

# TEACHERS' BELIEFS AT GERMAN MUSIC SCHOOLS

## A “MESSY CONSTRUCT”<sup>1</sup> IN A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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### Abstract

Teachers at music schools in Germany are confronted with very complex demands in their profession, ranging from artistic experience in various genres to pedagogical skills in the context of both broad-based and top-level promotion, as well as different age groups. It is not uncommon for certain tensions to arise when teachers try to meet all these requirements at the same time. Under such conditions, how do they define quality of instrumental and vocal tuition? As this is a matter of a still relatively young field of empirical research in Germany, such a basic and relevant research question has not yet been addressed. It is explored in my doctoral research project<sup>2</sup>, which is an empirical study based on interviews with teachers at music schools in Germany<sup>3</sup>. The concept of teachers' beliefs forms the theoretical framework and the data collected is analysed using Grounded Theory methodology. On the way towards developing a theory, it becomes apparent that educational quality from the teachers' point of view is much more difficult to identify than expected. Therefore, it seems necessary to broaden the research question. This paper illustrates the processuality of my research with a focus on the methodological approach.

### Keywords

Teachers at German music schools – teachers' beliefs – Grounded Theory – openness – educational quality – fields of tension

## Introduction

In Germany the term ‘music school’ represents neither general school nor conservatoire. At music schools, students of different ages have vocal and instrumental lessons usually once a week. They participate on a voluntary basis and pay a certain sum for learning music by singing or playing an instrument in individual or group lessons.<sup>4</sup> These and further general conditions influence the job description of teachers employed there. Not only do teachers at music schools have to consider such aspects as the age and the skills of an individual student or even their parents' wishes; they have to do so without any predefined curriculum

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<sup>1</sup> Pajares, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Supervised by Prof. Dr. Natalia Ardila-Mantilla at the Cologne University of Music and Dance and by Prof. Dr. Lina Oravec at the University of Koblenz-Landau.

<sup>3</sup> Since the framework conditions differ in some places between the individual federal states, this study focuses on one federal state, in this case Hessen.

<sup>4</sup> This also includes groups within the framework of elementary music education as well as so-called parent-child groups with small children under 3 years of age.

of the kind that exists at general schools. In addition, at music schools both broad-based and top-level promotion are relevant.

The *Verband deutscher Musikschulen (VdM)* is a municipal professional and supporting association currently consisting of 930 public music schools in Germany. It provides, among other things, guidelines and a structure plan. The document *Leitlinien zur Sicherung und Weiterentwicklung der öffentlichen Musikschulen* identifies several aspects for the safeguarding and further development of public music schools. This evidently shows the complexity of the requirements: right at the beginning, it becomes apparent that music schools on the one hand act as a public educational institution; on the other hand, they have to adapt to changes in society and compete with other cultural and leisure activities. Furthermore, they are expected to cooperate with other educational institutions such as general schools or day care centres, fulfil a social mission beyond musical education such as promoting students' personality development and reach all people of different ages and social groups. Promotion of gifted students and preparations for music studies are also part of their remit.<sup>5</sup>

These are just a few examples to give an impression of the function music schools have in Germany. With regard to the teachers working in these institutions, some, partly quite critical, statements can be found in connection with the complex situation described above: Ardila-Mantilla (2010) points out the historical change in the job description of instrumental teachers and identifies their professional fields not only as being a musician and teaching musical skills and abilities, but also teaching in diverse educational settings like team teaching or working in projects, dealing with different music genres, addressing the individual goals and needs of the students and many others. Röbbke (2012) even goes so far as to call teachers at music schools "*eierlegende Wollmilchsäue*", an ironic German expression for someone from whom too many skills are demanded. He draws attention to the vast number of tasks and calls for an end of the teachers' overload.<sup>6</sup>

Against this background, the question arose as to what constitutes good instrumental and vocal tuition for teachers at music schools. In other words, the present study was intended to be about teachers' beliefs regarding educational quality. It will subsequently become clear that this project is much more complicated than expected. First, though, the theoretical framework and the applied methods are discussed in more detail.

## Teachers' beliefs as the theoretical framework

Pajares (1992) describes the concept of teachers' beliefs as a "*messy construct*". This is mainly due to the lack of a uniform definition of the term. In addition, there are also various classification proposals regarding the topics<sup>7</sup> to which beliefs refer. In order not to go beyond the scope of this article, I will mainly refer to one conceptual explication which includes frequently mentioned aspects of other definitions.

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<sup>5</sup> Deutscher Städtetag et al., 2010, 2009; VdM, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> In this context, the precarious situation of teachers also plays a major role, which is particularly evident in their few permanent positions and low salaries (e.g., Dartsch, 2019; Ardila-Mantilla, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Following Fives and Bruehl (2012), the word 'topic' is also used in the further course of the paper, representing the German word 'Gegenstand'.

First of all, there is a broad consensus that teachers' beliefs play a significant role in their actions. They are considered as a central element in the professional competence of teachers among others like professional knowledge<sup>8</sup> or self-regulating skills (Baumert & Kunter, 2011). Following Reusser and Pauli (2014) teachers' beliefs are conceptions about various educationally relevant topics which are felt to be true and valuable. They give structure, stability, security and orientation to work-related activities and are characterized as having strong evaluative and affective components (Reusser & Pauli, 2014, pp. 642-643). This definition therefore provides information on the following three aspects: what teachers' beliefs refer to, how they are constituted and what function they can have for the teachers. Furthermore, it is often pointed out that beliefs in general can be both explicit and implicit, are resistant to change and that they are organized in a system in which some of them can also differ from one another (ibid.; Wilde & Kunter, 2016).

According to Reusser and Pauli, research on beliefs can be distinguished with regard to the following topics<sup>9</sup>:



Figure 1: classification of beliefs with regard to the topics (following Reusser & Pauli, 2014, p. 650)

These three kinds of beliefs can similarly play a role in my project when interviewing teachers at music schools.

Furthermore, the authors name different research questions and focal points: beliefs can be analyzed (1) on a descriptive level concerning their structure and relationships to each other, (2) regarding their connection to teachers' actions as well as to teaching effects and (3) with respect to their development and changeability (ibid.). My project is located here on the first level.

This brief explanation of teachers' beliefs should suffice here to illustrate the theoretical framework. The next chapter is about the methods used in my research project, which can be regarded as a central element of this article.

<sup>8</sup> There is disagreement in the literature about the extent to which knowledge is to be distinguished from beliefs (Taibi, 2013, p. 24-25).

<sup>9</sup> The term 'Überzeugungen' is the most common German translation of 'beliefs' (e.g., Reusser & Pauli, 2014).

## Methods

In order to find out about the music school teachers' beliefs, I designed a qualitative research project and conducted semi-structured interviews. This type of data collection is beneficial because the teachers can thus be questioned specifically about their view of educational quality and further related aspects, but there still is a certain openness for their narratives. The latter plays a significant role in the method chosen here: the Grounded Theory, first introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967.<sup>10</sup> On the basis of this approach a theory about the above-mentioned topic is to be generated by using the collected data. In order to achieve this goal, an analytical process is run through, characterized by the following three coding steps: (1) breaking up the data and forming categories through *open coding*, (2) re-assembling the data by creating links between the categories in the context of *axial coding* and (3) finding the core categorie(s) and their relationships to others by doing *selective coding*. These three coding steps are not linear but rather iterative (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The same applies to the individual steps of the entire research process: writing research questions, collecting and evaluating data and generating theory. They all run parallelly and are mutually dependent (Strübing, 2014, p. 11). In the course of such a qualitative process, even a reformulation of the research question(s) is not unusual, as Agee (2009) points out, following several authors: "*The development of new questions [...] often occurs during the inquiry process, sometimes during data collection and analysis. A researcher may find that the initial focus of the research question is too limited to fully address the phenomenon under study.*" (ibid.) This also represents a crucial point in this paper on my research project. However, by constantly comparing the data and collecting new ones, a theoretical saturation should be achieved over time.

Related to the whole process, the sampling constantly plays an essential role. At the beginning of the present research, such criteria as the respective instrument, the teachers' age and the form of teacher training were decisive for the choice of the interview partners. In the further course, some of their statements also determined the choice of the next interlocutor. An interviewed bassoon teacher, for example, clearly distinguished himself from the genres pop and jazz. For him, popular pieces were just a way of bridging phases in which students showed little motivation. This aspect led to the interview of a teacher who is mainly active in these genres. Another essential aspect that has to be mentioned at this point is the role of the researcher and his/her theoretical sensitivity regarding the research phenomenon. In general, the researcher's reflection on the research as part of the findings is considered an essential characteristic of qualitative research (Flick, 2017, p. 26). According to Strauss and Corbin (1996), the term 'theoretical sensitivity' is often associated with Grounded Theory and indicates an ability of the researcher to have and develop an awareness of the varying meanings of data. Not only literary knowledge and professional or personal experience belong to the sources of theoretical sensitivity, but also the analytical process itself. Increasing confrontation with the data in various ways can change the view of the research phenomenon, which in turn has an impact on theory generation (pp. 25–27).

The following section illustrates how such an iterative process might look, using my study as an example. These are deliberately not intermediate results in the form of concrete categories, as would typically be expected in a Grounded Theory study. The focus here is

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<sup>10</sup> Since then, the methodology has further evolved, as to be seen in the *Constructing Grounded Theory* developed by Kathy Charmaz (2006) or the *Situational Analysis* by Adele Clarke (2005).

much more on a kind of meta-level of the previous research process, in order to illustrate the processuality described above.

## Research process to date

As previously mentioned, the original focus of the research was on the music teachers' view of educational quality and all related aspects. Beyond the question of what teachers think constitutes a good instrumental and vocal tuition, the interview guide also included questions regarding their individual biographical experiences or their ideas of a good music school. Such further questions should serve to identify possible connections to the teachers' ideal of educational quality.

In the five interviews conducted so far, certain fields of tension have frequently emerged from the statements. Ms. Cleve, for example, thinks good tuition should be a meeting point ("*Treffpunkt*")<sup>11</sup> between the individual student and educational topic ("*Bildungsgegenstand*") to be imparted. The student should realize the topic places a certain demand ("*Anspruch*") on him/her. If he/she just wants a bit of fun and entertainment, Ms. Cleve cannot resist this wish, but she no longer regards something of this kind as good tuition. Ms. Dietl also differentiates between what she imagines as ideal and what the students want. She admits that for her, technical development is a crucial part of good instrumental tuition, but she is unable to realize this with all students, as some do not engage with it.

Such statements from these two interviews initially led me to the following conclusion: there are actual teachers' beliefs about educational quality that are confronted with other related aspects, e.g. matters of the individual student, which act as external disruptive factors (see figure 2). However, this kind of relationship between the different topics did not apply to statements from the other interviews.

Ms. Arens, for example, places the music school in a kind of niche between an educational institution and a service provider ("*Nische zwischen Bildungseinrichtung und Dienstleister*"). There, as she says, education cannot be forced ("*keine Schule mit Bildungszwang*") and customer satisfaction must be achieved. Accordingly, one has to strike a balance between the customer's and one's own expectations about the ability to play the instrument ("*Vorstellungen von dem, was 'Geige spielen können' bedeutet*"). As regards good instrumental tuition, she even goes so far as to have to define the word 'good' in the first place, i.e. good in the sense of mastering the instrument, or in the sense of joy for the student. In a similar vein, Mr. Bardo says that on the one hand the students should have fun because it is a hobby, but on the other hand they always have to learn something new, because the lessons are paid for.

This left me with the impression that the other related aspects could also be seen as part of the teachers' beliefs about educational quality (see figure 3).

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<sup>11</sup> In this article, most of the content from the data is paraphrased directly in English. At such points, the additional mention of the original German terms serves for a better understanding.

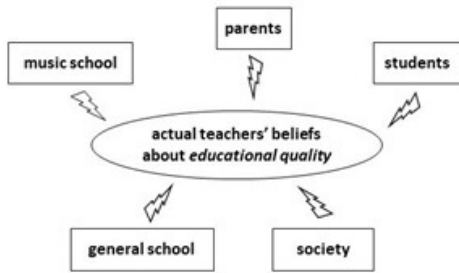


Figure 2: teachers' beliefs about educational quality versus external disruptive factors

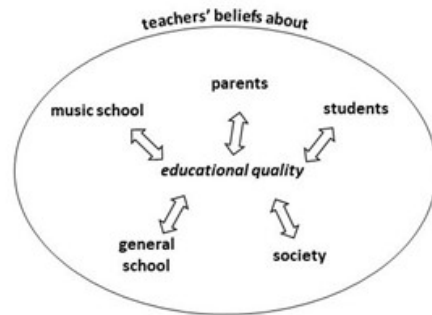


Figure 3: teachers' beliefs about educational quality and other related topics

The data reveal further interrelations that go beyond the issues mentioned and are not obvious at first glance. These statements give reason to question educational quality in the role of the central topic, or in other words, it seems premature to analyse the data solely from this perspective.

Thus, Ms. Dietl points out the different target groups depending on whether she is faced with one-to-one or group tuition. In her opinion, for minor students who receive one-to-one tuition, there also is a corresponding interest from home on the part of the parents (*„Jemand, der Einzelunterricht von seinen Eltern finanziert bekommt, da ist eben von zu Hause auch ein entsprechendes Interesse da.“*). In this form of tuition, the focus is on individual support of the student.

In group tuition, on the other hand, she first has to make sure that everyone is included (*„in der großen Gruppe muss ich natürlich erst mal gucken, dass ich überhaupt alle gut mitnehme“*). There, she encounters not only motivated students, but also many who would not normally have had any contact with an instrument themselves or through their families (*„In der Gruppe machen viel mehr Schüler mit, die sonst vielleicht keinen Unterricht von sich aus gehabt hätten.“*). She justifies this by the fact that group tuition is much cheaper and takes place in general schools, which saves additional travel costs and time. Such social aspects within the framework of educational provision additionally affect the teachers' thoughts.

Another influential point concerns the teachers' own understandings of music and further related aspects, like being a musician, in the context of their own biography. In a comparison between the situation of students and that of professional musicians, Mr. Ebert, for example, highlights the institutionalisation of music schools as a shortcoming (*„Manko der Musikschule“*). He regrets the students cannot have stage experience like professional musicians because they always perform at the music school in front of the same small audience, consisting mostly of family and friends. In addition, students frequently perform their pieces only once and then immediately start learning a new piece, while musicians practice the same pieces over a long period of time and perform them more often. This aspiration to match the real everyday life of a professional musician can be traced back to his own career.

When applying Grounded Theory as described in section 3, a most complex interconnectedness of different issues on various dimensions becomes apparent, which makes it difficult to identify the educational quality from the music teachers' point of view. Both multiple coding processes and knowledge from the literature that the focus of research on

beliefs is particularly on the different topics to which they refer<sup>12</sup>, legitimise an opening of the research focus at this point:

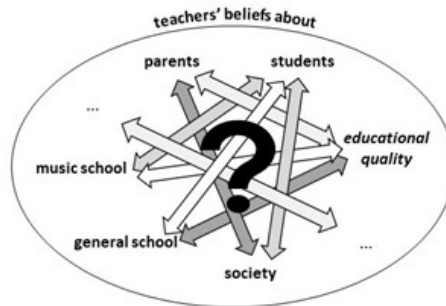


Figure 4: educational quality as one of several research topics

This step is intended, on the one hand, to discover possible blind spots due to the anticipation of educational quality as one of the topics and, on the other hand, to be able to make adjustments if necessary.

The previous research process can be well described with the following illustration:

*A question can be thought of as a tool that is much like a steady-cam lens used to document an event or a journey. In the initial stages of study design, the researcher uses the steady-cam to frame an ever-changing broad landscape and then narrows the focus to frame and follow a specific set of events or actions in the broader terrain.*  
(Agee, 2009)

Now I am at a stage of ‘zooming out’ and re-framing the landscape of music teachers’ beliefs to obtain a broader view. Further analysis of the various topics and their connections to one another, as well as more interviews, will show how I can use the steady-cam lens and narrow the focus.

## Conclusion

The starting point of my doctoral research project was the question of educational quality from the teachers’ point of view against the background of a very complex job description at German music schools. Even though this paper could only provide a few insights into the data, the presentation of the previous research process especially clarified the following two aspects: the topic of educational quality can be viewed from different perspectives and it is strongly interconnected with many other topics at different levels. This multidimensionality, on the one hand, reflects the complex professional field of teachers at music schools; on the other hand, it calls for an opening of the research topic in order to do justice to the phenomenon and thus meet an important quality criterion of qualitative research. Finally, further developments will show the extent to which teachers’ beliefs at music schools in

<sup>12</sup> Among others, Reusser and Pauli (2014) refer to this aspect under the term “*intentionaler Gegenstandsbezug*” (ibid., p. 644).

Germany can contribute both to the understanding of the teachers' situation and beyond to the scientific discourse of instrumental music education.

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