The quality of education in ECEC (0-6 years): The contribution of art music*

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Abstract

The notion of quality is at the heart of the democratic model of education (Goal 4 Agenda 2030). In the EU, the regulations on the *ECEC - Early Childhood Education and Care* (0-6 years) system since the 2000s show a holistic approach to childhood, focusing on the subjective right of every child to equal educational opportunities, insisting on the quality of education, attaching particular importance to the development of creativity, and supporting the idea of a coherent and unitary curriculum in the 0-6 system, linked to the subsequent segment of education and training.

The article shows how the cognitive and socio-emotional development of the child, as well as her or his creative and innovative abilities, would benefit greatly from an education in art music from an early age, because of its aesthetic values and as a testimony of civilisation. Unfortunately, music, and therefore art music, has little or no place in the 0-6 curriculum.

Based on the analysis of a number of normative documents on early childhood education, both internal and external to the EU, my contribution will propose three areas of intervention to build a quality vertical curriculum centred on art music education: the musical preparation of staff, the organisation of the curriculum in a historical and cultural perspective, and the design of the learning environment. These three lines of action are not always supported in a balanced way by the national frameworks for quality education in early childhood.

The aim is to stimulate debate among experts in music pedagogy and didactics, as well as educators and teachers in the *ECEC* system, in order to develop pilot projects to experiment with vertical curricula in artistic music education.

Key words:

Artistic music education; Democratic model of education; ECEC analysis of European regulations; ECEC curriculum; Music pedagogy and didactics.

Introduction: the notion of “quality” of education in the *ECEC* system

The notion of “quality” is at the heart of the democratic model of education (Goal 4 Agenda 2030). In the EU, since the 2000s, the regulations on the *ECEC - Early Childhood Education and Care* (0-6 years) system show a holistic approach to childhood, focusing on the subjective right of every child to equal educational opportunities, insisting on the quality of education, attaching particular importance to the development of creativity, and supporting the idea of a coherent and unitary curriculum in the 0-6 system, linked to the subsequent segment of education and training.

The notion of “quality” in *ECEC* is the result of a long process. Initially, at the normative level, the idea of quality first prompted the expansion of public pre-school provision and the improvement of staff competences (2011, EU Communication, final 66). Then the same idea gave impetus to reducing inequalities and promoting equal opportunities for all (2013, EU Recommendation, pp. 112). More recently, quality has been included among the benefits of the curriculum to be promoted throughout the *ECEC* system. In this latter perspective, the 2014 document *Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*, a report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission, is very important. The document defines four criteria for quality services in the 0-6 system: 1. a safe and stimulating environment; 2. encouraging and friendly staff; 3. opportunities for intensive social and language interaction; 4. appropriate experiences to support children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. The continuous professional development of educators and teachers in order to acquire knowledge and competences, the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, the definition of national guidelines and specific objectives, as well as the regular evaluation of progress, together with the involvement of parents, families in general and local communities, and the definition of an accreditation process, are some of the central aspects in defining the quality of educational services in the 0-6 system since 2014.

In 2015, the Council Conclusions on the role of early childhood education and primary education in fostering creativity, innovation and digital literacy focused on education for active citizenship and the promotion of creative and innovative competences as a basis for «personal fulfilment and development, social inclusion and active citizenship» (2015/C 172/05, paragraphs 1-4 of the section “With Regard to Creativity and Innovation”).

This brings us to the fourth of the seventeen goals of the 2030 Agenda, which was signed by the governments of the 193 UN member states in September 2015. This goal is to provide quality, equitable and inclusive education and learning opportunities for all.

Subsequently, the European Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 also refers to the «high quality» of education and care systems in *ECEC*. One of the aspects of high quality is «the importance of play, contact with nature, the role of music, arts and physical activity». Finally, in 2022-2023, the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, with its European Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (*ECEC*), focused on quality monitoring and evaluation.

All these objectives are based on the integration of policy and pedagogy. This suggests that a quality system for children is one that provides them with opportunities for cognitive, emotional-affective, physical and social growth and well-being, not only physical but also psychological, intellectual and spiritual.

In order to provide these opportunities, it is essential to design a unitary curriculum from 0 to 6 years, as set out in the 2014 *Proposal for Key Principles for a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*. The design of the unitary curriculum must be based on cultural

education in order to promote the sense of citizenship, which is the basis of citizenship, from early childhood.

Methods

This article reports on the results of a theoretical research that links the notion of “quality” of education and teaching in childhood – as studied from a critical-comparative perspective in Italian, European and international legislation (see Introduction) – to the idea of a curriculum that intentionally focuses on historical-cultural education from early childhood and that includes artistic music education.

The reflections start from the formative objectives of “active citizenship” and “cultural participation”, identified by the European Union, in order to explore the notion of “culture” as a synthesis of “heritage” and “traditions”. From a pedagogical point of view, the reflection is then deepened by building a bridge between all these concepts, in the perspective of key competences for lifelong learning. Among these, the eighth key competence, cultural awareness and expression, is the main educational objective of music education in general and of art music education in particular, also in the *ECEC* system.

Drawing on Immanuel Kant, the reflections in this article also establish a strong link between history education and critical education. This connection is the basis for a specific model of music education that is primarily, but not exclusively, focused on art music. The article illustrates some pedagogical and didactic foundations of this model and projects it into the *ECEC* system, demonstrating its educational potential in the building of European citizenship and a quality school.

Results

The results of the reflections focus on three areas in which the collaboration of scholars and policy-makers in the European Union should be promoted, in order to affirm artistic music education as a factor in improving the overall quality of education in the *ECEC* system:

- the training of educators and teachers in the knowledge and understanding of art music;

- the development of historically and culturally oriented art music curricula both in schools and in the training of educators and teachers at university level;

- the provision and design of “music ateliers” in schools, i.e. specific musical learning environments.

For reasons of space, the discussion here will have little to do with the first point, since it is an area in which a wide variety of academic curricula are at play in different European countries. Instead, it will focus on the second point and provide some insights into the third, in order to offer working hypotheses to be shared by researchers in this field in the European Union.

Discussion: cultural-historical education and artistic music education

If we are to educate for active citizenship from an early age, as stated in the EU Council Conclusions of 2015, this is impossible without participation in culture. But what do we understand by “culture”? And what do we mean by “cultural participation”?

The notion of “culture” encompasses both the beliefs and values of a community, and hence its traditions, and the cultural assets of that community, and hence its heritage – the set of material and non-material objects that bear witness to a civilisation and embody associations with

certain social values, beliefs, religions and customs, and hence with the traditions of that civilisation. Education in the knowledge and understanding of the traditions and cultural heritage of a civilisation promotes and encourages participation in a culture, because it fosters a sense of identity and belonging to a group, an understanding of previous generations and their history, and the development of a sense of identity and cultural awareness. The latter, together with cultural expression, has been identified by the EU as the eighth key competence for lifelong learning (EU Council Recommendations 2016 and 2019). In order to encourage students to develop this eighth key competence, historical and critical education from an early age is essential, because:

- without historical knowledge, we cannot understand the reality in which we live and act;

- without criticism, understood since Kant as a reflective act leading to discernment and thus choice, we cannot arrive at self-determination and thus at what is good for us.

The historical-critical approach in cultural formation trains students' ability to contextualise and problematise facts, phenomena and objects, including music. It therefore leads to an increase in the intellectual qualities of students, as well as the construction of a sense of belonging to a community (La Face & Bianconi, 2014). The earlier we start with this kind of education, from the ECEC system, the better: we are not used to thinking that the intellect is the greatest asset of the human being, and that we should invest in it with education from early childhood and with the transmission of knowledge in the next school segment. Historical-critical cultural education is therefore the foundation of intellectual education and the guarantee of cultural participation. I would like to emphasise that by “intellectual formation” I mean the development of the human being in all its multiple, interdependent dimensions: cognitive-cultural, critical-aesthetic, affective-emotional, linguistic-communicative, relational-social, identity-related and intercultural, and kinesthetic-physical (Cuomo, 2018, pp. 65-67). Intellectual formation should therefore be understood as holistic.

The arts make a significant contribution to intellectual formation as their contents have a high aesthetic and epistemological value. However, these contents are not easily accessible: they require a didactic mediation that leads students to an understanding of how works of art are created and how their construction corresponds to precise historical and cultural values, and through this understanding, to the acquisition of tools for high-level aesthetic participation.

At the University of Bologna, for a little over twenty years now, we have been developing a pedagogical-didactic model for music that focuses on educating students to understand music in its historical and cultural context. The starting point is the didactics of listening, which aims to develop an understanding of what a given musical object is, i.e. how it is constructed and why it is constructed in a certain way. The didactics of listening can enable students to understand that the structure and form of a piece of music, past or present, its materials and their organisation, the functions of the piece in the society in which it was created, the places, modes and contexts of its performance, are all expressions not only of the poetics of its author, but also of the culture of that society, its values and its “taste”. By taste, I mean a philosophical-aesthetic category that must be considered in its historical context. The model developed in Bologna then branches out from the didactics of listening into the didactics of musical production (performance, composition and improvisation) and the didactics of music history, understood as training in the research of sources. The didactics of listening to music is at the heart of the Bolognese pedagogical and didactic model, i.e. it precedes all the other practices of musical knowledge transposition, since it aims to create an awareness of music as an integral part of history and culture. Starting from the didactics of listening, the teacher develops the teaching and learning of music towards the other two transposition practices, the didactics of musical production (performance, composition,

improvisation) and the didactics of musical history, linking them in a relationship of continuity, that is, in an uninterrupted cycle (Cuomo, 2018).

In the *ECEC* system, the quality of a child's development, and therefore of her or his learning opportunities, depends directly not only on the quality of the care she or he receives, but also, and above all, on the path to knowledge of the world and of oneself that is fostered by the educational processes in which she or he is involved. It is therefore essential to promote access to, and use of, the symbolic systems of the social and cultural reality in which the child lives. These systems include musical art, which should be consciously taken into account in educational planning for the purposes of aesthetic development, musical education and cultural participation (Cuomo, 2023).

Knowledge of art music as a heritage should be considered a cultural right (Cuomo, 2024). This right should be affirmed through a specific artistic-musical education, to be introduced already in the *ECEC* system, precisely in order to promote a high quality of services, as advocated by the European Union. From this point of view, however, there are two main problems: the specific competences of the teaching staff and the establishment of an artistic-musical curriculum in early childhood. These two aspects are undoubtedly linked.

The training of early childhood educators and teachers in *ECEC* is a complex issue. In specific academic courses, future professionals should acquire historical and cultural competence in art music in order to be able to work with children using both compositions with notes and compositions with sounds. This distinction derives from the history of music, which in the 20th century has seen composers not only grapple with the codification of sounds in different musical languages, but also focus on purely sonic creative processes, including noise, even organised noise, timbral innovation and the exploration of new frontiers of sound. I will not dwell on the training of educators and teachers in the *ECEC* system here: as already mentioned (see Results), this is a complex issue that primarily concerns the need to harmonise the *ECEC* academic paths of the EU countries towards a solid artistic and cultural education of the enrolled students, with a focus on art music.

In terms of learning, in order to guarantee the cultural right to knowledge and understanding of art music, it would be necessary to include this form of music in the curricula of the pre-school and primary education systems, exploring the possibility of a unitary and integrated design between the two age groups, something on which the European Union insists. Allowing children to approach art music from an early age is the best way to encourage cultural participation, albeit in a playful and informal way, i.e. through meaningful aesthetic musical experiences. The question is not only political, but also methodological and didactic. So how to do it?

I propose the following hypothesis.

First, a very young child forms her or his knowledge of the world through concrete experience of the world itself. Musical experience, in particular, always unfolds through two aspects, reception and production: listening and playing, knowing and doing, thinking and acting.

Given that the child, in the first months of life, has limitations in the functional motor coordination of gestures aimed at sound production, it can be argued that artistic music education begins only on the receptive axis, i.e. listening, and then gradually moves on to the productive axis, i.e. performance, composition and improvisation, again following the model of music education developed by the University of Bologna and based on the circularity between listening, production and music history education.

A good starting point for children aged 0 months to 1 year is to cultivate “audiation”, the ability to think musically, according to a theoretical and procedural concept described in Edwin E.

Gordon's *Music Learning Theory* (Gordon, 2001). In very young children, this ability is stimulated by adult singing. The adult, in establishing a relationship with the child, picks up the child's vocalisations and passes them on in a form of communication that gradually moves from sound-vocal to musical. Through improvisation, the adult transforms these vocalisations into musical patterns, which she or he returns to the child between one vocalisation and the next. In this way the very young child naturally develops the ability to hear the connections between different patterns. In this way the child is trained to listen to real musical phrases and becomes accustomed to syntax, albeit informally and unconsciously. Musically, MLT is based on pieces of tonal and modal language, in the form of art music, including jazz.

From the age of 1, always working on the receptive level, it is possible to propose educational paths that include pieces from different historical periods, in order to expose children from an early age to the great variety of languages, sounds and timbres that art music offers. From the age of 2 to 3, while continuing the listening activity, it is appropriate to complement it with a creative part. The child gradually acquires motor skills, which are the starting point for the educator or teacher to connect listening with practical competences. From the age of 3, it is important that the moments of listening and production are increasingly integrated, in a relationship of continuity, in order to promote a complete artistic musical experience that educates the mind and the character. To make this idea clearer, I propose the outline of an educational and didactic path. I have described its methodological foundations in another article, from which I have taken the example (Cuomo, 2023).

The first step could be an exploration of the timbres of classical musical instruments by listening to pieces composed for individual instruments. Here are four examples: the *Badinerie* from the Overture No. 2 in B minor for flute and orchestra by J. S. Bach (BWV 1067); W. A. Mozart's *Theme with variations* (twelve) in C major K. 265 for harpsichord or piano, which uses the famous children's melody, known in many languages, from the French folk song *Ah! vous dirai je, maman*; the *Suite* No. 1 for solo cello, also by J. S. Bach, and the timpani air from *Les airs de trompettes, timbales et hautbois* by J.- B. Lully. The four instruments – flute, piano, cello, and timpani – become the subject of reflective listening activities that link their shape and structure to timbre, then to the genre of music being listened to, and finally to the way in which sound is produced. In this way, comparisons can be made between instruments, distinguishing, for example, the sound and timbre of the piano from that of the timpani, precisely because they are both percussion instruments. A comparison can then be made between the timpani and the flute, and finally between the flute and the piano, all in order to train the children's thinking in order to grasp both the similarities and the differences, between timbres, ways of producing sound and the basicl technical aspects of performance.

It will then be possible to reflect on certain aspects of the music heard. This will be done at different levels of correspondence with the specific qualities of the piece. For example, at a general level, it will be possible to observe the “allegro” character of Bach's *Badinerie* and Mozart's *Theme and Variations* mentioned above, and to invite the children to look for differences between one allegro and the other (e.g. the first is more lively, the second more moderate), thus training their ability to discriminate. By focusing on the rhythmic-melodic movement of the cello, as mentioned above, children can be helped to understand the “swinging” character, and the “wavy” profile, of the melody of the prelude to Bach's suite. Finally, with regard to the timbre of Lully's *Airs*, the children will be able to develop a vocabulary appropriate to the acoustic perception of the power and impact of the timpani's sound. It does not matter that these definitions have different levels of correspondence: what matters is that they are relevant to the structural characteristics of the

pieces.

Then, taking a particular piece, for example Mozart's *Theme* mentioned above, after listening to it, children from the age of 3 can be asked to reproduce it, first rhythmically with sticks, then also musically, for example on a xylophone, and finally to organise an instrumentation that allows them to perform rhythmically and melodically in small groups.

Between the ages of 3 and 6, attention spans increase and symbolic thinking develops. Children show greater interest in longer fairy tales, more complex stories and stories with more complicated plots. While maintaining the link between listening and making music, it is possible to work consciously with this age group on the historical axis, starting from the present in which the children live. Nevertheless, they intuitively learn the concept of time as the organising principle of their present through the cyclical and recursive nature of events.

From the age of 3, as children become more interested in fairy tales, they learn, again intuitively, the chain of events in a narrative. Thus, from this age, they begin to take an interest in the world around them, to pay attention to familiar stories, and thus to develop their first time skills. These need to be reinforced and developed so that they understand that everything around them, people or things, has a history, i.e. that every present has a past. Therefore, in order to work on the development of a historical and cultural musical awareness, the methodological line to follow is to historicise the present (Cuomo & Badolato, 2024). Starting from the music of everyday life, teachers can invite the very young to compare it with the music listened to by their parents and grandparents, and to extend the reflection to the places of music, in order to grasp the differences in types of music, their places and tastes, over time.

The time direction I propose for this methodology, from the present to the past, can also be preceded by an initially informal and intuitive approach. However, this kind of historical path, from the present to the past, can be accompanied or complemented by the reverse direction, from the past to the present, through pieces of different musical genres. For example, operas with a fairy-tale or magical setting, such as Mozart's *The Magic Flute*; those that evoke childhood stories, such as Rossini's *Cenerentola*; or more playful ones, such as Donizetti's *Elisir d'amore*; to Verdi's operas, such as *Falstaff*, based on Shakespeare's play; or Puccini's operas, for example *Turandot*, also with a fairy-tale setting. The musical theatre of the 20th century should not be overlooked, from Hindemith's *Wir bauen eine Stadt* to Nino Rota's *Lo scoiattolo*, to contemporary musical theatre works specifically for children, which are now often included in the programmes of concert institutions. Even instrumental music, perhaps with an evocative quality linked to children's stories, such as Schumann's *Kinderszenen* op. 15, or Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, or the dances from the Suite from the ballet *The Nutcracker* op. 71a by Tchaikovsky (*March; Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy; Russian Dance; Arabian Dance; Chinese Dance; Waltz of the Flowers*) are part of the repertoire that can be proposed to children at an early age.

This reflexive, selective and comparative work between the different forms of art music, the places where they are (or were) performed and that condition their production, as well as the tastes they represent, trains minds to problematise, which is the basis for the formation of critical thinking.

A final working hypothesis concerns the educational environment, the organisation of which is part of the implicit curriculum design. It is well known that the environment is the “third teacher”. In order to train quality musical listening, we would need to create real “music ateliers” in the *ECEC* system, i.e. places specifically designed for listening and musical production. From the point of view of listening, the studio should have acoustic, and therefore architectural, characteristics that are conducive to the best possible listening experience. From the point of view of music production, it should be equipped not only with Orff instruments, as is usually the case, or with

instruments made by the children, but also with art music instruments. These could be of real size, so that professional musicians can be invited to play on them, but also of smaller size, like the classroom objects in the Montessori method: in the first case, the children get used to listening to live music; in the second, they are encouraged to touch the instruments and experiment with their physical, acoustic and tonal qualities. The music atelier should also have special library corners with audiobooks about art music composers. The children should be free to use the audiobooks and the teachers and educators should also use them consciously, in a way that complements the planned musical and didactic paths (Cuomo, 2023).

Conclusions

This article proposes a working hypothesis using music that aims to achieve "high quality" education, care, and instruction in the *ECEC* system in the European Union. The concept of "quality," as argued here, also based on EU legislation, requires a focus not only on "care," but on the education and instruction that specialists in the sector must intentionally "design" from birth to six years of age. This means thinking of the *ECEC* system through the curriculum as a methodological tool for planning itself from birth. Furthermore, planning should be unified, from birth to six years of age — that is, organic—and should encompass the foundations of the subsequent segment, from six years of age onward. It is hoped that specialists in the sector will agree on this point, in order to develop coherent and integrated *ECEC* curricular guidelines across EU countries, in order to overcome the excessive disparities that currently exist between national curricula, despite European legislation. This article seeks to encourage this perspective of joint work on a organic *ECEC* curriculum. At the same time, it advocates that such a curriculum include aesthetic education through the arts with a specific historical and cultural orientation, and that, for music, it include an emphasis on art music for the reasons discussed extensively. Nonetheless, to enhance the quality of the ECEC system, this curricular planning should be accompanied by joint work on two other fronts: artistic and musical educational planning within the *ECEC* system, focusing on staff training and educational environments. University education, and therefore in-service training, should include more hours of knowledge and understanding of music, to enable educators and teachers to design historical and cultural music curricula that emphasize art music. I would like to point out that the concept of "art music" includes both the tonal language, the foundation of Western culture's masterpieces, and its twentieth-century developments. These developments are highly interesting and rich in educational potential for early childhood. After the denial of tonality, they focused musical invention on creative sonic processes that generate composition with sounds and of sounds, in addition to composition with notes. This broadened the concept of "music" to include environmental sounds and noises, then to contemporary or historical soundscapes, and finally to new forms of musical thought that are more immediate for very young children compared to the syntactic-musical comprehension inherent in tonal language. Understanding how artistic musical knowledge has evolved is essential in training educators and teachers for a quality *ECEC* system. I hope that, in this direction, we specialists can contribute to harmonizing university curricula in the EU for this age group and to providing in-service training that maintains quality standards. Nevertheless, work must also be done on educational environments, not only from a pedagogical perspective but also from an architectural and acoustical perspective. This is the most important aspect in economic terms, since the idea put forward here would require structural funding for the *ECEC* system in the EU, such as to integrate architectural design into curricular planning. This is a highly advanced concept, seemingly utopian, but in reality more concrete than one might think, provided there is a strong political will to invest

in high-quality musical, theatrical, and artistic education for children. Along these two lines of work, this contribution aims to encourage discussion among specialists in the field in the EU to develop actions that enable concrete change. The area on which I have focused here, however, is musical pedagogy and didactics, as I have outlined a curriculum approach for children aged 0 to 6 based on two methodological principles: the circularity between listening, production, and historical musical understanding, and a historical-critical approach, centered on the continuous historicization and problematization of content, in ways certainly appropriate for very young children, as briefly exemplified here. Experiments conducted in Italy have demonstrated that this methodology, both generally and comprehensively, promotes the child's integral development in all its dimensions (cognitive-cultural, critical-aesthetic, affective-emotional, linguistic-communicative, relational-social, identity and intercultural, kinesthetic-bodily). Specifically, it promotes the development of key-competences, fostering the development of social and civic competences related to citizenship, as well as those related to cultural awareness and expression and the ability to learn to learn. The pedagogical and didactic model briefly outlined here, which roots Music Pedagogy and Didactics in Musicology on the one hand and in Educational Sciences on the other, was developed over twenty years of research by the Department of Arts at the University of Bologna in collaboration with other Italian universities and within the work of a specific study group within the International Musicological Society (Cuomo C., La Face G., 2020). It fully unfolds its educational potential if educational programs are designed organically, that is, when they deal with a specific musical theme in a coherent and unitary way. Furthermore, when the pedagogical strategy adopted focuses on problematisation, which stimulates children's curiosity and need for knowledge, it promotes an attitude of research and cognitive and metacognitive reflexive thinking, also through the verbalisation of what is heard, played or composed. Artistic music education in a cultural-historical curriculum, based on a method that emphasises the link between thinking and doing, listening and making music, can become a driving force for improving the quality of education in the *ECEC* system, and for promoting cultural participation from an early age.

* This article forms a conceptual unit with the following one, *Croatia and Italy: national curricula and artistic music education in the 0-6 years system*, by Valentina Fanelli, in this same volume. The English translation of both articles is by Dr. Elisabetta Zoni.

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