Action Research as a method in researching community music

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1. Introduction

Little has been published on Action Research (AR) in Germany in recent years (von Unger et al. 2007), where this research method is historically not as established and recognised as it is, for example, in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian context. In the German context, AR "always had and still has a very weak position" (Fricke 2011:249). But internationally, participatory and action-based research methods are an established part of qualitative research, which becomes clear when one looks at the wealth of current English-language textbooks and research guides on Action Research (e.g. Herr/Anderson 2005; Reason/Bradbury 2013). This is contrasted by a different development of these methods in the German context, resulting in a generally critical attitude towards them, as described by Burkhard Hill (2013). A recent paper on teacher-practitioner research in music education (Buchborn/Malmberg 2013) and the critical response to it (Niessen et al. 2014) exemplifies this situation.

Through this article, I would like to enable a deeper understanding of AR, which takes into account these international perspectives. I will examine in what way AR is an appropriate research method for certain research questions in music education, specifically in community music. To further the development of music education research in Germany, I believe there is a need to include research methods that have been accepted internationally as part of the qualitative methods spectrum (for example AR and arts based research methods).

In the following, I will introduce and analyse AR as a research method in community music, using examples from the Munich Community Music Action Research Group (MCMARG), which I facilitate as part of a research project on developing community music in Munich. I will start by defining community music (Chapter 1) and introducing AR as a research method (Chapter 2), followed by a brief look at the research questions that guided my study. Then I will describe the research context and exemplify the research process of AR through the example of the MCMARG (Chapter 3). Finally, I will reflect on the challenges and benefits of AR as a research method in community music (Chapter 4) and offer some final conclusions

(Chapter 5).

1.1 Introduction to community music

Since community music is a relatively unknown term in Germany, I would like to offer the reader a brief introduction and definition.

Community music could be described, in some forms, simply as participatory music making. But Lee Higgins (2012:3) suggests three perspectives on community music: "(1)music of a community", for example Samba in Brazil or Jodeln in Bavaria; "(2)Communal music making", for example house music, and; "(3)an active intervention between a music leader or facilitator and participants". Music making in the third perspective is always based on some key characteristics: a commitment to accessibility; sensitivity to context; equal opportunities; active participation; diversity, inclusion and democracy. My main focus lies within this third perspective.

In the UK, community music has developed from its roots in the British community arts movement in the 1960s (Everitt 1997; Joss 2010; Kelly/Killing 1984; McKay/Higham 2011) into an international field of practice and research. It has been part of the International Society of Music Education (ISME) since 1982 through the Community Music Activity Commission, which fosters research and practice internationally.

Education work of orchestras (Mertens 2012; Wimmer 2010), music therapy (Aigen 2012; Higgins 2014), applied ethnomusicology (Pettan 2010; Post 2006) and community cultural development (Goldbard 2006) are all areas intersecting with community music (Higgins 2012). Kraemer (Kraemer 2007) distinguishes six areas of music education in Germany. When based on the key characteristics described above, community music can take place in all of these: music education in early years; in schools; in instrumental education; in adult education; in special needs, and; in social work. In Germany the term *community music* isn't used much (yet). It does however resonate with principles that are promoted as part of social work (Hill 2004) and arts education. In the role of a 'boundary walker', community musicians move in, in-between and outside of the areas listed above (Higgins 2006). As Wayne Bowman (Bowman 2012) suggests, it is education "through music" and not just "in music".

2 Action Research (AR)

In this section I will provide an introduction to AR: its origins, the research process, and the positionality of the researcher.

2.1 Origins of AR

AR is a family of practices with broad origins. The term AR was coined by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s in the United States while he was a professor at MIT. In his essay 'Action Research and Minority Problems' Lewin describes AR as "research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action". He writes that AR was in no respect less scientific "or 'lower' than what would be required for pure science in the field of social events. I am inclined to hold the opposite to be true" (Lewin

1946:35). Lewin's work was applied in Organisational Development. Other origins of AR include Paolo Freire's liberationist perspective, the teachers-as-researchers movement in England in the 1960s (Elliott 1991:3), and community development. The philosophy of AR is also reflected in liberal humanism, pragmatism, phenomenology, critical theory, systems thinking and social construction (Reason/Bradbury 2013:3).

There are multiple AR traditions, but Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the tradition with which my research is most closely aligned. With its emphasis on participation and action when researching in communities, PAR (Fals-Borda 1987) builds on the work of Paolo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 1970). It is probably the branch of AR closest in spirit to community music, due to its goals of "emancipation, empowerment, participatory democracy, the illumination of social problems, capacity building within the community involved in the research" (Grant et al. 2013:590), and its approach– that everyone participating in the research process does so as a co-researcher.

2.2 The research process

AR is a cyclical process of action and reflection, which integrates knowing and acting, characterized by participation of and collaboration with the co-researchers. AR is therefore a way of integrating "theory and practice, scholarship and activism (…) and numerous perspectives (…) tied to the particular context, place, time, and life history of each person." (Wicks et al. 2013:16). This resonates with the principles of community music listed above, for example in its emphasis on social change, context and participation. Bridget Somekh (2006) developed eight methodological principles that underlie AR. In her view, AR:

> "Integrates research and action in a series of flexible cycles; is conducted by a collaborative partnership of participants and researchers; involves the development of knowledge and understanding of a unique kind; starts from a vision of social transformation and aspirations for greater social justice for all; involves a high level of reflexivity; involves exploratory engagement with a wide range of existing knowledge; engenders powerful learning for participants; locates the inquiry in an understanding of broader historical, political and ideological contexts." (Somekh 2006: 6–8)

Points two (collaboration), four (social transformation and social justice), five (reflexivity), seven (powerful learning) and eight (context specificity) in particular resonate with community music.

In this article, I chose not to follow the format of separating the research stages that the other articles in this book applied. This is because in AR, the processes (for example data collection, analysis, interpretation and introduction of action strategies) don't happen in the clear order often found in other research methods but often happen in several cycles "Holistically rather than in separate steps (…) until a decision is taken to intervene in this process in order to publish its outcomes to date" (Somekh 2006: 6). In a paper reviewing AR in music education, Tim Cain also writes that "the research stages in AR often occur more or less simultaneously, with distinctions between them being blurred" (Cain 2008:286).

2.3 Positionalities in AR

AR challenges the traditional notion of the role of the researcher as an objective outsider. It sees the researcher as part of the research process, acknowledging their ability and role to actively influence the process through the research: "AR involves intervention not only as a main feature during the data collection, but as an explicit goal of the research" (Bresler 1995:16). For this reason it is paramount to reflect openly the role and positionality one has as a researcher in an AR process. To support this, Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson provide a useful "Continuum of Positionality" (Herr/Anderson 2005:31), describing six positionalities. These range from insider to outsider, based in different research traditions, validity criteria and resulting in different contributions. For the sake of brevity I cannot examine all positionalities in depth here, but I will provide a summary and place my research in this continuum.

The continuum starts with "the insider" (a researcher who studies their own self/practice) as often applied in the field of education by teachers researching their own practice (Whitehead/McNiff 2006). The second position is the insider in collaboration with other insiders, third are insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s) and fourth is a reciprocal collaboration (insider-outsider teams). Herr and Anderson's fifth position: "outsider in collaboration with insiders" is often held by non-governmental organisations in developing countries to develop issues on a grass-roots level through Participatory Action Research (PAR). This positionality is linked to the work of Paolo Freire, which I mentioned in the previous section. Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin see the processes of AR as consistent with Freire's concept of 'conscientization': "The inquiry process has to aim at the solution of problems important to the local participants, and the knowledge produced by the inquiry process must increase participants' control over their own situation" (Greenwood/Levin 1998:77). The sixth (and last) position is the "outsider who studies insiders", which stands in the tradition of university-based AR projects.

In AR, it is key to reflect on one's often multiple positionalities. Being part of the research for my dissertation, this project is based in the fifth and sixth position, aiming to contribute to: "the creation of knowledge" by collaboratively researching community music in Munich; "improved/critiqued practice" by individually and collaboratively analysing and reflecting on community music practice in Munich; and; "organisational development/transformation" by collaboratively (and in our own organisations) developing community music in Munich (Herr/Anderson 2005:31). I am also connected to the second positionality (an insider in collaboration with other insiders) firstly because I grew up in Munich and I participated in many community music projects as a child and teenager, for example in the Freie Musikzentrum (FMZ), which is participating in the MCMARG. Secondly, I worked as a community musician myself for over ten years, mostly in the UK but also in Munich.

In the following section I will exemplify parts of the research processes (data collection, analysis and dissemination of results) with the example of the Munich Community Music Action Research Group.

3 The Munich Community Music Action Research Group (MCMARG)

The MCMARG is part of a larger study on developing community music in Munich and the focus of my PhD in Music Education at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München, supervised by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Mastnak.

3.1 Research context

Munich is the capital city of Bavaria, a German state located just north of the Alps. Munich is home to 1.47 Million people. It has the lowest crime rate (Landeshaupstadt München 2014) and unemployment rates of any German city of over one million people (Stadt Stuttgart 2014). It is home to the headquarters of multinational companies including Siemens, Allianz and BMW. These are only a few examples to show that Munich is and has been a prosperous city for a long time (Wheatley 2010). This context has an impact on the cultural life of the city. In Munich high art is very dominant, and in music this is evidenced by the opera house and the rich variety of orchestras. Traditional forms of teaching western classical music (for example in the large, heavily oversubscribed Munich Music School serving about 9000 pupils) and performing are historically very established in the dominant middle class and well organized in highly developed national associations. Munich city council has an established history of supporting arts education. Community play and dance are well-developed fields of practice. However, participatory music-making or community music remains an under-developed area in terms of engaging with the community and structural development. A representative of the Department of Arts Education of the City of Munich (Kulturreferat/Abteilung Kulturelle Bildung) is participating in the MCMARG, having recognized that there is a need to develop community music in Munich.

The two research questions that arose out of this context were: what and how can the concept of community music contribute to the development of music education, specifically participatory music making or community music in Munich? How can community music be developed? The following quote aptly describes what the MCMARG aims to do by collectively examining the international concept of community music and applying it to the local context in Munich:

"Meanings created in one context are examined for their credibility in another situation through a conscious reflection (...). They are moved from the context where the understanding was created through a collaborative analysis of the situation where this knowledge might be applied." (Greenwood/Levin 1998:85)

3.2 The Pilot Phase

I learnt more about the context I just described during the pilot phase. From September 2012 until October 2013 I started getting to know community music practice, organisations and practitioners in Munich. This was achieved through one focus group meeting, and observations of projects, training sessions, meetings, conferences, and performances. I also conducted a first wave of nineteen semi-structured expert interviews. The criteria for selecting my interview partners were that they were Munich based and their practice or organisation had intersections with community music. My aim was to understand the field, to build relationships with practitioners, to learn about their practice, and to hear their thoughts on community music in Munich. I listened "intently to community concerns and issues that will be addressed through the AR" (Anderson/Herr 2005:83) and, based on this, refined my understanding of the field. As part of the analysis of the interviews, I clustered re-occurring themes: community music practitioners work in isolation because there is no network in this field; there is little knowledge about each other's practice; they want

more exchange with other practitioners, and; the concept of community music resonated with them. Interviews and conversations with the officer for arts education at the City Council Munich, Kitty von Korff, confirmed this need by telling me that community music is the most underrepresented art form of arts education in Munich. According to her:

> "There is a lack of funding, provision and access to music making activities for socially disadvantaged groups. The field of music education is very institutionalised and happens mainly in formal music education and the highly funded music schools. There is a lack of access to: rehearsal spaces, performance opportunities, funding for free-of-charge music making opportunities, especially for people who have limited financial opportunities." (Von Korff 2014)

The participants' discussions in a workshop on community music in July 2014, run by Phil Mullen for the Arts Council Munich, confirmed the practitioners' needs, visions and resonance with community music that I had identified in the pilot interviews. From May to September 2014 I undertook a second wave of semi-structured interviews with a further 10 interview partners to compare the results with the first wave of interviews. I chose my interview partners, as before, because their practice had intersections with community music and they were based in Munich. Analysing the interviews by clustering the re-occurring themes confirmed my previous findings again.

I responded to the findings of the first wave of interviews by initiating the MCMARG. The aim was to fulfil the need for exchange expressed by practitioners in the interviews and to give the participants the desired space to develop a network, their practice and thinking collectively. AR seemed the research method most closely matched to these needs: "AR does not start from a desire of changing others 'out there', although it might eventually have that result, rather it starts from an orientation of change with others" (Reason/Bradbury 2013:1).

3.3 The Members of the MCMARG

The group currently consists of eleven participants representing administration, practice and research: three professors (one social work professor with a focus on music; one music education/music therapy professor and one professor who leads an organization which develops music projects with children and contemporary music); two members of the local and regional administration (one from the Department of Arts Education of the City of Munich who is also a trained artist and the officer for popular music of the district government of upper Bavaria who is also a trained musician); three community musicians/musicians (one Jazz musician/composer/member of the board of a music organization focusing on world music, one musician who leads a community music band, one community musician from a social work background); the director of education of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra; one director of a community arts organization doing projects with young people involving all art forms; me (I studied community music in England, then worked there for 10 years as a community musician and went back to my hometown Munich two years ago to study for my PhD. My role in the group is to participate, to document and facilitate the processes and to analyse them collaboratively with the group members).

The criteria for inviting the participants were an expressed interest: in the pilot interviews; to participate in the group; to collaboratively develop community music in Munich, and; a focus in their practice or research with links and overlaps to community music.
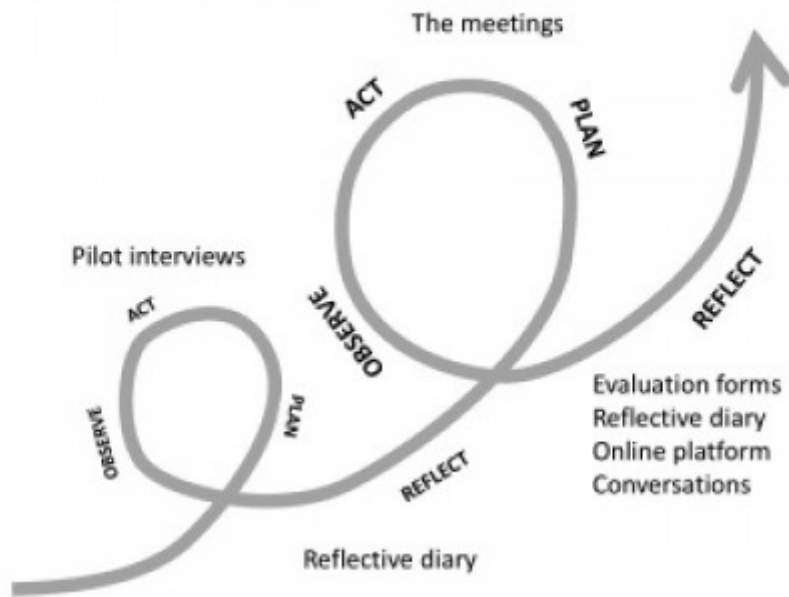
3.4 Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis is on-going and started at the outset of the project. Each meeting of the MCMARG followed the action research cycle: the group planned the meetings in collaboration, reflected together afterwards and developed the next meeting based on these reflections. I supported this by transcribing the audio recordings; identifying key themes to develop in the next meeting, based on the members' interests; developing a schedule for the next meeting, emailing it to all participants for member checking and feedback, and; organising the next group meeting based on the feedback. After each meeting I analysed the evaluation forms the group filled in after each meeting. Between meetings I enabled online collaboration for in-depth work on certain topics and had conversations with the members, reflecting on the process. To support my personal reflection process I kept a reflective diary. To document the process I collected and recorded email conversations, phone calls, informal meetings and conversations. Aiming to increase data validity, I have meetings with critical friends to reflect on data and the research process.

The graphic (1st Graphic) shows how the overall cyclical process of AR was applied in the MCMARG. The "research design in AR is evolutionary rather than specified beforehand in a research protocol" (Jupp 2006: 3).

- I started with the pilot phase, and the results showed non-existing exchange between community musicians; no terminology for the practice 'community music'; no connection to the international discourse of community music.
- This resulted in the 1st intervention: the invitation to participate in the MCMARG. I documented and facilitated the meeting.
- Reflection based on the documentation, evaluation forms and reflective conversations with the members. Based on these the next meeting was collaboratively planned.
- This resulted in the 2nd intervention: a meeting of the group to develop a German context specific definition of community music. Again I documented and facilitated the meeting.
- This cyclical process continued with further four meetings (in May, July, November, December 2014).

The Action Research Cycle

The meetings

ACT   PLAN

Pilot interviews

ACT

OBSERVE

OBSERVE   PLAN

REFLECT

Evaluation forms
Reflective diary
Online platform
Conversations

REFLECT

Reflective diary

The Action Research cycle

3.5 Summary of the meetings

During the meetings a lot of processes took place. The group had many positive conversations and reflections but also, as in all group processes, some difficult moments.

1st meeting 24th of October 2013, focus: who are we and what do we want?

After introductions and getting to know each other, the group decided on the format for future meetings: a theme to focus the discussion; each meeting should take place in a different location to get to know each other's workspaces, always hosted by an arts organization that is part of the group; a moderator should focus and lead the discussions.

2nd meeting 6th of February 2014, focus: definition of community music in Munich

This meeting focused on the development of a shared context-specific definition of community music in Munich in the German language, based on existing international definitions, applying them to local issues,

and finding appropriate German terms. We continued working on this definition after the meeting, using an online tool that enabled everyone to work on the document collaboratively.

3rd meeting 6th of May 2014, focus: what needs to change?

The focus of the meeting was on identifying areas requiring development in community music in Munich. We identified areas of change and used the nine domains of community music as developed by Huib Schippers and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2013) to categorise our thoughts.

4th meeting 24th of July 2014, focus: community music and policy in Munich

This meeting was hosted by the officer for popular music of the district government of upper Bavaria (Popularmusikbeauftragter des Bezirks Oberbayern) and focused on community music in policy. The two policy/arts administration representatives of the group presented their funding practice to the group and related this to community music. The members of the group responded with inputs on funding practice and collaboration with the funding bodies.

3.6 Summary of developments

In this section I will give some examples of the developments that were triggered by the work of the MCMARG: within the individual participating organisations, within the group itself and the resulting action beyond the group.

Examples of developments in the individual organisations

When I started conversations with the Department of Arts Education (Kulturreferat der Landeshauptstadt München/Abteilung Kulturelle Bildung), they repeatedly expressed how community music resonated with their perspective on music education. For this reason they are participating in the MCMARG. This resulted directly in a key event focusing on community music hosted by the Department of Arts Education: In the autumn of 2013, they decided to host round-tables in arts education. I was invited to co-host the first citywide round-table for music in Munich as a representative of the MCMARG, together with the education department of the Philharmonic Orchestra and the Youth Centre Quax. They decided that community music should be on the agenda of the meeting. At the round-table I led a workshop focusing on key words characterising community music and arts education. As part of the exercise, the participants discussed their practice in relation to these key words. I then introduced the MCMARG and community music as a concept for music in arts education. I followed up the round-table with conversations and interviews with interested practitioners and organisations.

Following the third AR-group meeting, I received a phone call from Michael Reithmeier, board member of the Freies Musikzentrum (FMZ). He wanted to meet me. We met the next day and he said he would like to know how I perceive his organisation. Did I think what they were doing was community music? He then told me that he had had a board meeting where he had instigated a discussion about the practice and role of the organisation in the community. This was based on his reflections that were triggered by the MCMARG. The FMZ was founded in the 1970s as a community music organisation with a focus on world music, with its roots in an openness to all musical cultures and all learning and teaching styles. Reithmeier strives to bring the FMZ back closer to its roots. Over the years, the FMZ has become more like a music school where pupils pay for a wide range of music lessons, professional development qualifications or workshops. As a result of participating in the group, Reithmeier wants to re-examine the role of the FMZ in the community and the ethos and vision of the organisation. He would like to develop fully accessible opportunities for music making and artistic exchange, as well as the organisation's thinking on pedagogy in music education in the spirit of community music.

Example for developments within the group

The development of a German definition of community music was a key process, because until now there has been no German definition of community music. Although it is an international concept, and I could have easily just translated, for example, the ISME definition, it was important for the group to locate the concept within German research, practice, language and context. This discussion surrounding the definition of community music has been happening for a while in the Anglo-Saxon and international context, but for this to have relevance to the German context and the reality of the participants, it was important to develop a definition in the mother tongue of the group. As part of this discussion the group talked a lot about the focus on mistakes and perfection in German music education, which reflects the emphasis on western classical music in Munich. We talked about the importance of focusing more on active music making without fear of making mistakes and access to enjoying music making for everyone. For them, this is what the concept of community music offers and a lot of traditional music education in Germany prevents. The definition the group developed includes key elements of most other established English definitions, such as participation, access, active and life-long music making. But is also includes references to German specific discourses such as community music being part of "Kulturelle Bildung" (arts education) and socio-cultural developments:

> „Der Begriff „Community Music" bezeichnet Formen des **aktiven Musizierens** in Gruppen, die **als Ausdruck einer Gemeinschaft und ihres sozialen und kulturellen Kontextes** entstehen. Diese Formen beinhalten besonders **selbstgestaltetes Musizieren**, das in soziale Strukturen (Cliquen, Nachbarschaften, soziokulturelle Zentren usw.) nachhaltig eingebettet ist. Es geht um die Wiederaneignung von Musik als soziales und ästhetisches Ereignis im Alltag.

> Die **Partizipation** der Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmer an der Gestaltung aller Aktivitäten und Produktionen ist ein wesentliches Merkmal. **Kulturelle und soziale Teilhabe** stehen als Ziele im Sinne des Empowerments gleichberechtigt neben **musischen Bildungszielen** (wie der Vermittlung von musikalischem Handwerk). Unabhängig vom sozialen, kulturellen oder

finanziellen Hintergrund sollen alle Menschen jeden Alters die Möglichkeit haben, sich durch Musik auszudrücken**.** Community Music ist daher **leicht zugänglich** und ermöglicht die **Inklusion** unterschiedlichster Menschen.

Community Music ist durch **Gleichwertigkeit aller Musikformen** und **Interdisziplinarität** gekennzeichnet. Beim Musizieren werden auch Verbindungen zu anderen künstlerischen und kreativen Ausdrucksformen gesucht, die in der Gemeinschaft gepflegt werden. Community Music als Teil von Community Arts kann sich allen künstlerischen Sparten öffnen, die ebenfalls mit ihren Methoden oben beschriebenen Grundsätzen von Selbstgestaltung und Partizipation folgen.

Der Begriff Community Music beschreibt damit auch eine politische Dimension der beschriebenen Form gemeinsamer künstlerisch-kulturpädagogischer Arbeit: Der **Einübung von demokratischen Handlungsweisen**.

Community Music kann als **Bestandteil Kultureller Bildung** gesehen werden. Kulturelle Bildung ist unverzichtbarer Teil allgemeiner Bildung**.**"

Examples of resulting action

After having worked intensely on our definition of community music and identifying areas of needed development, the group is now keen to move forward with some collaborative action beyond the group meetings. We spent a lot of time discussing ways to move forward by organising a "community music conference", interweaving theory, research and local practice. The representative of the Department of Arts Education suggested to organise a community music conference in Munich in 2015, involving the MCMARG in partnership with the Hochschule Munich, the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Munich and the Department of Arts Education. This was further developed by the whole group: to take place in 2015, with local community music groups performing, keynote speeches, panel discussions and workshops for local community musicians. We are aiming to coordinate this with a first publication focusing on community music in Germany (an idea of Prof. Burkhard Hill, another member of the group). The publication will be a collaboration with the editor of the International Journal of Community Music and director of the International Centre of Community Music, Prof. Lee Higgins, who has a strong connection to Munich through his previous work on community music there.

Next Steps

In the autumn of 2014 we will meet to: collaboratively analyse the process of the group; continue planning the community music conference, and; have more in-depth work on processes and quality in community music. In the winter of 2014 we will hold a final meeting for this phase, evaluating the process and discussing the question of sustainability to decide, as a group, on how to move forward.

3.7 Dissemination of findings

In AR there are always several audiences to whom the findings can be of interest: the co-researchers; the organisations they represent; the field of practice (in this case community music); related fields of practice (here cultural education and music education); and; the academic community (in this case community music, music and cultural education).

What is the appropriate medium for the dissemination of AR projects? Anderson and Herr write that an increasing number of AR dissertations involve a video component: "Because of the link in AR between the generation of knowledge and social change, many researchers have turned to alternative mediums for the dissemination of knowledge" (Anderson/Herr 2005:86). Richard Winter points out that the style and structure of AR reports need to be "both personal and detailed, and yet at the same time, offer general significance" (1996:26). He suggests that there is

"[a]n instructive analogy offered by feminist writers who have chosen innovative formats such as the blending of autobiographical reminiscences with interspersed passages of social history, sociology and psychoanalysis, or the weaving of varied themes and general reflections within accounts of everyday life." (Winter 1996:26)

But the audience also determines the format of dissemination. Since I am facilitating the MCMARG as part of my PhD research, the findings need to be published in an academic format and in academic contexts, for example, for paper presentations at conferences and as part of my PhD thesis. Any other components that AR reports might involve are determined by the research process and the acceptance of other formats in the research context. The key is always to ensure that research ethics are being adhered to, by securing permission from the co-researchers to publish and write about the project. It is also not uncommon to do a form of member checking prior to publication, where the understandings developed as part of the AR process are presented back to the group to incorporate their thoughts and feedback. For example, for this publication, the quoted members read and corrected my writing to ensure that it accurately reflects what they thought.

4 Strengths and challenges of Action Research

4.1 Strengths

4.1.1 AR is connected to practice

Cain sees the potential of AR in music education because: "Many publications offer advice to teachers about teaching but few are both well researched and by teachers; AR offers one way of filling this gap" (Cain 2012:423). In his book 'Community Music in Theory and Practice' (2012), Higgins points out a similar aspect when he reviews research strategies used in community music research: "My concern is that researchers or thinkers who have little or no connection to the actual practice of community music might misinterpret the practice through both writing and program development" (Higgins 2012:181). He recommends arts-based research methods. I believe that AR is a method that also allays his concerns. A key element of AR is its connection to practice, with its focus on action and its view of all research participants as co-researchers. I have shown above the participative nature of the research process of the MCMARG, and that most participants are musicians, community musicians or work in music policy and therefore they are all connected to practice.

4.1.2 Dissemination of the research results beyond academic contexts

Research results are usually disseminated within academic contexts: publications, journals and conference papers. AR publications typically reach additional non academic audiences: the co-researchers; the organisations they represent, and; the other interested parties in the field (I discussed this in more detail in chapter 3.7).

4.1.3 AR creates knowledge that bridges scholarship and practice

Prof. Pat Thomson, co-editor of the peer-reviewed journal "Educational Action Research" said in an interview that as a journal "we assert and support the rights and responsibilities of professionals to be engaged as active knowledge producers" (Thomson 2011). On a similar note Fricke (2011:259) criticises the distinct separation of methodological and theoretical, practical and theoretical knowledge as a simplification. He writes that in AR: "all kinds of knowledge (practical, methodological and theoretical) amalgamate. In AR action and research, action and knowledge and different kinds of knowledge are integrated" (Fricke 2011:260). For example, in the MCMARG we have explored theories and definitions of community music collaboratively, related them back to our practice and, based on this, developed a first German definition of community music.

4.1.4 AR affects change

A final core strength of AR is that the research process in itself is educative, aiming to change and transform practice. Liora Bresler supports this when she writes that: "The significance of AR is tied to its ability to produce an enhanced understanding leading to an improvement in classroom practice" (1995:26). In his article 'Critical Theory and Praxis: Professionalising Music Education' Thomas Regelski (1998) sees AR as a way of developing critical teaching and professionalising music education through teaching as action research. I believe this notion can be extended to the practice of community music in Germany, where there is strong variation in terms of quality and development of community music, but no training or qualification system in place. However it is important to clarify that in the case of the MCMARG, the AR process is not an attempt to professionalise practitioners. Rather, it was initiated as a first step towards a moderated exchange and development process resulting in the formation of a network. Through this network, members were able to affirm their own practice, to develop quality criteria for their community music work, to locate their work in a field between social work, formal music education and music therapy and to raise the profile of their work through collaborative action: the community music conference and publication.

4.2 Challenges

4.2.1 Producing trustworthy new knowledge

Cain (2012) critiques many AR studies for using an inappropriate paradigm for the type of research they pursue, resulting in a failure to produce trustworthy new knowledge. For example, Bresler (1995) locates AR within the interpretive paradigm and explores it alongside ethnography and phenomenology. However, Cain argues that the positivist, interpretive and critical paradigms are inappropriate for music teachers' AR. He suggests the participatory paradigm as the best suited. In another article, Cain provides a critical review of the use of AR in music education research. His key recommendations for the improvement of AR are that researchers need to: "(…) develop their understanding of AR, take a more focused use of research literature and a defensible position with regard to data analysis and the generation of trustworthy findings" (Cain 2008:311). The literature I reviewed leads me to the conclusion that to address this challenge and make a solid contribution with an AR project, one needs to apply the lessons learnt from previous studies. That includes situating the research in the appropriate research paradigm, building a defensible position with regard to data analysis and the generation of trustworthy findings, and taking a focused use of AR literature to support the research.

4.2.2 Researchers' bias

The bias of the researcher could be seen as a limitation of AR. "The close and collaborative relationship between researchers and researched, for example, could be seen as a source of bias because the researcher is no longer independent of the research setting" (Jupp 2006:3). There are several ways to address bias in AR: the establishment of validation meetings (which I have done regularly, reflecting on the research process and data with critical friends); building a 'critical reflexivity' into the research process (continuous self-reflexivity and acknowledgement of the perspectives and bias we bring to the research– I do this in my research journal and in reflective conversations), and; member checking of methods, data and triangulation (Anderson/Herr 2005).

4.2.3 Dependence on uncontrollable variables

Another limitation is the dependence of the process on variables that are uncontrollable by the researcher. For example: the varying levels of the participants' engagement; the dependency on external contexts, cultural policy and funding goals; insufficient resources of the participants who might already be working at full capacity in their 'day jobs' and; the repetition of discussions because of changing group members. In the MCMARG, we have been lucky so far– there has been a core group of nine people that always attended the meetings from the beginning and we could therefore
continuously develop our thinking.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced AR as a research method, shown that my research builds on an international tradition of AR in music education and how it reflects the principles of community music. I have then described what this looks like in reality, with the example of the MCMARG. I have demonstrated the collaborative and participative research process, which included practitioners, policy makers and

researchers and shared my views on the strengths and challenges of the AR process.

When I learned about AR, I felt that this was a research approach that reflected the principles that underlie community music and would enable me to continue as a researcher with the same spirit that moved me when I worked as a practitioner: seeing the experts in Munich as *partners* in my research, and not research subjects; seeing them as people who I do research *with*, and not *to;* reflecting an approach to change that drew me into becoming a community musician in the first place. Higgins describes community musicians as boundary walkers (Higgins 2006). Similarly, I believe that action researchers are walking on the boundaries between theory and practice and, when built on a methodologically solid foundation, AR is one way to bridge and further scholarship and practice in community music. Reason and Bradbury support this when they describe how AR "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people" (2013:4).

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Anmerkungen

Zitieren

Gerne dürfen Sie aus diesem Artikel zitieren. Folgende Angaben sind zusammenhängend mit dem Zitat zu nennen:

Alicia de Banffy-Hall (2015): Action Research as a method in researching community music. In: KULTURELLE BILDUNG ONLINE: https://www.kubi-online.de/artikel/action-research-as-a-method-researching-community-music (letzter Zugriff am 11.10.2021)

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