

Teaching Music in K-12: An Investigation Based on Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy

MODALIDADE: COMUNICAÇÃO

SUBÁREA: Educação Musical

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Abstract. This paper presents initial results of a PhD research in progress, which aims to investigate the music teachers' senses of their teaching work in public K-12 education (Kindergarten, Elementary, Middle and High School) in the State of Paraíba (Brazil). The methodology is based on the principles of (auto)biographical research, with data collection through narrative interviews. Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy and his reflections on the meaning of life constitute the theoretical reference for the analysis of the participants' narratives. The initial results show contradictory perspectives associated with Music teaching in K-12 education. Teaching Music can be seen either as an activity that enables personal fulfillment through self-transcendence or as an occupation empty of meaning. These different meanings are related to the participants' personal educational paths and their expectations regarding professional performance in the field of Music.

Keywords. Music Teachers, Brazilian Public Schools, (Auto)Biographical Narratives, Logotherapy.

Ensinando música na educação básica: uma investigação baseada na Logoterapia de Viktor Frankl

Resumo. Este trabalho apresenta resultados iniciais de uma pesquisa de doutorado em andamento, cujo objetivo é investigar os sentidos de professores de música no trabalho docente na educação básica do estado da Paraíba. A metodologia está baseada nos princípios da pesquisa (auto)biográfica, utilizando entrevistas narrativas como instrumentos de coleta de dados. A Logoterapia de Viktor Frankl e suas reflexões sobre o sentido da vida constituem o referencial teórico para a análise das narrativas dos participantes. Os resultados iniciais mostram perspectivas contraditórias em relação ao ensino de música na educação básica. Ensinar música pode ser visto como uma atividade que possibilita uma realização pessoal através da autotranscendência ou como uma função vazia de sentido. Esses diferentes sentidos estão relacionados aos percursos de formação educativos dos participantes e suas expectativas quanto ao desenvolvimento profissional no campo da música.

Palavras-chave. Professores de música, Escolas públicas brasileiras, narrativas (auto)biográficas, Logoterapia.



Introduction

First of all, to clarify the educational context to which we refer and allow readers from different countries to understand, it is necessary to explain the organization of the educational system in Brazil, that is distinct from the one adopted in the USA. In Brazil, the school stages prior to university are included in the so-called "Basic Education" (a direct translation from Portuguese), which is equivalent to Kindergarten, Elementary, Middle and High School, or K-12 education. For the undergraduate teaching courses that certificate K-12 education teachers (equivalent to "teaching license majors" in Brazil), there are majors for each specific artistic language, including Music.¹ Although there are teaching license majors in Music, public schools of K-12 education in the region of our research do not usually offer Music classes, except occasionally as extracurricular activities – such as choirs or marching bands that encompass small groups of students.

The Brazilian educational laws are often ambiguous and imprecise regarding teacher training and the content of art classes in the K-12 (Penna, 2015, p. 130). Often, music teachers must teach visual arts, dance, and theater content at school. In this way, they become a Multi-Art teacher.

This research is based on the first author's personal experience, who has a teaching license degree in Music and acts professionally as a Multi-Art teacher in public schools of Paraíba, state of the Brazilian Northeast. In conversations with other licensed Music teachers, there are common reports that emphasize the prestige of performance and teaching instruments, while assigning little value to the work of general musical education in public schools. This perception of teaching may result from a teaching license major focused on the musical instrument performance, which can bring conflicts between the professional expectations created in it and the actual possibilities in the job market. Furthermore, Brazilian educational laws are often ambiguous and imprecise regarding teacher training and the content of art classes in the K-12 (Penna, 2015, p. 130).

Grounded in these questions, we are conducting a PhD project that has the following research problem: *how music teachers who work in the K-12 education of Paraíba perceive and find meaning in their teaching work?* Its specific objectives are: to analyze these teachers' musical life stories and their formation paths; to discuss the existing dilemmas between the

¹ The Federal University of Paraíba (Universidade Federal da Paraíba) offers this kind of course in four different areas of art: Music, Visual Arts, Theatre and Dance.





expectations of music teachers' formation and their teaching work; investigate the meanings found in teaching from the theoretical frame of Logotherapy².

In this article, we share the first results of the research, analyzing and discussing excerpts from six teachers' narratives who participated in the study. Further in this paper, we present the assumptions of Logotherapy that have guided our analysis³.

Logotherapy and the meaning of life

Logotherapy is a theoretical and psychotherapeutic approach that defends the unconditional nature of finding the meaning of life by the human being (Aquino, 2014, p. 29). Created by the neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Emil Frankl (1905–1997), Logotherapy is based on his reflections on the meaning of life and his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps (Frankl, 2022b, p. 137–138).

For Logotherapy, the search for meaning is the primary motivation of the human being (Frankl, 2022a, p. 124). It emphasizes the projection of life towards the future as a possibility for the encounter and concretization of meanings (Bruzzzone, 2006, p. 6). This approach seeks to raise awareness of human beings about their freedom and responsibility (Frankl, 2019, p. 81).

Logotherapy has three basic pillars: *freedom of will*, *will to meaning*, *meaning of life*. Freedom of will is the human being's ability to decide. For Frankl, an individual is not fully determined, but capable of responding to the demands and challenges imposed by life (Aquino, 2013, p. 48–51). Although Logotherapy recognizes that the human being is influenced by biological, psychological and sociocultural factors, it highlights that these conditions do not eliminate the human capacity to deliberate and take position in life (Miguez, 2014, p. 32–39).

The will to meaning is present in the incessant search of the human being for a meaning of life. For Frankl (2019, p. 396), the human is the only being who interprets and assigns meaning to his existence. Thus, Frankl (2020a, p. 28) presents the concept of "self-transcendence", which is defined as the ability of a person to reach out beyond themselves, by loving someone or a life project. Thus, self-transcendence is found in the opening of the human being in the world to fulfill their purposes (Aquino, 2023, p. 60). Frankl (2020b, p. 28) points

² This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.

³ The abstract of this paper was presented by the second author at the 37th World Conference of International Society for Music Education (ISME), in Montreal (Canada).

out that happiness and self-fulfillment can only be found as a result of self-transcendence and the search for meaning.

According to Logotherapy, the human being can discover the meaning of life through three categories of values: 1) "Creative values": found in acting on the world—for example, in artistic creation, work, etc.; 2) "Experiential values": relating to experiences with nature and love; 3) "Attitudinal values": present in the brave posture of human beings in the face of unavoidable suffering - for example, an incurable disease. (Frankl, 2020b, p. 34).

Every human being is questioned by life and seeks a project to dedicate, that is, values to self-transcend. Thus, Frankl (2019, p. 105–106) states that the meaning of life, the third pillar of Logotherapy, differs from person to person and moment to moment. Both the questions of life and the answers we give to them are unique. In addition, the process of finding out the meaning of life is not arbitrary, since it requires the opening of a person to values, as well as awareness and responsibility with life (Frankl, 2022b, p. 38).

Thus, a job occupation can be a meaningful activity that allows one to figure out the meaning of life. However, Frankl (2019, p. 205–206) warns that it is not a specific job that allows process, although it is an opportunity for the fulfillment of creative values. The job can be seen as a meaningful activity or as a task with the feeling of emptiness that may unfold into boredom, indifference, etc. Therefore, one's occupation is not the only instance that enables one to figure out the meaning of life, because there are other activities in which humans can also find meaning and fulfillment: studies, hobbies, volunteer services, relationships with music, etc. (Frankl, 2019, p. 211–212).

Having presented the main concepts of Logotherapy that guide our analysis, in the next section, we detail the methodology of our research.

Methodology

In this research, we used the qualitative methodology of (auto)biographical narratives (Jovchelovitch; Bauer, 2002, p. 90–113; Flick, 2004, p. 100–115; Penna; Silva, 2025). The research participants are six teachers selected by these criteria: they are licensed Music teachers by Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB); work in public schools in the State of Paraíba and are responsible for Multi-Art or Music classes in K-12 education for at least one school year; freely decide to participate in the research. The research project was submitted to UFPB's Ethics Committee, and the participants signed a consent form agreeing with the research procedures.

As instruments of collection, we use autobiographical "narrative interviews" in two stages. The first step is based on a broad and common guiding question to all participants in which we expect a more general report on their life stories (Flick, 2004, p. 110–115). The second interviews are constituted by a list of open-ended questions that resumes and deepens aspects raised by the participants in the first narratives.

The narratives were recorded and transcribed personally by the researcher⁴ and the excerpts cited were grammatically reviewed. Participants are identified as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and so on; names of schools and people were omitted for ethical reasons (Gibbs, 2009, p. 30–31).

For the analysis, we adopted the "*reading in three times*" adapted from Souza's proposal (2004, p. 122–129). The three times are: 1) Elaboration of the participant's story — life stages, working time, expectations before engaging in the profession, etc.; 2) Identification of recurring and significant themes in the narratives; 3) Interpretative analysis of the reports (according to the listed themes) based on Logotherapy and establishing relationships with studies in Music Education.

At the moment, we concluded the first stage of the research concerning autobiographical narrative interviews. We present in Table 1 the characteristics of the six participating teachers —three men and three women.

Table 1 – Participants of the research.

Participant	Age	Gender	Time as a teacher
Teacher 1	31	male	4 years
Teacher 2	35	male	4 years
Teacher 3	58	male	5 years
Teacher 4	40	female	10 years
Teacher 5	47	female	10 years
Teacher 6	46	female	1 year

Source: research data.

⁴ To assist in the narrative's transcriptions, we used the site "Riverside" available at: <https://rivide.fm/transcription>. Access on: July 8th, 2025.

In the following section, we present the initial results regarding the meanings of teaching in K-12 education.

The Meaning of Teaching

The participants' narratives show that the teaching of music in K-12 education varies between professional satisfaction and lack of meaning. The participants reported recurring difficulties, such as the undervaluing of Art in school, the indiscipline of students and the distance between teacher education at university and school reality. Despite this, such challenges do not deny the possibilities of finding meaning in Music teaching at school.

Teacher 1 reports that, at the beginning of his formation, he planned himself a career focused on musical instruments practice. He is currently an art teacher in two public schools and, in spite of having changed his professional expectations, he claims to be satisfied with teaching:

This matter of being able to contribute to the formation of people. Most of the students want to learn, although there are those bad students, but most of them want to do something with arts, want to gain knowledge, and want a better future for their lives. So, I have a role and feel that I can contribute to their education, with this knowledge they want to get. [...] I feel fulfilled with my profession (Teacher 1, Interview 1, Jan. 8th, 2025)⁵.

In this same direction, Teacher 3 reports that he is concerned about the challenges of Brazilian K-12 education and, as a reaction, seeks to offer critical and meaningful education to his students: “*art is not only art focused on itself, with an end in art. Art is human, citizen, critical formation.*” (Teacher 3, Interview 1, Aug. 4th, 2025). For Logotherapy, responsibility is an essential part of the human being (Frankl, 2022a, p. 134), and this aspect appears in these narratives of Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 when they reveal the desire to contribute to the formation of their students. This dialogues with Logotherapy and its belief in the human capacity to self-transcend (Frankl, 2020a, 28). This desire and the dedication of these teachers can be interpreted as a self-transcendence through “experiential values”, according to Logotherapy (Frankl, 2020b, p. 34).

Teacher 3, who works in a rural school, reports that teaching is a significant activity in her life, despite the challenges of everyday classroom.

⁵ In parentheses, the indication of the participating teacher, which interview (first or second) and the date on which it was held. Excerpts from the narratives are presented in italics to differentiate them from bibliographic quotations.



Elementary school is much more like this, a lot of work, more complex. We only learn to be teachers inside the classroom... And when you enter the room, a situation that was not predicted during the undergraduate teaching course [teaching license major] will happen [...] I am loving [the school], despite adversities, challenges. (Teacher 6, Interview 2, Feb. 11th, 2025).

According to Gaulke (2019, p. 138), the school is not a space only for the transmission of contents, but a place for the formation and development of the teacher's practice. In addition, the sense of well-being in the profession may be related to the feeling of belonging, recognition among peers and the possibility of collaborating in the formation of students. For the author, finding meaning at work is essential for professional development and to Music teachers to remain in public schools. She points out that the meaning of work is not in acting itself, but in the perception that work is meaningful to other people (Gaulke, 2019, p. 140–141).

However, this positive feeling is not always present in the report of our participants. Teacher 4 reveals that she had a feeling of desperation at the beginning of her teaching career, when she even thought about resigning: *"I was still [very] young, very inexperienced. I was like this: 'I'm going to resign... I cried, I thought like this: 'My God, I studied so much, I studied for that, my Lord?!'"* (Teacher 4, Interview 1, Feb 27th, 2025). For Teacher 4, the bad behavior of students and her inexperience in K-12 education were factors that made it difficult to find meaning in her work.

Huberman (2013, p. 39), Sobreira and Fetzner (2024, p. 23) point out that the beginning in the teaching profession can be permeated by an "initial fright". This can lead to feelings of insecurity and willingness to quit work. However, time in the career as a teacher can bring a greater understanding about the profession and a consequent confidence in schools (Sobreira; Fetzner, 2024, p. 23–24). In this same direction, Tardif (2014, p. 268) emphasizes that daily work with students can bring self-knowledge to the teacher and reflection on practice. In another moment of her report, Teacher 4 reveals that her perception about K-12 education has been repurposed and is currently seen as a "mission": *"So, in fact, [K-12] is really my mission field. In this case, totally redefined [...]. The teacher needs to have a minimum sensitivity to understand that he is there [at school] to be able to contribute to the lives of those students. It's not just to be able to teach content and to earn [the salary]"* (Teacher 4, Interview 2, March 20th, 2025).

As discussed, the narratives aforementioned indicate that teaching can be understood as a practice of self-transcendence. In addition, Logotherapy shows that teacher satisfaction does not result from the direct pursuit of happiness in the profession, but from engagement in



values that transcend the individual (Frankl, 2020b, p. 28–34). If, on one hand, teaching can be perceived as a meaningful activity, on the other hand it can be seen as a function without meaning. In this direction, the report of Teacher 2 suggests that teaching in middle school is more taken by the need to support oneself financially than as an activity that brings meaning to life: *“Sometimes I wonder, when I am at school teaching, [...] I feel like I’m in a place that I do not want to be”* (Teacher 2, Interview 1, Jan 16th, 2025). Unlike the meaning associated with his role as a teacher, he reveals that his practice as a musician is quite meaningful for his life and is performed with pleasure, despite considering it a hobby. This reinforces the considerations of Logotherapy that emphasize that one can find meaning in activities outside one’s profession (Frankl, 2019, p. 211).

The report of Teacher 5 also highlights her struggles in finding meaning in her teaching practice. During the interviews, she talks enthusiastically about her work as coordinator and teacher of music courses at a public conservatory. However, when she talks about K-12 education, it raises questions about working conditions: teacher’s health, work overload, undervaluing of teaching work, overcrowded classes etc. So she reveals: *“I feel like I’m waiting for the day I retire [laughs]. I feel like I’m counting down the days to not be there anymore”* (Teacher 5, Interview 2, Mar. 10th, 2025).

The narratives of teachers 2 and 5 indicate that they do not find meaning in teaching in K-12 education, although they accomplish their professional responsibilities. This absence of meaning may be associated with the “existential vacuum” (Frankl, 2022a) that is unfolded in situations of boredom and indifference.

Conclusion

The narratives show us that “self-transcendence” is important for teachers to remain in the profession. This aspect can be identified when teachers dedicate themselves to the education of their students. This relationship of care from teachers to their students is found in “experiential values”. However, teaching in K-12 can be assumed only as a means of subsistence, that is, to earn a salary. Many music teachers may find meaning not in K-12 education, but rather in teaching music in conservatories or in working as professional musicians. This perception of lack of meaning may be related to “existential void”.

The narratives analyzed are related to the perspective of Logotherapy that the meaning of life is found in the world, being dynamic and contextualized. The meaning our participants found in their teaching work are related to their formation paths and professional expectations.

Hence, sometimes teaching is narrated as a meaningful activity, sometimes as a meaningless function. In this first stage of the research, there are indications that the stronger the meaning found in musical performance, the more unlikely it is to find meaning through Music teaching.

Teaching music in K-12 is not an activity that involves only the pedagogical and bureaucratic aspects of the profession. Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy has contributed to the understanding that a career as a music teacher in K-12 education brings existential questions regarding the search for meaning in the profession.

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