

KOBLENZ GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH ON MOVABLE-DO SOLFÈGE IN GERMAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Lina Oravec and Julia Steffens

Abstract

This article briefly introduces four Grounded Theory studies on the movable-do solfège approach in German primary schools, all conducted at the University of Koblenz-Landau. Two interview studies by master students (1) Susanne Becker (2018) and (2) Julia Steffens (2019) were conducted independently of each other. A meta-study by Lina Oravec and Julia Steffens (3) connected both their data (Oravec, Steffens 2021; Oravec, 2021). This article focuses mainly on the meta-study, before outlining a possible future dissertation project by Julia Steffens (4).

Our meta study (3) seeks an explanation for the central phenomenon of the *students' decreasing motivation to practice solfège*. This phenomenon has been described by both students and teachers, who at the same time also spoke enthusiastically of this method and its obvious effects on pitch accurate singing. As causal conditions for the phenomenon we could easily detect an *age effect*, a *tiring effect* and an *expert effect* that make the children feel “too cool” for a method which seems increasingly “childish” in the surrounding *world of the regular scale* using letter notation, not solfège. Another reason hidden in the data became apparent: the teachers' output orientation was found to be limited mainly to pitch accurate singing, which is achieved surprisingly quickly and well. Other potentials of the method are – partly consciously, partly unconsciously – neglected by the interviewed teachers. While all of them introduce solfège to the children as early as possible in order to reach a *habituation effect* before the phase of decreasing motivation, they deal differently with the beginning of this phase: some just avoid solfège from third grade on, while others prepare extraordinarily well for their lessons with third and fourth graders or also include letter notation and instruments in their solfège practice.

Keywords

Solfège – movable-Do – primary school – general music education – Grounded Theory – ethnography

Introduction and state of research

In today's German public schools, solfège is not very common. It has, however, become slightly more popular in the last 20 years, along with the increasing establishment of choir classes (Fuchs, 2013: 5), as well as with the promotion of the so-called *AMU (Aufbauender Musikunterricht)*, a didactical concept in the context of general music education (Jank, 2005; Fuchs, 2010). In Germany, the Kodály version of movable-do¹ syllables (do-re-mi ...) combined with hand signals is most common (Losert, 2011: 272). All teachers and students

¹ Other than within the fixed-do-method, the syllable *do* does here not always represent the tune *c*, but always refers to the first degree of the major scale.

interviewed for our studies use solfège in this way; therefore, this is the meaning of the term as used in this paper.

Previous research on solfège in Germany follows a historical-systematical approach (e.g. Losert, 2011; Phleps, 2001); we have not been able to find any empirical research. Even empirical studies accompanying singing projects using solfège (e.g. Spychiger & Aktas, 2015; Gütay, 2012; Forge & Gembris, 2012) have paid no attention to the solfège approach.

However, there are several Anglo-American empirical studies (e.g. Antinone, 2000; Amkraut, 2004; McClung, 2008; Hung, 2012), some even focusing on primary schools (Reilfinger, 2012; Holmes, 2009; Martin 1991). Most of these papers are based on quantitative analysis of intervention studies investigating the effects of pattern training with movable-do on students' sight singing competence. As a synopsis of the papers mentioned, one can state that pattern training with movable-do has a significant positive effect on the sight singing competences. This has been found in comparison of pre- and post-tests as well as in comparison with control groups without treatment. However, other ways of pattern training within other experimental groups, e.g. using the fixed-do-approach, letter signature or a neutral syllable have widely proved to be as effective.

Only rarely have the sight-singing tests been accompanied by brief interview questions for the participating teachers or students. Teachers reported, for example, that their second graders were excited by the approach and especially "enjoyed playing decoding games, creating new patterns and writing tonal patterns" (Holmes, 2009: 118) in the 10 weeks of training.

Desideratum I

As illustrated above, little is known about the practice of solfège in primary school classrooms. This is even true for the US, since the reported intervention studies do not examine everyday school practice; moreover, they mainly measure objective test data, while data on the perspectives of the children and teachers involved are rare. In addition, the American focus on sight singing skills seems odd in the context of German primary music, where conventional sight singing skills are usually not addressed.² The perspective on the use of solfège in German primary school evokes the following questions: What are the aims of German music primary teachers using movable-do solfège? How do they embed solfège in their general music classes? How have they made themselves familiar with the method? What do they think about movable-do solfège and its effectiveness? How do they perceive the children's involvement? And how do the children make sense of the method, how do they enjoy working with it, what do they use it for?

Such questions as these led Koblenz master student Susanne Becker to conduct an interview study with primary music teachers using movable-do, and Koblenz master student Julia Steffens to conduct an interview study with children who have experienced the method in their primary music classes.

² Fuchs (2013) mainly names tonal audiation and singing skills (in terms of pitch accuracy) as benefits of movable-do in primary schools.

Methods: Searching for Grounded Theories

The above-mentioned master students' theses (projects 1 and 2) were conducted independently of each other. It was their supervisor Lina Oravec who subsequently initialized a triangulation of both teachers' and children's data in a new analysis (project 3). While all three studies deal with different research questions, they follow a common research approach, aiming to develop Grounded Theory from the data.

Even if Grounded Theory fathers Glaser and Strauss (1967) did not use the expression themselves, the process of constructing a Grounded Theory from data involves 'abduction', a way of reasoning as described by Peirce (Peirce 1997; Reichertz 2010): A surprising fact is found in the data, and abduction can be seen as the act of forming a new explanatory hypothesis that can then again deductively be tested with the existing data and further data collection. Therefore, in all three projects, in the iterative process of open, axial and selective coding, our attention was drawn to all surprising phenomena.

In this way we encountered a phenomenon we called *students' decreasing motivation to practice solfège* in the triangulation study (3) that we will focus on in this paper. This phenomenon caught our attention because we found several inconsistencies associated with it, one of them being which age teachers considered ideal for learning solfège. As the interviewed teachers described their different actions in dealing with this phenomenon, we could apply the coding paradigm of Strauss and Corbin (1990) that focuses on the analysis of (inter-)actions. The paradigm helped us find explanations for the phenomenon and inconsistencies linked with it by analyzing its context, conditions, teachers' actions in dealing with it, and the consequences of such actions.

At the same time, we were "reading for ideas" to become "theoretically sensitive" in analyzing the data (Glaser 1978: 32). In all three Grounded Theory studies that have already been conducted, there are existing concepts in the theoretical literature that helped us name, sort and sometimes also further explain the data. In this short paper, however, we will not be able to report on this. The following brief introduction of our three conducted Grounded Theory studies will instead focus on the *puzzle(s)* that emerged in the data.

The master students' projects (1 and 2)

Susanne Becker interviewed five primary school music teachers and one secondary school teacher as a contrast case. Surprising results in her analysis were (a) how effective the teachers described movable-do for the enhancement of children's pitch accuracy when singing, even if only using the three syllables So, Mi and La; (b) how differently the teachers continued with, or even broke up their solfège practice, after these common introductory games with three syllables. The latter phenomenon was coded with the core category '*eigenes didaktisches Süppchen*'.³

Julia Steffens interviewed 14 (partly former) primary school students who had experienced solfège practice: group interviews were conducted with both third graders and young secondary school students looking back on their solfège practice at primary school. Theoretical sampling also led to interviews with two young adults. Keeping in mind that some

³ Idiomatic for 'everybody (didactically) doing their own thing'.

didactical literature describes solfège as a helpful all-round tool (Heygster & Grunenberg, 2009: 9), it was surprising how little the interviewed students used their solfège knowledge. Even those who described their solfège experience as helpful at secondary school still would not recommend it to their classmates. Learning *sofège as a mother tongue* was the core category elaborated in this project, referring to the conditions for successful work with solfège in primary schools: solfège should be embedded in children's school lives as early as possible, before they learn the regular musical scale using letter notation. Furthermore, solfège should be promoted by a motivating, competent teacher and be present in more contexts than in just the general music classroom.

The meta-analysis project (3)

The *students' decreasing motivation to practice solfège* had played a role in both master studies, but it was not until the common meta-analysis that it became the central phenomenon of our analysis. It was striking how, in both teachers' and children's interviews, the children's enthusiasm to learn solfège described by Holmes (2009: 118) was confirmed, but at the same time teachers and children also talked about children's rejection of the method as "not cool", "boring" and "childish"⁴. The second inconsistency concerning our central phenomenon has already been stated: Secondary students who greatly profited from their solfège experience would still not recommend the method to their classmates. The third inconsistency was found in the stated moment that this rejection phenomenon starts to become relevant: While the interviewed primary school teachers largely agreed that even third graders were – due to their higher age – no longer easily capable of acquiring solfège, the interviewed secondary school teacher even saw fifth graders as the perfect age for solfège – other than six graders.

We will now briefly introduce the Grounded Theory we developed around the phenomenon of the *students' decreasing motivation to practice solfège* following along the categories of the coding paradigm (see figure 1).

The coding paradigm asks for a reflection on the *context* of a phenomenon and helped us realize that the obvious context of our research project, the primary music classroom, is not the only context relevant to our phenomenon. The primary classroom is embedded in a world where solfège ("die Solmisationstonleiter") is not very common, while "the regular scale" ("die richtige Tonleiter") using the letter signature is the conventional one. In their *action strategies* to handle the decreasing motivation, the teachers take this into account by introducing solfège as early as possible, hopefully before the children become acquainted with the regular scale. For those children who have instrumental tuition outside school, they might also involve letter notation as well as musical instruments into the solfège practice for keeping them motivated. While some of the teachers decide not to continue with solfège when children become less interested in grade three, one teacher stated that she prepares extensively for these lessons and trains solfège very well in order to keep the children impressed and motivated. This corresponds with the results of the student interviews,

⁴The interviews were conducted in German; therefore, exact citation is only possible in German, while any translation already involves some interpretation. For this reason, we decided to use direct interview citation in this article only rarely and instead give preference to paraphrase. However, in order to offer the reader at least some feeling for the original interviews, we will at least quote some of the in vivo codes or occasionally some short passages in English in cases where a quite transparent translation is possible. In other cases, we quote solely in German. For more (German) quotes see also Oravec, Steffens (2021); Oravec (2021).

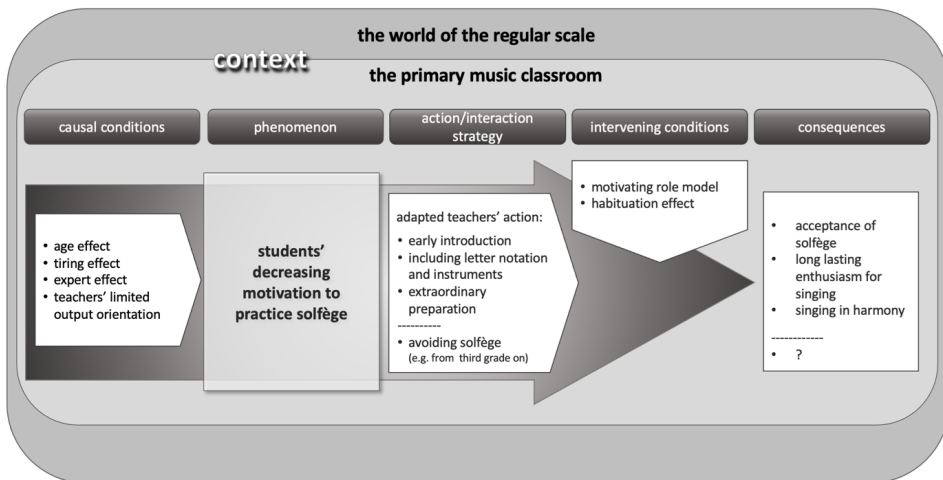


Figure 1: Grounded Theory Coding paradigm (Strauss & Corbin 1990) used to enlighten the phenomenon of students' decreasing motivation to practice solfège

revealing the great impact of a teacher who is regarded as a competent and motivating role model for students' motivation. This *intervening condition*, as well as a habituation effect of regular solfège practice from an early age, fosters ongoing acceptance of solfège as one important *consequence* of the teachers' actions. This is stated by both teachers and students. The same applies to further merits: children's everlasting enthusiasm for singing and being able easily to sing in harmony with fourth graders. Interestingly, none of the interviewees mentions any negative consequences of the teachers' strategy simply to avoid solfège from third grade on in reaction to students' decreasing motivation.

Which reasons for the decreasing students' motivation could be detected, what are the *causal conditions* of our central phenomenon? Our data suggest that solfège combined with hand signs has a bewildering effect even on first graders when first confronted with it. Student Peter states:

"At the beginning I thought: Oh no, what is that supposed to be? But then it was actually becoming fun, the better we learned it."

The interviewed elementary school teachers take it as an "age effect" that this bewilderment is no longer as easily overcome by third graders, who are just growing "too cool" for solfège. An age effect could, as our data imply, also be connected to the fact that the regular music scale becomes increasingly familiar among children the older they get. Accordingly, the solfège scale might seem more and more "childish". The interviewed secondary school teacher, however, also assumed an age-unrelated "tiring effect" after some time of working with the method. This idea corresponds partly with some of the students' statements that solfège, after a while and once they are familiar with it, just seems like a "waste of time". We call this an 'expert effect'.

All the reasons named so far have been stated by at least one of the interviewees. However, we did identify one more reason, closely connected to the students' *expert effect* hidden in the data, which we call *teachers' limited output orientation*: As already described in study 1, it was remarkable how strongly the teachers' ways of using solfège differ, after having started with similar imitative singing games with the syllables la, so, mi. For example, one teacher uses solfège in the wind ensemble to allow the transposing instruments to find the same pitch; another uses it for singing jazz chords; two use it in German lessons to train words; several use it to prepare new songs with the children. Analyzing how the interviewed teachers talked about these different occasions for solfège, we noticed it was only when connected to pitch accurate singing that the teachers actually named the students' competencies they aim to enhance (e.g. "Die Kinder lernen, sauber zu singen, wenn man das lange genug und konsequent genug macht."). In other situations, the teachers apparently use solfège pretty much just because it can be used there (e.g. in German lessons). They also talk about various other great possibilities of the method, such as a music theoretical understanding, sight singing or composition skills, but rather not connected to their own teaching. Sometimes, the apparent neglect of potential of the method seems to be unconscious. On other occasions, however, teachers even state explicitly that they do not aim to enhance the students' competencies in terms of sight singing or music theory. Some do not even care "if they can use the hand signs correctly, that's really not important". Even though the interviewed teachers generally state the solfège method has great potential for the development of musical competencies in many areas, we can conclude that the teachers' output orientation in teaching solfège is basically limited to well-pitched and motivated singing. This could explain why the students feel like experts and after a while become bored.

The Grounded Theory introduced here would now actually have to be tested again based on further data collection following theoretical sampling strategies in order to reach "theoretical saturation" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 143). Since our meta study (3) did not involve data collection, our theory must be regarded as very provisional. Then again, the results of qualitative empirical research are never final: "The published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory" (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 40).

Desideratum II and possible prospect dissertation project (4)

Such a "pause" in Julia Steffens' "process of generating theory" on solfège practice in schools has clearly been marked by her 1.5 years of practical teacher training, having started in August 2021. Therefore, it is not yet certain whether there will be a follow-up research project. Nevertheless, there is still much to find out about solfège in German schools: first of all, our data have mainly been limited to primary schools, but there is reason to widen the research field, especially because there are many choir classes in grades 5 and 6 using solfège. Furthermore, all our analyses so far have been based on interview data, considering solely teachers' and students' points of view. Based on interview data, we could focus mainly on phenomena that are conscious to the participants, being interviewed aside from their everyday school practice – even if we already assumed explanations hidden in the interview data, such as the teachers' limited output orientation. Steffens' potential dissertation project on solfège practice in schools would expand this view by using ethnographic methods such as participant observation and informal interviews, asking: What is happening in solfège

classes and their environments? The sound of common singing or instrumental playing, the writing on the blackboard, gestures, the expressions on faces, interactions with parents, audience, etc. can all be taken into account as well.

Steffens' project has been inspired by Blanchard's ethnographical study on hegemony in the music class (2019) that regards the general music class room as culture. Analogously, Steffens regards solfège classrooms as 'cultures' that can be researched and described, being aware that with the description of a culture, this culture becomes manifest only within the description itself (see Blanchard 2019: 144). Following Blanchard, within the ethnographical approach there is a higher sensitivity than within the Grounded Theory approach towards the fact that already the collected data must be regarded as constructed (Blanchard, p. 165f). Blanchard emphasizes the 'alienation of ones' own culture' as an important condition for his reflexive research on the music class, especially for him as an experienced music teacher (p. 119). In case of the research project on solfège school cultures, this alienation might not be too difficult because the researcher actually comes from outside this culture. Our common research project (3) shows there is an inner and an outer context of solfège in schools: the primary music classroom vs. *the world of the regular scale*. Coming from the world of the regular scale as a researcher might help one to behave like a "professional stranger" in the field (Agar 1996).

Ethnographic research is often found to be less clearly structured and planned than other types of empirical approaches. Even if Grounded Theory and ethnography are different approaches, they can work hand in hand, as Blanchard has shown. The reflective researcher is a very important factor for both approaches. In line with the three research projects introduced in this article, the outlined possible future dissertation project also aims at a Grounded Theory on the culture of solfège in schools, explaining something hitherto unanticipated in the data.

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