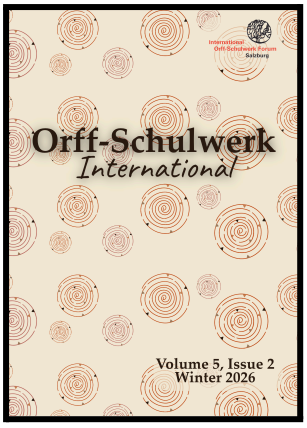
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# A story – the heart of our creative teaching using music, dance, speech and drama

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# A story – the heart of our creative teaching using music, dance, speech and drama

*Manuela Widmer*

**Introduction**

When we wish to work with speech in Elemental Music and Dance Education, the primary concern is how we can make ourselves understood by our children, young people and adults – whether younger or older. Or to put it another way: do we understand what our audience understands? Only then can we decide what kind of linguistic artwork (verse, poem, story) to select for the group in question and how we can engage with it creatively. To what extent can group members be involved in the creative process of developing a song text or a rhythmic speech game from a prose text? To what extent will teachers take the initiative themselves? In this article, the suggestions relate to childhood when examined more closely how language development goes hand in hand with cognitive development and what this means for the selection of language material.

**Sometimes we are lost for words**

Haven't we all been in a situation at some point where, in the presence of children, we were at a loss for words, where we couldn't make ourselves understood to them or didn't understand them? Do we understand what children understand? Can we grasp how they see the world, what they think about and how they feel? Do we understand the difference between our adult understanding of language and that of children? How can we improve our understanding and empathy? Finding answers to these questions will help us to select suitable texts, stories or fairy tales that appeal to children and reflect their experiences and feelings.

**Different levels of language comprehension**

We can gain a very good insight into what children understand when they try to explain something to us: from the way they describe things, we can draw conclusions about their use of language, the extent of their vocabulary and their cognitive abilities – and thus also about their ability to think in abstract terms based on concrete impressions. They present us with their knowledge, their ideas and impressions of the adult world, as well as their world view. They are generous with connections they have not yet fully grasped, and fill in the gaps imaginatively (when their knowledge is no longer sufficient), but they also readily admit: *'I'm not quite sure about that.'* The logic of their thinking is sometimes astonishing, sometimes ludicrous! Children often look for comparisons drawn from their everyday experiences. Sometimes they offer us associations that are difficult for us adults to grasp.

**The way children communicate**

If we want to involve children in a creative process that makes use of language, texts, stories and individual words, we must first ask ourselves: when we perceive language in all its forms, do we understand and communicate it in the same way as children do? Children's thoughts, feelings, intuitions, desires and understanding are reflected in what they convey to us: in their own words, through movement, gestures and facial expressions. Let us listen to them patiently and observe them closely!

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The pioneers of child language research, Clara and William Stern, wrote: 'Originally, a person's behaviour in a given situation is expressed through a holistic action of the organism, in which gestures, facial expressions and actions, together with the accompanying sounds, form an inseparable whole' (1907/1987, p. 123). This statement serves as a clear guideline for us when we work with forms of language in the classroom. It influences both our choice of texts and our methodological approach.

How, then, can we help children not only to understand the texts we offer them, but also to make them their own? When we tell a story or recite a poem, we want to give the children the opportunity, right from the start, to immerse themselves in the text with all their heart and soul. Only in this way can we foster the concentration and motivation they need to later engage with the story's content and characters through play, voice, speech, movement and dance.

To achieve this, we must change the way we think and act and try to put ourselves in the children's shoes, viewing the world of language from their perspective, so that we can then behave in such a way that they can follow us wholeheartedly.
In practical terms, this can mean: speaking freely (not just reading aloud), making eye contact, and giving the children time to understand, to react and to ask questions.
Our hands, too, can 'speak', and we should 'listen in' to every word internally before we utter it: sometimes softly, sometimes louder, sometimes loudly; sometimes slowly, sometimes wearily, sometimes explosively; sometimes cheerfully, sometimes mischievously or in horror; sometimes sadly, sometimes tearfully, sometimes jubilantly – and in a thousand other ways!

**The use of language from the perspective of fellow professionals**
Several issues of *Orff-Schulwerk-Informationen* (OSI No. 66/Summer 2001, and OSI No. 76/Winter 2006/2007) focused on the topic of 'Language in Music and Dance Education'. There I found some interesting and thought-provoking perspectives from Werner Thomas, Ernst Wieblitz, Ulrike Schrott and Christine Schönherr. Werner Thomas, a leading expert on the Orff-Schulwerk (also known as *Musica poetica*) throughout his career, writes:

> The texts of *Musica poetica* are full of vivid imagery rooted in the real world, yet at the same time pointing to an archetypal world. Flowers and trees, birds and fish, the sun and the moon, houses and paths, flames and waves, God and the devil: children are intimately familiar with all these things. They bear witness to the mysterious presence of the natural world and of creation, and they evoke timeless and spatially transcendent images in the soul. […] Images of this kind are the humus of the soul, the breeding ground of the imagination (OSI No. 66, p. 7).

Today, however, we must be open to other texts and stories from different eras – both old and new – and, of course, with an eye to many further linguistic stimuli from other cultures, as well as from the world of technology and the internet.

My colleague Ernst Wieblitz, together with his wife Christiane Wieblitz's children's choir, has staged numerous unforgettable theatre performances featuring music, dance and song. In his view, a good picture book

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> […] taking people on an inner journey and, in the process, discovering other, new external and internal worlds. Is it not the case that the essence of a person's individuality consists of countless facets – including possibilities – each of which can be developed and brought to light when touched by the right medium? (OSI No. 76, p. 21).

Children, as well as young people and adults, gather in groups at nurseries, schools and music schools to make music, dance and perform plays together. My long-standing colleague at the Orff Institute, Ulrike Schrott, has always criticised the fact that

> […] we live in a society in which music and dance have been reduced to mere school subjects'. – But she would like to invite the children to a 'joyful celebration'! – She regards picture books as 'helpful saviours' in the classroom, because '[…] they spark the imagination and lead everyone involved back to deeper contexts of meaning […] so that the original function of music and dance can be experienced once more (OSI No. 76, p. 15).

My colleague Christine Schönherr – who is responsible for the subject *Speech Education and Creative Interpretation* at the Orff Institute – emphasises the close connection between speech work and movement: 'The speaker stands behind what they say. It is the expression through body language that 'transforms speech into a whole-body act, which also opens a door to the speaker's mental and emotional expression' (OSI No. 66, p. 37). Later in her article, she also reminds us once again of one of Carl Orff's fundamental ideas (see quote in the next paragraph) when she explains: 'Speech exercises are linked to gesture, sound gestures, pantomime and dramatic expression, and, depending on the text, also to the instrument' (ibid., p. 38).

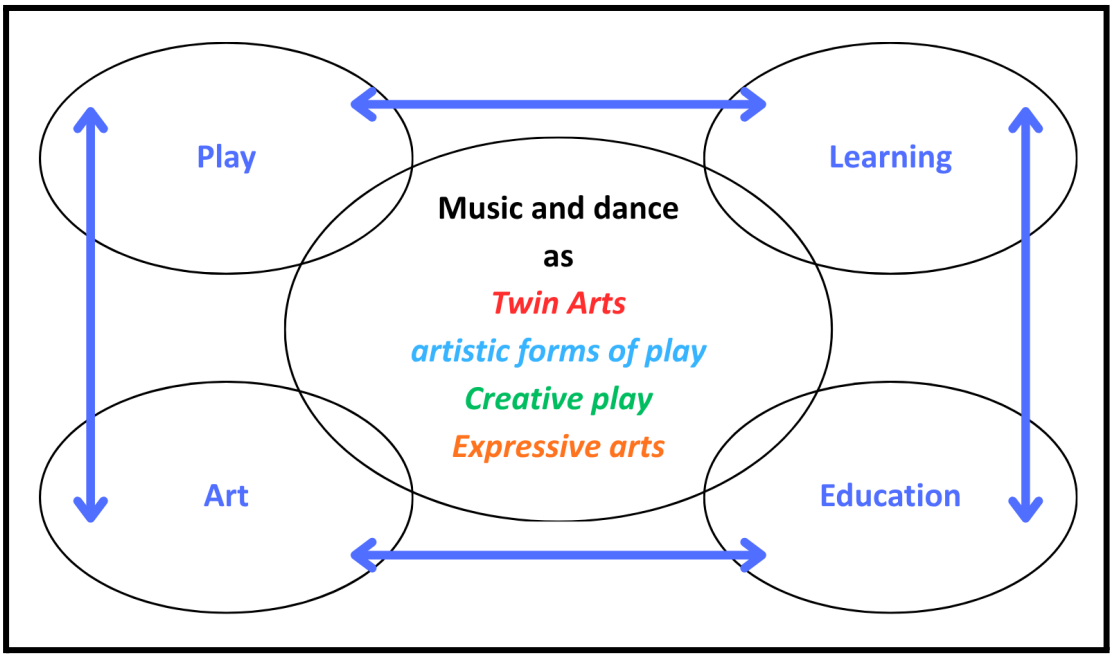
**Teaching as a work of art – a holistic approach**

Music and dance, play and learning, art and pedagogy – all these pairs are closely interlinked. Let us take a look at some classic sources. It is always worthwhile to revisit them from time to time: 'Elemental music is never music alone but forms a unity with movement, dance and speech […]' (Orff 1963/2011, p.144). Barbara Haselbach takes this line of thought further: 'Alongside the development of basic concepts of dance and music, the focus is on the child's own creative activity' (Haselbach 1971, p. 17). And Josef Derbolav, an educationalist, has reflected on the relationship between Orff's pedagogical intent and his artistic aspirations. 'Here, it is not a pedagogue who has stooped down to the child's world […] Here, a master has left his own mark without compromising his mature sensibility, certainly with pedagogical intent, but nonetheless in full accordance with the demands of the art he serves' (Derbolav 1963, p. 36). One final thought takes us even further back into the past: in 1938, Johan Huizinga wrote the following about the relationship between music, dance and play in his work on cultural anthropology *Homo Ludens – The Origin of Culture in Play*: 'Whilst everything that is called music is, in fact, constantly situated within the bounds of play, this applies to an even greater extent to its inseparable twin art, dance' (Huizinga 1938/1987, p. 180).

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That is why we also wish to examine the holistic aspect of our work—spanning music, dance, language and theatre. To summarise, I have listed all the pairs of concepts mentioned above in a table:

**Identity in essence – First-degree relatives**




**Texts under the microscope**

Let's now take a closer look at how we can select texts based on various criteria. A story can be told in a single sentence or in a verse of just four lines. And, of course, we draw on the rich repertoire of verse poetry, short stories, old and new fairy tales, and picture book stories. I prefer to work with stories from picture books, because the combination of words and pictures is particularly inspiring for our profession and our clients! A basic categorisation of the play materials helps me to search specifically for a story that suits my group and matches my own abilities and objectives. We can distinguish between simple and complex stories:

*Difficulty level 1*

Rondo games or Rondo texts: e.g. travelogues (around the world), animal stories (e.g. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*). For players aged three and over.

*Difficulty level 2*

Stories about transformations (metamorphoses) and collages of dramatic moments, e.g. stories about the seasons, the four elements, fantasy stories, some new stories and picture books (e.g. *Where the Wild Things Are*). For players aged five and over.

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*Difficulty level 3*
Stories with dramatic plotlines and more complex scene structures, e.g. most old and new fairy tales such as '*The Bremen Town Musicians*' or *'The Story of Ferdinand'*. For players aged seven and over.

Having engaged intensively with the 'picture book' genre over the last few years from the perspective of its authors, I have been able to identify an increasing number of criteria that define a good picture book. However, these criteria do not necessarily relate to the aesthetic aspects of the artistic quality of the story, its text or the accompanying illustrations, as this is often a matter of taste. It is risky and irresponsible to make universal statements here about what is good or bad. On the other hand, in my personal experience, the criteria I present below often go hand in hand with quality criteria – including aesthetic ones! However, the following rule always applies: each group leader should decide for themselves what they like, what appeals to them personally, and whether they can wholeheartedly endorse the use of a particular story in their teaching groups.

Here is a small selection of guidelines: our language materials should
- be direct and natural
- precise and relaxed
- simple and immediate
- authentic and sincere
- elegant, witty and artful
- cheerful, funny, quirky
- cheeky, quirky
- serious, thoughtful, touching.

Can the chosen text (rhyme, poem, story)
- be performed theatrically?
- be set to music?
- be danced to?
- be 'painted' with vocal sounds?
- serve as inspiration for writing your own song lyrics or speech pieces?

**Some criteria in detail**
The spoken material should be visually evocative and rich in sound. This means it should contain words or terms that can evoke strong visual and auditory associations.
On the one hand, the spoken material should describe specific situations and circumstances, but on the other hand, states of mind and objects can also be creatively expressed through dance and/or set to music. Here are a few examples:
- the cosy warmth in a comfortable room, which – visible and tangible – brings comfort to people;
- the well (represented by two children crouching and holding hands), into which something falls and which looks in and back in alarm;
- trees in a park or along an avenue, turning towards a sad king and whispering words of encouragement to him.

The language material should 'move' the group members both internally and externally; that is to say, on the one hand, it should evoke a sense of empathy and, on the other, trigger the

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desire to express oneself. The language material should be immediate and entertaining, and encourage improvisation both physically and through playing an instrument.

There is, however, one approach against which I would like to issue a specific warning: performers must never be used merely as props! If flowers, trees, houses or a garden fence are needed, these objects can be made together with the children, and the parents might help with this. In my productions, the performers only embody an object when it becomes part of the action – that is, when, as described above, it is given a human touch and 'intervenes' in the action through gestures, facial expressions and, where appropriate, words.

**Some – tried-and-tested – solutions**
Do the roles in a story offer enough scope for the different abilities, skills and wishes of my group members? I'll run into problems if I choose a story with only two or three main roles and lots of – rather insignificant – supporting roles! In any case, it's essential that the story's content matches the participants' intellectual and emotional level of development.

Here are some solutions from my own experience that have proved effective:
*'Role embellishment'*
A princess is accompanied by three ladies-in-waiting (or sisters). This also takes some of the pressure off the lead actress, as spoken lines or a song can be shared amongst a group of actresses, and acting – and perhaps even a dance – is much more fun in a small group!
*'Role doubling'*
Each animal in *The Bremen Town Musicians* is played by two children: there are two donkeys, two dogs, two cats, two roosters and as many robbers (both boys and girls) as volunteer for the role – and just like that, a whole school class is kept busy!
*"Role splitting"*

During the play, the performers in a particular role change one to three times. So there are several kings, princesses or Ferdinand the bull. This makes sense, as some of the main characters grow older as the story progresses. The role change takes place openly on stage, for example by passing the crown or the bull's horns from one performer to another.

To conclude, here is a diagram that provides a way of grasping many of the aspects of my topic at a glance (the original 'MUWOTA Tree' can be found in my book *Spring ins Spiel*, 2004, p. 10):

**The Music-Word-Dance-Drama Palm**
(© Manuela Widmer 2026/2004 – MU-WO-TA-DRA Palm)

The **roots** represent the questions and challenges we encounter when working with stories:

- Do we understand what children understand?
- What kinds of stories are there? Stories can even be contained in a single sentence!
- What criteria can help us identify suitable stories?
- Our language material should be visual language material!
- On the one hand, the text should describe specific situations…
- …on the other hand, states and objects can also be expressed creatively!

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- Are you really ready to play?

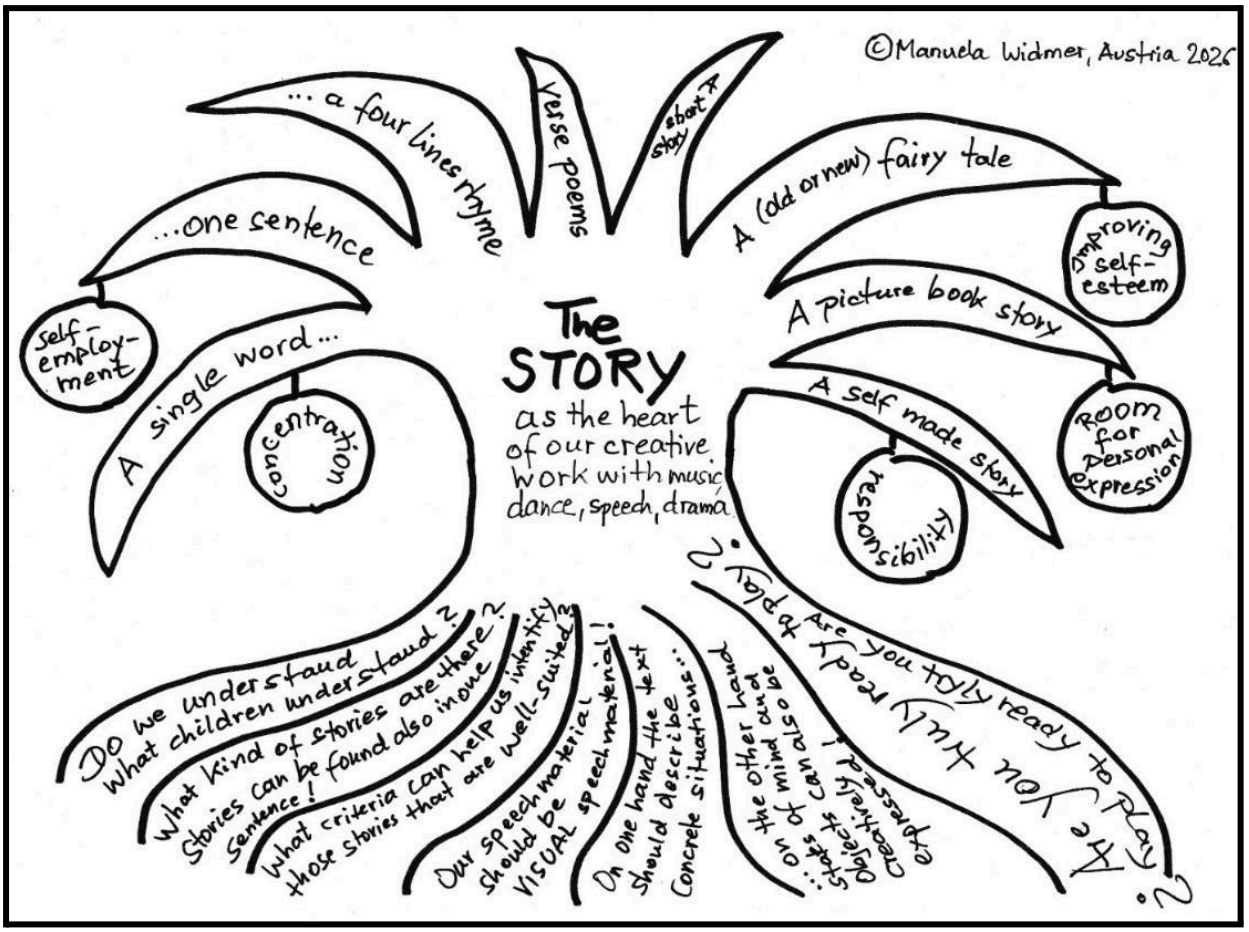
The **branches** represent the wealth of language material available to us:

- A single word
- A sentence
- A quatrain
- A stanza
- A short story
- A (traditional or modern) fairy tale
- A picture book story
- A story of their own invention.

For some, the **fruits** represent desirable educational goals which, ideally, the children can achieve through our work:

- Concentration
- Independence
- Responsibility
- Self-confidence
- Space for personal expression.

And now, all that remains is for me to encourage all readers, after careful preparation and with enthusiasm and a positive attitude, to join in the fun with their own groups – enjoy!




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For nearly 40 years, she has led teacher training courses internationally and is the author of different books and articles about Music and Dance Education. Her major interest is Elemental Music Drama and she has developed concepts and directed over a hundred productions for various groups of players worldwide.

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