicielskie konceptualizacje uczestnictwa w kulturze muzycznej na przykładzie rodziców uczniów szkół muzycznych I stopnia w Polsce. Rekonstrukcja fenomenograficzna

W pracy przedstawiono wyniki badań przeprowadzonych wśród rodziców dzieci uczęszczających do szkoły muzycznej. Jej celem była fenomenograficzna rekonstrukcja sposobów konceptualizacji uczestnictwa w kulturze muzycznej. Analiza zebranego materiału badawczego pozwoliła na wyodrębnienie szeregu kategorii wskazujących na indywidualne i społeczne konteksty tego uczestnictwa. Szczególnie interesujące są zagadnienia związane z kompetencjami kulturowymi, różnymi sposobami postrzegania muzyki przez osoby badane. Na szczególną uwagę zasługują również konteksty odnoszące się do rodziny, jej mechanizmów i nawiązywania więzi rodzinnych.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika rodziny, pedagogika kultury, rodzice, uczestnictwo w kulturze, szkoła muzyczna, kultura muzyczna, fenomenografia

*Participation in cultural life equals full enjoyment
of what it means to be human*

Fintan O'Toole

Introduction

Culture provides a source of almost unlimited development possibilities for every human being (Kozielecki, 2002, p. 16). It is an essential component of our personality, and the lack of cultural cover in the practice of everyday life would expose us to the painful directness of experiencing the world. Participating in culture, in its various dimensions and forms, becomes today one of the most important factors shaping the reflective identity project, both in the everyday practice and concerning the most fundamental issues concerning the nature of human existence (Jaworski, 2010, p. 56). An important area of human culture is art, which – as Herbert Read claimed – plays a crucial role in the process of developing creative imagination, sensitivity and expression (Lasocki & Powroźniak, 1970, pp. 143–144). The above-quoted author had primarily elite art in mind. However, today, we are witnessing the disappearance of the distinction between the products of *high art*, *recognized and sanctified* and the products of pop culture. Additionally, together with the changes in civilization, there occurs a process of ‘domesticating’ the cultural activity, expansion of mass culture and new forms of participation, transferred to new types of institutions, such as the Internet or shopping centres (Janicka-Olejnik, 2016, p. 62).

Musical culture has also been dominated by popular music, produced on a mass scale – simple, uncomplicated, often addressed to passive, manipulative, uncritical audiences (Strinati, 1995, pp. 22–23). The world of classical music, which is “the most spiritual of all intellectual arts” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 17), has become rather an elite niche, attracting the interest of a small, but very committed group of connoisseurs. There is still another group of recipients, referred to as *omnivores* – people who include both classical and popular music elements into their cultural experience, with their eclectic choices dictated by both their internal aesthetic needs and the desire to create their own image and draw social distinctions (Melosik, 2013, pp. 38–40).

As Andrzej Tyszka wrote, every culture involves a cult of certain values which are not phantasmagoria, but which bother human consciousness and thus

play a key role in the lives of individuals and social groups (Tyszka, 1999, pp. 95, 51). The same applies to musical culture. The music school and its cultural environment make an interesting example in this context.

Among music school teachers it is said that when parents enrol their child in school, they enrol themselves as well. There is a lot of truth in this statement. Assuming that the family – as a peculiar micro-world – operates within the entire network of mutual relations with the surrounding further and closer macro environment, the situation in which a child enters a new cultural environment means that the parents are also found in the sphere of its influence (Królikowska, 2015, p. 129). And it is not just about a whole range of challenges and commitments of an organisational nature. This situation also generates multiple experiences for parents both in an individual and a social dimension since music school introduces the entire family to participation in classical music culture, which is practically exclusively the focus of state music education in Poland (Konaszekiewicz, 2015, p. 14). In the majority of cases, this experience of the parents is something completely new or even alien to their cultural capital acquired.

The presented research aimed to phenomenographically reconstruct the ways of experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing participation in musical culture¹ by parents of children attending music schools. The understanding of different ways and categories of this experience may contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms governing creation and realization of individual development paths of the respondents as well as the processes of building a family community.

Theoretical contexts

The world of culture is an environment in which human beings are immersed and which they constantly produce (Krapiec, 1996, p. 47). Taking such a perspective, it seems obvious that participation in culture concerns the reality of every person and takes place in the dimensions of their individual and social, intellectual and emotional life, modifying their way of perceiving and interpreting reality (Golka, 2013, p. 148). This participation can be understood in two distinct ways.

The first way, a narrow view, focuses on the consumption of what is generated by professional artists and distributed in society by institutions founded for this purpose: theatres, cinemas, concert halls, galleries (Janicka-Olejnik 2016, pp. 59–60). In such a case, we are dealing, first of all, with a passive, not always

¹ Although the term “musical culture” covers different genres and styles, given the subject matter of the paper, the term will be used with reference to classical music.

guided by the internal imperative (and sometimes even without any satisfaction), communing with art and with the process of participation in culture. And it is not imposed by any kind of administrative orders. Sometimes people are guided by a conformist desire to meet the cultural norms of the given environment, for image aspects or any type of social promotion (Zarycki, 2008, p. 26). In such a context, participation in culture and culture itself is understood as

a kind of exclusive addition to reality, shared by those who have satisfied more basic needs or those who, because of their high social status, are normatively obliged to do so. (Krajewski, 2014, p. 311).

The second, broad understanding refers to

the situation of being active, to being immersed in culture understood as a process of constant modification. It is not only the consumption of the culture disseminated by institutions, it is not only being a member of audience, viewer, listener or reader, but above all, the involvement of each of us in the circulation of culture [...]. (Janicka-Olejnik, 2016, p. 60).

Participation in culture is

any human contact with cultural products and cultural behaviour, and thus direct or indirect contact with other people. This contact consists in the use of cultural products, in assimilating, reproducing and producing the values embedded in them, in being subject to the models of culture, as well as in creating new products and values and behaviours. (Golka, 2013, p. 122).

The above definition implies an expansion of the spectrum of various cultural activities, which, apart from the now traditional forms, may also include one's own attempts at artistic creation (including amateur work), Internet activity, one's own lifestyle, dressing, home decoration, as well as spending free time and building interpersonal relations (Janicka-Olejnik, 2016, pp. 57–75).

Indicators of participation in culture include the multitude of cultural arrangements in which this participation is implemented and the various interests, frequency and intensity of contacts at a certain level of cultural competence (Golka, 2013, pp. 161–162). This competence, according to Barbara Fatyga and Bogna Kietlińska, is a resource of diverse abilities of an individual, determining their predisposition to participate in culture (Fatyga & Kietlińska, 2018).

The above-described ways and forms of participation in culture also refer to musical culture, yet due to its specificity, this process can also be analysed in terms of so-called music-promoting activities. On the one hand, they have a

cognitive dimension, which refers to the development of knowledge about music, its history, diverse styles, artists and performers. In this respect, the aspect of conscious and critical appraisal of elements of this culture is also important. The behavioural dimension includes engaging in various types of activities, such as listening to music, playing instruments, various forms of making music, going to concerts and taking actions in the area of music promotion (Uchyla-Zroski, 1999, p. 14).

Participation in musical culture also involves an encounter with certain values, primarily artistic and aesthetic ones. The former refer to “the artist’s skill, his invention, the challenges he faced and the way he responded to them”, while aesthetic values are interpreted by the audience in a particular work and depend on the sensitivity and vision of the artist (Gołaszewska, 1990, pp. 152–163). In this respect, super-aesthetic values, without which certain axiological horizons would be completely inaccessible to humans, are of highly significant (Stróżewski, 1997, pp. 70–79).

As it follows from the above considerations, participation in culture can be conditioned and manifested in different ways, it can take different forms, refer to different values and cover different areas of human activity. This depends on both individual (musical abilities, personality traits) and environmental factors. In this context, music schools fulfil a special role in the Polish educational system.

The tradition of music education in Poland dates back to the 18th century, and its current model has been functioning (with minor changes) since the 1950s. These are mostly public schools, where admission exams are a necessary condition to start music education. The curriculum includes playing an instrument, music appreciation and theory classes, ensembles and choir. The first degree school lasts 6 years – younger children, or 4 years – older children (Konaszki-iewicz, 2015, pp. 11–27).

The music school, as a dynamic and evolving organism, generates its own specific culture (Adrjan, 2011, p. 11). If we follow Alfred Kroeber’s claim that culture includes selected forms, norms and values, a stream of related ideas and objectified patterns (Kroeber, 2002, p. 138), then the culture of the music school manifests itself in a specific language (musical terminology), rituals (exams, concerts, competitions), the way the classes are organised, interpersonal (master-student) relations, a separate system of assessing and certifying achievements, elements of the material environment (practice rooms, instruments, notes) and values. Education in music school is a part of the aesthetic education realized in the dimension of developing aesthetic sensitivity (education to art), as well as on moral, social and mental level (education through art) (Wojnar, 1997, p. 7).

Parents entering such a defined cultural environment of music school join a world focused on classical music. This is a completely new situation for them,

completely out of the range of their previous experience. They obviously have a certain cultural capital (manifested – as Pierre Bourdieu put it – in the knowledge of certain conventions and cultural forms, tastes, patterns of relations or possession of certain objects) (Zarycki, 2008, pp. 21–22); however, their resources may not be adequate for the challenges they face. It can also be a moment encouraging a reflection on the experience of being in culture, leading to a kind of renewal of the state of consciousness of oneself and the loved ones (Kołodziejski, 2015, p. 69).

Methodological assumptions of own research

The research presented in this paper was carried out in the paradigm of qualitative research using a phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography (*phainomenon* and *graphein* – appearance and description – description of things as we see them) is

[...] an empirical study of a limited number of qualitatively different ways of conceptualizing, understanding, perceiving and feeling different phenomena and aspects of the surrounding world (Męczkowska, 2003, p. 73).

This research approach uses the concepts of understanding, conceptualisation and experience interchangeably, taking the view that none of these terms fully corresponds to what is happening in the human mind, doing so only in its own way and complementing each other (Marton & Pong, 2005, p. 336). What is important for phenomenographers is the world experienced and constructed in our consciousness at the same time, and not – as for phenomenologists – different aspects of the same phenomenon (Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2016, p. 270).

Phenomenographic research falls within the so-called second-order cognitive perspective. While the first-order perspective concerns the objective world, the second-order perspective refers to our perception of the world; it does not focus on the world itself, but shows the researcher's approach, interested in the subjective concepts of reality (Moroz, 2013, pp. 34–35).

The empirical material is usually collected during a semi-structured interview. A phenomenographic interview is a specific form of qualitative interview and its purpose is to collect descriptions of the world of life of the subjects, to search for and understand the meanings given by the subjects to specific phenomena. The questions should be open enough to encourage reflection, allow the respondents to structure their statements and to thematise their elements. The questions should be predominantly of the type: Why...? What do you think...?

What is your opinion...? Tell me, how do you understand that...? (Bruce, 1994, pp. 52–53). During the interview, the principle of *epoche* (taking into account all the comparisons in brackets) and the principle of horizontality should be respected, considering all obtained descriptions as of equal value (Spinelli, 1989, pp. 17–18).

The collected material is subject to an interpretation procedure. Its individual stages include: getting acquainted with the material, condensation (preliminary grouping of characteristic fragments in terms of the selected criterion), comparison of elements in terms of similarities and differences, grouping the material based on similarities and differences between the ways of understanding the phenomenon, articulation (preliminary description of the essence of similarities in each separate group), identification of separate concepts of the phenomenon and creating categories of description, and contrasting (juxtaposing the created categories of description to determine the existing differences). In order to construct a category of description, the analysis often involves decontextualizing and recontextualizing fragments of statements (Męczkowska, 2003, p. 86). It is possible that one person's statement may be defragmented and classified into several different categories of description. Categories of description, forming a specific resultant space, have consequently both individual and collective nature – the so-called *collective mind* (Marton, 1981, pp. 196–197).

The research sample selection was purposive to be able to present a wide range of concepts concerning different ways in which certain phenomena are experienced. Phenomenographic practice shows that the optimum number of respondents is between 15 and 20 (Trigwell, 2000, p. 66). In the presented research, the group of respondents consisted of 19 persons with a child in a first-degree music school, living in northern and eastern Poland. None of these persons was a professional musician or interested in classical music. The research was conducted in 2018–2019, with the aim of reconstructing the experience, description, understanding and conceptualisation of participation in musical culture focused on classical music. The research questions concerned the following issues: What do you understand by participation in musical culture? What do you think, what do you feel and do when undertaking activities in the area of participation in this culture? Why are you undertaking these activities? Are you learning forms of this participation and if so, how? What do you like or would you like to change in your participation in musical culture?

Research results

The analysis of the collected empirical material led to the identification of four categories of description, enabling the reconstruction of parental concepts of participation in musical culture.

1. Experiencing participation in musical culture as an activity requiring specific competence.

a) Lack of sense of adequacy in the process of participation in musical culture:

When I listen to music, especially classical music, I feel like I don't know much about it. I know if I like something or not, I can assess the mood, I know if something catches my ear, but that's all. If I had to justify why, I would have a problem. I can't say much about it, although sometimes I try something, but it turns out trivial.

Actually, I don't understand what I'm listening to, maybe because nobody taught me how to listen to such music; I feel like I'm listening to a foreign language I don't know at all.

I feel lost and confused when all these sounds reach me. I can't see anything about it and it annoys me. Especially when I'm in a concert hall. Sometimes I'm afraid that someone will ask me something and I won't be able to provide a reasonable answer. I'm not comfortable there. It took me some time to learn how I should behave, how to react when I should applaud. It costs me too much stress and nerves. I don't think this is my world.

I feel uncomfortable at such concerts, everyone smartly dressed, official, unnatural; I'm not really fit for such situations.

b) A sense of ambivalence in participating in musical culture:

I often ask myself what it is all about. When I talk to my friends about the music we like and listen to all the time, I mean rock music of the '90s. At that time I almost always have something to say, we talk about the concerts we've been to, the musicians, the common experiences, parties, memories, and how important it was for us. When I'm with my son at a symphony concert, I have little to say, I rather listen to what he feels and thinks, maybe I subconsciously check what he learned at school. I'm a little ashamed of it, and I think he can sense that I have a problem.

Sometimes I am convinced that I have managed to understand something of this, especially when these are some relatively uncomplicated pieces – Strauss's waltzes, Tchaikovsky's ballet or Vivaldi's Four Seasons. However, if there is something by a contemporary composer, then actually I can say that I feel chaos, I cannot figure it out, it is all complicated. It discourages me.

2. Experiencing participation in musical culture as a parental responsibility.

a) Understanding of participation in musical culture as a formal duty:

I go to the concert hall with the children mostly because I have to. I do not have any other option, as my husband is working abroad. I know I should do it. The same of course concerns school concerts. I'm only doing this because of the children. They would be sad if I didn't come. The headmaster and the teacher wouldn't be happy either if I didn't show up.

For me, Christmas concerts at school are a fixed point on the agenda. I come because I ought to, but it is also a chance to talk to the teacher; because of my job, I don't always have the time and opportunity. Children are happy when we are together, the entire family, I think it is important for them and we should be there.

Sometimes I try to help my daughter to practice playing the instrument. I'm with her, I ensure she is systematic; I have regular contact with her teacher. I come to class, I even take notes. At the meeting with parents, the headmaster said that this is what we should do, he even suggested buying a guide for parents of music school students. I'm doing my best, I know it's necessary and essential, but I don't think I'm really getting it right.

b) Description of this participation in terms of rewarding joint commitment and development:

It's a fantastic experience for me; we go out to the concert hall with the whole family. We dress elegantly. At the concert we sit together, we feel like this is a celebration day for us. After the concert, we go somewhere together to have ice cream or dinner. It's a completely magical experience. Before the concert, I try to find out something about the work to be performed, the composer, I always buy the program of the concert.

I love the performance of students in the music school. And this is not just because my child performs there. I know how important this is to everybody – both children and parents. I know how much work it takes. Sometimes we work on a piece for weeks, but it's worth it. Then when you listen to it, you feel enormous satisfaction. If my child is happy, I am happy. This way we spend a lot of time together, share stories to discuss and memories. At the same time, I learn a lot. Mainly from my child: about notes, composers, about what it is. A symphony or a fugue. I used to be taught it all at school, but I can't remember anything now.

c) Distancing oneself:

I'm not really interested in all this; of course I'm trying to make sure that my son takes his lessons, but I think it's the same as any other additional activities. Actually, they take a lot of time and are expensive. Personally, I would rather have my son go to football training, but my wife wanted him to play the piano. Until he gets bored, let him play.

3. Describing participation in musical culture as a factor triggering individual and social activities.

a) Entering social relations:

For me, it's very important that by going to concerts I can meet other people like me. I need this, I feel a little lonely in my environment – my work colleagues don't share my musical taste, and I like to share what I feel with someone.

It also gives me an opportunity to meet other parents, talk to them, not only about music, we have similar problems – children do not always want to practice playing the instrument, we are not always able to help them; we share our experience and ways of handling problems.

I like talking to my daughter's teacher. I like going to lessons, I'm learning a little bit myself, but I ask a lot, we talk; I'm very interested in her opinion. If there are any interesting concerts, she always lets me know. I believe we've made friends.

b) Releasing social energy:

I spend a lot of time on organizing school concerts. Sometimes we have to print out invitations, prepare the room, move instruments. We do it together with other parents. At the end of the year, we also organize a picnic for our children. After each concert, we take all the children for pizza, or order it to school, organize school Christmas Eve together, at the end we all sing Christmas carols together, the teachers play along with the students.

We organise charity collections. We search for sponsors. We have different professions, backgrounds, connections; it's useful in this type of activity.

Actually, I don't get involved in any special way. I do what I should do. Though, regretfully, I sometimes forget to pay the necessary contributions. I have little time and it's all going on without me. Of course, if I am needed, I won't refuse.

4. Experiencing participation in musical culture as an inner experience.

a) Emotions:

These are strong emotions for me, sometimes it's euphoria, sometimes sadness; I am not indifferent to music.

I can distance myself emotionally, maybe not completely, but I'm not that sensitive. I'm experiencing everything in my own way, but in moderation.

This is the most important thing to me. I realize that I don't care about the sounds themselves, but about what I feel because I get carried away by my emotions.

All this classical music is too sad for me. It is overwhelming, it makes me feel depressed. Maybe I just happened to listen to the wrong repertoire, but I think there's something about it.

b) Metaphysics:

In fact, it's not about the sounds themselves, but this inner space where I can hide for a while, there's something attractive, magical about it – a flooding wave of sounds!

When I listen to music, I reflect a lot, I look for the sense of being here, of being at a concert, but as if in a different world.

I'm trying to find my place in it. On the one hand, it all seems distant and abstract to me, but on the other hand, it gives me inner peace, a sense of harmony with the world and myself.

It's all very ephemeral, but it leaves a permanent mark in the soul.

Table 1.

Conceptualisations of participation in the musical culture of the examined persons

Contexts arising from text condensation	inadequacy, ambivalence	responsibility, involvement, development, distance	interpersonal relations, social activities inertia	emotions, metaphysics
Description domain – differentiation criterion	musical competence	attitude towards their role	type of activity	nature of individual experience
CATEGORIES OF DESCRIPTION	Experiencing participation in musical culture as an activity requiring specific competence	Experiencing participation in musical culture as a parental responsibility	Description of participation in culture in terms of individual and social activity	Experiencing participation in musical culture as an inner experience

Source: Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2009.

Discussion and conclusions

The descriptions reconstructed above refer to four categories. The first of them concerns the whole complex of cultural competencies related to participation in musical culture. The statements provided by the respondents show elements of both total inadequacy and ambivalence in relation to the perceived content and actions taken. Undoubtedly, such a situation generates a certain kind of confusion, frustration and self-esteem building. Respondents often consider the world of music that surrounds them to be unnatural and too distinguished. This unfamiliar world also seems attractive, but still inaccessible to them. This feeling of inadequacy does not apply solely to music in the strict sense. It also applies to a specific etiquette that has to be followed in places such as the concert hall or the opera house.

Another reconstructed category refers to the understanding of participation in culture as a parental responsibility. Parents make sure that their children go to lessons and are well prepared for those lessons; they go to concerts with their children, take part in school events, but without inner conviction. Some parents are very committed and happy to fulfil their responsibilities and do not treat them as chores. For them, it is an opportunity to spend time with their family, talk to each other and develop relationships. They emphasize the integration value of such activities and the fact that they learn a lot from their children. Although it is not easy, they accompany the children practicing their instrument, participate in their concerts, support them in difficult moments and enjoy their achievements. There are also parents who distance themselves from what their children are doing, and step back, leaving room for the other parent to act.

The third category involves experiencing participation in musical culture as a factor triggering activity. It is also perceived in terms of building interpersonal relations with people who feel contact with classical music just like them. They also point out the importance of the relationship with the music teacher as an expert in this field, but also someone who will help them to explore the world of sounds more consciously.

The respondents described their experiences related to musical culture also in terms of building social activity and involvement in the organization of concerts and everything that is connected with it.

The last category involves describing participation in musical culture in terms of inner experience. An inseparable part of musical experience is here exploration of a whole range of different emotions – from euphoria to depression. The respondents also pointed out that contact with music was for them a meta-

physical experience, prompting reflection on themselves, their place on earth, the transience and meaning of life.

The above analyses raise the question of the participation of the interviewed persons in musical culture. The issue of musical competence, the absence of which prevents the full access to various institutions, organizational forms, ways of life and open intellectual and artistic circulation, is also worth highlighting here (Sztompka, 1994, p. 14). The reasons for such a situation should be seen, among others, in the crisis of general music education and in social consent (Popowski & Grusiewicz, 2014). However, the experiences described by the respondents exceed the sole model of participation in culture, based mainly on passive perception. The world of classical music (although alien so far), arouses certain emotions, prompts reflection and a search for existential questions and answers. All of this provides an impulse to construct and reconstruct one's own stable identity based on the whole spectrum of available cultural sources (Melosik, 2013, p. 455). This is especially important at a time when the present reality is marked by uncertainty and permanent anxiety (Bauman, 2007, p. 6).

The fact that the music experiences of the respondents are anchored and generated in the school reality of their children is worth emphasizing. This reality inspires an activity that provides conditions for authentic, free expression (Etzioni, 2012, p. 27), and enables self-creation of one's own personality (Olubiński, 2018, p. 22). The social capital of a local community generated on this occasion should be also noted here.

Additionally, it is necessary to see the family contexts of the respondents' participation in musical culture. Usually, it is the parents who introduce their children to new experiences and values. The primary habitus underlying any subsequent assimilation of culture is shaped first of all by parents (Kłoskowska, 1990, p. 22). However, in this case, we are dealing with the process of reverse socialisation in which the cultural content is transmitted from children to parents (Sztompka, 2012, pp. 450–451).

The experience of the respondents also demonstrates that participation in musical culture makes for them an important element of establishing family ties founded on common thoughts, aspirations and values (Gałęska, 2015, p. 29).

The analyses conducted above revealed the rich world of parental experiences in the area of participation in musical culture. The world of many dimensions, anchored in various individual and social contexts, often complex, full of subtle reflections and emotions. This world is worth exploring and sharing with others, since as Herbert Read used to say: Art has the power to inspire the human being – each of them.

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