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## Activism within music education: working towards inclusion and policy change in the Finnish music school context

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*This study examines how interactions between policy, institutions and individuals that reinforce inclusive music education can be framed from an activist standpoint. Resonaari, one among many music schools in Finland, provides an illustrative case of rather uncommonly inclusive practices among students with special educational needs. By exploring this case, contextualised within the Finnish music school system, we identify the challenges and opportunities for activism on micro, meso and macro levels. On the basis of our analysis, we argue that Resonaari's teachers are proactive because, within an inclusive teaching and learning structure, they act in anticipation of future needs and policy changes, engaging in what we call teacher activism. We claim that this type of activism is key for inclusive practices and policy disposition in music education.*

A source of pride to locals and puzzlement to outsiders, the comparative educational reports of the past decade have elevated Finland to a notable international position. A rather monochromatic country in the global spectrum, Finland has been projected by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies and the Organization for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) as a leader in educational achievement. Despite some criticism, the positive determining factors are easily apparent, such as: a synergy between the socio-cultural norms of the social welfare state and educational expectations; economic and structural incentives for teacher specialisation and professional development; and a highly valued balance between national and local autonomy and accountability (Sahlberg, 2010).

Yet, as one analyses the Finnish system – observing its structure, policy culture, curricular history and strategic investment – the achievements may be demystified and tensions revealed. First, whilst Finland has managed to attain a system of equal-educational opportunities and is explicitly committed to embracing cosmopolitanism, immigration and diversity remain sensitive and contentious issues. Although Finland is a significantly less homogeneous society than a few decades ago, only recently has the national music curriculum expanded its focus from constructing national identities to navigating a multicultural classroom (Karlsen, 2011; see also National Board of Education, 2004; National Board of General Education, 1985); further, this expansion has not been without challenges (see Allsup, 2010). Secondly, since the 2000s, the school system has continued to focus on the development of special needs education (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 38). This

also emphasises how inclusion and democracy remain nebulous in Finnish society and its educational structures, including music education. A third, and final point of tension can be seen in the fact that the music education system remains hierarchical in both ethos and structure (Anttila, 2010), despite its roots in Finnish social democracy and its ideals of educational and cultural equity (Sahlberg, 2010). Comprehensive schools in Finland have long established 'informal' practices and popular music instruction, aiming to democratise musical access (Väkevä, 2006). However, the system also rests heavily on a hierarchical structure for its specialised 'music schools' where children are selected by examination on the basis of their musical aptitude.

Unsurprisingly, these tensions are represented in both tacit and explicit policies. On the one hand, general education's macro-policy documents have adopted a language of inclusion and equity, establishing that 'equal opportunity in education is realised when all, whatever their background, have the opportunity to pursue education without their background predetermining participation or learning outcome' (Ministry of Culture and Education, 2012, p. 10). On the other hand, micro-policy actions, such as those taken by the Association of Music Schools in Finland, formulate and enforce examination standards, which create a canon for studies that every student is expected to follow. Regardless of this clear policy dissonance, large numbers of music schools continue to operate on a 'pyramid model' (Heimonen, 2002), selecting only potentially gifted students, deemed able to succeed along some professional pathway (Westerlund & Väkevä, 2010, p. 150). Statistically, half of the annual music school applicants are accepted (Koramo, 2009, p. 23), and the excluded remainder are forced to look for other, non-governmentally-funded opportunities for extra-curricular music studies.

Recently, however, the Finnish music education field has increased its inclusion and diversity efforts. A notable reform in the Basic Arts Education was the binary syllabus (in 2005), whereby music-school students may choose between general and advanced syllabi, the former aiming to increase possibilities for less goal-oriented and more 'hobby-like' music studies (Westerlund & Väkevä, 2010). This seems to be an attempt to align to larger cultural-educational policies that 'guarantee equal opportunities and the right to culture, high-quality free education as prerequisites for everyone' (Ministry of Culture and Education, 2012, p. 11).

As such, the Finnish music education system may be considered unique and of interest to the international music education community – perhaps because of its aforementioned complex and at times contradictory nature. In this study, we introduce a music school named Resonaari as it presents an exception to this system. Specifically, as a music school for students with special educational needs, it illustrates rather unusually how inclusive practices and an attention to policy can impact music education practice at-large, and not only for those working within special needs education. We argue that this is of particular significance given that, far too often, 'inclusive education is reduced to a subsystem of special education', wherein several forms of marginalisation and exclusion operate (Liasidou, 2012, p. 5).

As our analysis will show, Resonaari offers insight into the multiple, complex, ethical, pedagogical and policy-programmatic trials that music educators face; this is particularly relevant when working with society-defined 'marginalised' students. We believe this case contributes widely to music education because it displays complex pedagogical

interactions, in which practitioners, who are in the process of developing innovative actions, draw from diverse fields. Following Donald Schön's (1983) assertion, there is an evident need for this kind of investigation as 'professional knowledge [remains] mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practices' (p. 16). Resonaari does not escape Schön's challenge; nevertheless, it provides a pathway to address this mismatch whilst focusing on the notion of teachers as proactive and engaging education activists. We explore this idea by following Sachs (2003) and what she calls a generative protocol for an activist teaching profession. Using the case of Resonaari as a practical representation of Sachs' framework, we look at how *teacher activism* can provide alternative ways to work inside and outside formal music institutions, for example, by seeking: inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness; collective and collaborative action; effective communication of aims and expectations; recognition of the expertise of all parties involved; creating an environment of trust and mutual respect; ethical practice; being responsive and responsible; acting with passion; and experiencing pleasure and having fun (Sachs, 2003, pp. 147–149).

Based on interviews, observations and policy documents, our article examines the case of Resonaari within the Finnish music school context from three research perspectives: a policy standpoint; institutional inclusion discourse; and individual professionalism in music education, in order to answer the ultimate research task: How is teacher activism manifested at Resonaari? In sum, our study introduces Resonaari as an informative case, where the intersections between policy, inclusion and teacher activism unfold as a practical potentiality within the field of music education as a whole.

### The context

As of 2013, Finland has 465 music, visual arts, dance and circus schools offering Basic Arts Education. Of these, over half are music schools overseen and subsidised by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Finnish National Board of Education is responsible for drafting the national core curricular guidelines and evaluations for all governmentally funded music and art schools (Heimonen, 2002). Over the past 50 years, the primary focus of Finnish music schools has been to further the tradition of master-apprenticeship, the practice of private tuition, and the systematic quest for early-age professionalisation (Heimonen, 2002).

Whilst emerging alternatives have challenged these traditions, Resonaari continues to focus on *inclusion* and thus, remains unique within the Finnish music school context. First established in 1995 as a pilot project by two founding teachers and about five students, Resonaari currently employs 12 music teachers, who provide musical instrument tuition to over 200 children and adults via individual and group lessons which emphasise popular music practices. Resonaari does not have entry examinations and accepts anyone with an interest in learning music. For the most part, the students have physical or cognitive disabilities, or learning difficulties. Additionally, Resonaari has launched a unique music education project for older adults as novice musicians in a rock band setting (see Laes, 2015).

In 1998, Resonaari was awarded official governmental status. As a result, the school was obligated to follow the guidelines prescribed by the national Basic Arts Education policies. Thus, Resonaari is now evaluated just as any other music school would be, and

is required to demonstrate student progress and account for its music-learning structure, regardless of its distinct mission and student population. Given the variability in learning processes and the unpredictable artistic progress of its student body, as well as the limitations of the traditional curriculum and standardised evaluation protocols, Resonaari needed to find an alternative means to convince governmental authorities of the impact of its practices. One solution was the school's introduction of a new pedagogical approach based on *Figurenotes*, a simplified notation system (developed at Resonaari), which enables and facilitates playing music (Kaikkonen & Uusitalo, 2005). Another solution was their development of an individualised education plan, as defined in the core curriculum for Basic Education in the Arts (National Board of Education, 2002), in which students follow tailored, individual curricula, which are regularly (re)-evaluated. Furthermore, Resonaari's flexible co-teaching practices and use of multiple musical instruments have created a teaching laboratory, wherein many music educators have learned and practised their metier, enabled by partnerships and the school's open-door policy. Resonaari, unlike other music schools, has also invested heavily in researching and documenting their innovative pedagogical efforts. The school has focused on practices that propel the students' musical agencies inside and outside the school, sometimes in unexpected ways. A powerful example of this is a punk band comprised of former Resonaari students that gained international success and is now the focus of the acclaimed documentary *The Punk Syndrome* (2012).

Our rationale for this study is that Resonaari's dynamism challenges us to consider the ways in which structurally inclusive practices may or may not create spaces for the concrete realisation of policies, and facilitate learners to 'grow into active citizens by developing knowledge and skills for operating in a democratic, egalitarian society' (Ministry of Culture and Education, 2012, p. 18). In the subsequent sections, we describe some of the lessons learned from our interactions with Resonaari.

### **Theoretical underpinnings and goals of the study**

This study rests on the conceptual axis of teacher activism (Sachs, 2003) that manifests itself differently at the *macro* (policy impact), *meso* (music school leadership) and *micro* (teacher-student interaction) levels. In this study, Resonaari is seen as a catalyst to discuss the possible relationships between: engendering processes of innovative music education practice; influencing and responding to policy discourse; and addressing the socio-cultural-educative rights of individuals, particularly those that are traditionally seen as being 'at the margin' (Delpit, 1995; Slee, 2008; Liasidou, 2012). We understand marginal groups to include those who are 'culturally silenced' (Freire, 2006; see also Gibson, 2006) or whose capability to learn is questioned (Biesta, 2011).

We base our analysis on Ozga's (1990) understanding that it is crucial to 'bring together structural, macro level analyses of education systems and educational policies and micro level investigation, especially that which takes account of people's perceptions and experiences' (p. 359). In order to uncover and address key relations in this political-institutional-personal continuum, this analysis functions at three levels: macro, meso and micro. At the macro level, it offers a 'lessons-learned' approach to policy work in music education, drawing from an adaptive stance that can be identified in the Finnish system. At

the meso level, it analyses Resonaari as a representative case of how organisations, such as schools, community centres, non-profits or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), can establish an activist disposition, which aids them in ‘talking back’ to policy (see Schmidt, 2013); this ‘talk-back’ allows organisations to better communicate with community stakeholders, and establish an impactful, internal vision. Lastly, at the micro level, this study exemplifies how the processes of personal and cultural inclusion are mediated through music education at Resonaari.

In order to frame and focus this rather complex enterprise, we address the following research questions, each one directed at one of the three key elements of the article: the interaction between *policy*, institutions and individuals; the re-examination of the idea of *inclusion*; and the exploration of *teacher activism* as a concept in the context of music education.

- (1) How does the case of Resonaari inform the pedagogical relationship between policy development, institution, and individuals on macro, meso and micro levels?
- (2) What are the key elements that shape inclusive music education as defined by the case of Resonaari and how do they relate to the Finnish music school system?
- (3) What characteristics define teacher activism in Resonaari’s practices?

### Methodological approach

The empirical material of this study is comprised of interview accounts from Resonaari’s teachers and a policy maker in Finnish Educational Board, as well as policy documents and other public data sources concerning the Finnish educational system and music schools. We, the two authors, analysed the data from different positions: the first author as an insider, educated within the Finnish system and having worked as a music teacher in Resonaari, and the second author as an outsider, not only to Resonaari, but to Finnish society (having grown up in Latin America and now residing in the USA). This dual stance not only made possible the cultural, linguistic and conceptual translations between our observations and research participants, but also opened inter-reflexive possibilities that impacted the analysis. Barrett and Mills (2009) consider inter-reflexivity as one possibility for postmodern, critical examination of observational methods because, in a qualitative research paradigm, the researchers’ own roles and interests significantly contribute to the investigations. Hence, approaching the researched phenomenon from two different angles helped us to challenge our *predispositions*, that is, the researchers’ ‘habitual forms of thought and action’ that shape the research process both consciously and unconsciously (p. 428).

We collected interview data in February 2012 and May 2013 during our joint visits to Resonaari. On two different occasions, we conducted individual and small group interviews of three informants. Two of the informants played key roles within the organisation as a teacher or leader, and founders of Resonaari. The third informant is a long-time teacher at Resonaari. Additionally in May 2013, we interviewed an expert at the Finnish National Board of Education. The aim of this interview was to gain insight into current policies concerning Finnish music education. The informants are hereafter referred to as *teacher*, *organisation leader*, *organisation founder* and *policy maker*. The interviews resulted in approximately 8 hours of data, which were transcribed and coded for further analysis.

This study aligns with the reflexive, critical educational research principle that ‘views education as ideologically-formed historical process’ that is ‘shaped by emancipatory interest in transforming education to achieve rationality, justice and access to an interesting and satisfying life for all’ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 220). Therefore, our methodological approach in this case study is designed to uncover a unique contextual history – the Finnish music school system – framed by particular experiences and rationale of the teachers and leaders at Resonaari.

Furthermore, in order to illuminate interrelations between practices and policy, we follow an *interpretative policy analysis* rationale (Yanow, 1996) which understands ‘meanings as constructed by participants in particular policy processes’ (Dryzek, 2006, p. 194). Accordingly, our analysis is also linked to narrative policy investigation (Roe, 1994), and as such, acknowledges that facts rarely speak for themselves but are part of stories and rationalisations. Further, as our case study is characterised by an interaction between daily practice and larger policy action, our study follows Liasidou (2012) in her proposition that investigations should look at macro and micro dynamics that synchronically impact policy processes, without losing sight of the diachronic manner in which these dynamics have arisen.

In accordance with the epistemological principles articulated above, we used Alvesson and Sköldbberg’s (2009) data- and insight-driven methodological strategies as analysis tools. In a data-driven study, data is ‘not regarded as raw but as a construction of the empirical conditions’ (p. 284). In other words, the data serve as a platform for conscious interpretations rather than for specific content analysis. Insight-driven refers to a constant awareness that the data imply ‘a more profound meaning than that immediately given or conventionally understood’ (p. 284). Thus, we, as two authors from (and currently living in) two different geographic and cultural places – representing an insider-outsider dual stance – have together developed our analysis process from our two different but overlapping hermeneutical circles of experience and interpretation.

### **Policy development in institutional and individual realms**

We approach the initial research question – what is the relationship between policy and pedagogy in Resonaari? – by acknowledging that the notion of ‘performativity’ remains a major threat to meaningful, just and equity-based education. The current version of performativity, explained and explored by Stephen Ball (2003), can be understood by an over-emphasis on accountability measures and choice. This over-emphasis is evident in the language of federal policy globally, but perhaps is most visible in the policies of the USA and the UK (OECD, 2004). This point is significant to this analysis as disabled, immigrant and underprivileged students have all been victims of exclusionary practices, because they are often perceived as a threat to ‘school performativity’.

As the formation of teacher activism is central to this study, it seems appropriate to begin unfolding the first research question by focusing on the identification of what Lindblom (1990) has called ‘agents of impairment’, such as dominant ideology, lack of information and bureaucratic restrictions, among others. Regardless of the challenges at the macro level, at the micro and meso levels, an activist disposition can serve to resist such ‘agents of impairment’, facilitating what Fung (2003) has called ‘recipes for the public sphere’, that is, structures and processes that enable participation. We see this disposition



manifested at different levels at Resonaari. One level involves the enactment of flexible internal practice, as this teacher relates:

I am organising a tutorial teaching project for the parents because one key issue is how to organise practicing at home and how to support that. I now invite all the parents here [to Resonaari] and tell them that they can bring their instruments, and they can ask if they don't know how to play or how to help their kid [to play music].

Another level relates to the systematic use of teaching as a non-proprietary collaborative exchange, as this teacher suggests:

We consider group teaching important because music is a social [activity]. When you are teaching alone you usually feel that everything is OK but you are blind in some way . . . it is only my way to teach and make music.

We see here a counter-balance to centralised and hierarchical forms of policy action, which Majone and Wildavsky (1979) refer to as 'policy as decisionism'. This way of approaching policy is particularly unhelpful in educational environments given the complexity of the tasks, the multiple constituencies and standpoints, and the high-level of professional engagement from its constituents, such as administrators, teachers and parents. Hence, Resonaari teachers' actions can be seen as a way of talking back to policy. In this way, teachers' actions develop multiple ways of structuring policy thinking according to local needs.

*Establishing policy autonomy towards institutional agency*

According to Sachs (2003), the development of a transformative teaching profession requires trust that operates at both the micro and macro levels. Compared with the UK system (where school inspections and impositions of accountability regimes are prevalent) or the US system (where the state constantly negates its trust in the teaching profession by measuring teacher competence through standard-setting) (Sachs, 2003, pp. 138–139), the situation in Finland shows signs of variance. As Sahlberg (2010) argues, it is central to the Finnish education culture that there is trust between the educational authorities and the schools (p. 2). A policy maker at the National Board of Education explained the possible origin of this distinction:

Do you mean that we are trying to have an impact on teachers' work? No, no, we don't have [an] inspection system in Finland; we gave that up in 1992 . . . We [tend to] trust teachers and local authorities . . . Schools have to follow the national core curriculum, but there is a lot of space for the decisions made by the teachers. I think that is the strength of our system.

Central to the vision formation, we see a separation between impediments and restrictions, given that 'the actions of the various social actors are influenced and constrained, but not determined, by the underlying socio-economic structures which pose ideological and pragmatic confinements and dilemmas' (Liasidou, 2012, p. 86). Operationalising trust is not a question of 'blind faith in other people' but 'a contingent and negotiated feature of professional or social engagement with others' on both micro and



macro levels (Sachs, 2003, p. 140). The policy maker, when describing the organisation leader of Resonaari, exemplifies Sachs' argumentation saying:

In the field (...) he has a special role, because he has such a good ability to communicate, tell and articulate what is the idea [behind] this work. He does excellent advocacy work.

The pivotal realisation behind this statement is that 'words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses' (Ball, 1990, p. 18). Consequently, teachers too, if proactive, can impact how policy – from legislation to local rules – can be constructed and implemented. The crucial element seems to be the development of a policy disposition and the use of policy language. As the example above shows, whilst policy language can be quite formalised, it can also be 'informal speech embodying only everyday experiential knowledge' (Dryzek, 2006, p. 194).

The weight of professional accountability based on active engagement and autonomy, which are necessary elements in policy-disposition development, can be seen in the following response from the policy maker:

We are moving away from competencies and curricular objectives that focus on students [and] what they can do. Rather, we want to focus on how [we can help] teachers set more rich learning opportunities and environments.

We see here an acknowledgement of the complexity of the task at hand, as well as an understanding that professionals will be responsive – in their own ways – to this conception. This acknowledgement creates a policy space where trust is pivotal: where macro directives account for the active decision-making of teachers, expecting that autonomy will lead to thoughtful pedagogical decisions at the local level. It also demonstrates how a symbiotic relationship between macro and micro policy is possible.

Thus, the creation of mindful learning environments is not simply the result of 'good teaching' or sound pedagogical thinking – which they are – but also a representation of a flexible policy environment that facilitates autonomy. In turn, this autonomy develops leadership. This leadership is manifested by an ability to see the macro policy constructions inserted into a community, which discusses and attempts to uncover suppressed meanings, and challenges its 'agents of impairment', as Dryzek (2006) suggests. Resonaari attempts to change policy *autocracy* into policy *autonomy*, whereby the community is able to create images of interaction, music learning and responsibility. Then, the community can work hard to implement them in their daily interactions – we suggest that this is institutional agency.

*'Policy savvy': Teachers constructing equity and social justice discourse*

Slee (2008) acknowledges that 'a number of groups, including research-based interests, parent bodies, and professional groups' resist equity and social justice, describing them as challenges that are fortified by the 'elasticity required for stretching across the intersections of student identities' (p. 100). In other words, in working with students who have multiple needs, teachers are bound to be in conflict with each other, and at times, work against

greater, overall goals. We agree that democratic discourses – in practice and theory – do not just happen and are not free ranging; that is, they often exist as a struggle with what Berger and Luckmann (1967) have called social constructions. Thus, it is important to note that equity and social justice – basic elements of inclusion – are constantly permeated by questions of authority, deference and legitimacy. Further, these questions often play an active role in prescribing the normative boundaries of official forms of knowledge, which, in turn, qualify what is deemed appropriate, deviant, able, immoral, feasible or utopian.

Of course, policy and social-justice thinking are constantly entangled in the question of who has a voice and who has permission to speak, in the sense of who is visible and privileged, as well as who is allowed to lead, to construct ideas and to institute directives. In the case of Resonaari, we discover an internal policy disposition aligned with Dror's (2006) idea that good policy makers must find a balance between meeting present needs and addressing future challenges. Further, good policy makers must learn to acknowledge and overcome psychological, informational and moral contradictions.

This question of voice is pertinent here because, regardless of the various and many curricular and pedagogical responses to learner diversity, music education for social justice remains significantly unaddressed (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). One could even claim that establishing it would presuppose near radical structural and organisational change within schools and music institutions. Resonaari indicates, however, that a clear and feasible step toward this process would be for educators to see themselves as policy makers. This new viewpoint might be shaped in both traditional and innovative ways. Our data suggests that being 'policy savvy', that is, teachers who are knowledgeable and engaged with policy, is a quality worth pursuing. The organisation leader exemplifies this in the following statement:

From the beginning of Resonaari, I have talked to both the department of culture and the social work department [of the city council]. It was really funny, because there was a rule that if you get funding from one city organisation you cannot have funding from another. But I just [had the attitude] that we did not care [about that rule]! And it worked because both sections started to fund us.

What we uncovered here were opportunities for envisioning and asking questions about the likely range of 'possible futures' for the students and for Resonaari itself (Dror, 2006, p. 91). Simple, daily exercises toward proactivism can develop both a disposition toward 'what if' challenges – aiding strategic planning as well as decision-making, and also encouraging music teachers to envision and consider the impact of their decisions on different constituencies (Hammerness & Shulman, 2006). This approach to challenges speaks directly to teacher education because further investigation of similar practices could help in providing equal value for leadership, planning, communication, and stakeholder evaluation, as music education currently places on didactic skills. All of these are key to policy knowledge and a more successful – that is, participatory – school life at the pre-service and in-service levels.

### **Inclusion as a mandate to individual and musical agency**

Resonaari simultaneously mirrors and contradicts the notion of inclusion in the Finnish music education system; consequently, it serves as a rich point of analysis for our second

research question. Inclusion, in its most unproblematic definition, is access to social life that occurs in the technical, institutional and interpersonal dimensions (Ikäheimo, 2009). However, whilst these structural considerations of inclusion are significant to policy production and the establishment of interaction patterns within organisations, such as schools, we must also attend to other more personal and ethical manifestations of inclusion.

Liasidou (2012) argues convincingly and with great nuance how the language of inclusion 'does not seek to normalise allegedly 'defective' individuals, but seeks to subvert exclusionary social conditions and disabling educational practices, which oppress and subjugate disabled students by violating their basic human rights and undermining their human subject positions' (p. 9). The challenge that Resonaari accepts at the micro (teaching), meso (organisation) and macro (policy) levels, is to turn into practice the idea that inclusion, not only the inclusion of students with disabilities, but everyone, emerges from a knowledge base where 'diversity is perceived to be the norm and considered as positive and enriching experiences' (p. 12). Indeed, one of the characteristics of social-justice education is the attempt to develop a 'vision of democracy through difference' (Barton, 1997, p. 235; see also Biesta, 2011), which may provide a more productive way of looking at inclusion and its challenges.

What our investigation makes clear, however, is that making music education 'more inclusive' does not necessarily mean that everyone can construct his or her own musical agency identically. This goal takes on a concrete form in Resonaari's work with individuals who have learning and/or physical disabilities. In these situations, the acknowledgement of difference is as necessary as working from a positive construction of difference. This stance exemplifies an ethical approximation between inclusion and equality where all individuals are regarded and treated as *equally important* whilst presenting *unequal needs* (Blackburn, 2008; emphasis added). For music education, this 'equality of difference' implies that the construction of musical agency should be seen as *equally meaningful* for everyone despite the possible inability to have *identical possibilities*. The implication – which we believe to be powerful – is that 'inclusion' in music education is highly attainable. Its attainment requires, however, individual and institutional agency that can be in direct tension with past disciplinary practices and policy structures, all of which emphasise the need for the policy disposition we see within Resonaari.

#### *A specialised music institution for the marginalised: inclusion or exclusion?*

One could argue that an institution that works mainly with the disabled, disadvantaged and the elderly, that is, individuals who usually experience a marginal placement within music and society, could itself be perceived as the perpetuation of exclusion or segregation. In the universe of music, ableism (discriminating favour towards able-bodied persons) embodied by talent is the preferred discourse. Given this paradigm, the challenge of situating Resonaari within the inclusion and exclusion nexus becomes even more challenging.

We suggest that Resonaari provides an example of a way out from this educational conundrum by nullifying exclusion. In effect, Resonaari places a significant burden on competing music schools, which demonstrate in compelling and practical terms that the failure to actively pursue an inclusive disposition is not only ethically unsustainable, but also educationally inept. As the policy maker acknowledges:

This is a very challenging idea, [projected by Resonaari organisation leaders], that we can teach whomever within our [music school] tradition. It has been a difficult idea for [the] average instrumental music teacher . . . to think about, that you can teach [anyone]. Because they still are thinking that there are only some students who can study the advanced syllabus.

The new system of advanced and general syllabi offers a clear example of the challenges, creating divisions of aptitudes that reflect a long-standing, cultural perception. This is the case even if it is openly acknowledged as problematic. In point of fact, after the reform most music schools have continued to offer tuition within the advanced syllabus, whilst other art schools seem to mainly follow the general syllabus (Koramo, 2009). Further, the policy maker concedes:

I think [that] in the tradition of music schools [the] thought is that some students are gifted and some are not.

The activist disposition at Resonaari arises out of a practice where musical agency is seen as attainable within a community of individuals marked as 'marginal' or 'not fully able' by other music schools. This approach places the music school system under the risk of dismissing inclusion by failing to construct musical agency as equally meaningful to all, despite unequal possibilities.

Whilst what is written above is embedded in a set of conceptual ideas that are somewhat complex, these ideas can be profoundly simple and powerful, as the organisation leader articulates:

We call this a positive cultural revolution and it comes from practice. We need to find ways to teach each person who is entering the room. Now, as we succeed in this music school, it starts to have a wider effect, which works on many levels: it affects [the student], the families, the schools, politicians, attitudes, culture. And this change also means that many music schools in Finland have started to think that as well: 'we too should have this kind of thing, this is possible'.

Resonaari has therefore established a divergence from the binary syllabi system, creating an advanced syllabus that can be carried out on their own terms, by means of individual learning plans and personal learning goals. The impact is both political and personal, both reflective of recent change and proactive in establishing a new tangible pathway.

*'You're stupid but you play so well'*

The activism of Resonaari would sound hollow without a robust conception and practice of inclusion as a daily occurrence. Inclusion then arises not from policy dictum or societal mores, but rather from an ethical commitment to teaching, as exemplified by a teacher:

Sometimes I feel that people are making these things too complicated, it is only about respecting every student's learning potential. Sometimes people just give a student a

maraca and say: this is your part, 'play the maracas until you die' – even though there are a lot of other possibilities!

We also observed that working towards these 'possibilities' intentionally distances teachers from 'the images of salvation and the presentation of disabled children as incomplete students' (Slee, 2008, p. 101). At Resonaari, teachers do not hesitate in challenging students to work at the limits of their musical and cognitive skills. Whilst Liasidou (2012) is concerned that, 'very often education policy and practice concentrate on the products of learning rather than process of learning' (p. 19), in small but important ways, the teachers we observed seem to adopt product and embed it into process.

I let him run around from [one] instrument to another . . . And I saw that he wasn't going to destroy anything so I just let him do that. I told the mother that we are trying to adapt the surroundings to her child [while] in a regular school the child would need to adapt to the surroundings.

Providing space for the construction of agency, and waiting so that students grant themselves permission to learn is also balanced by careful guidance. The teacher highlights this critical role:

We need to find the best teacher and the best time . . . Because I also need to evaluate the time [limit] of how long the kid can focus, and would a one-on-one lesson or [a] group lesson work better, or a couple lesson if they need [peer support] to increase their participation in the beginning, or do they need to gain their own skills in peace before they can join in group lessons.

On one hand, Resonaari's practices show a tension between addressing inclusion by expanding the students' possibilities to be active musical agents outside music school and, on the other hand, offering secured, 'segregated placements' for the learners' right to learn music. Indeed, both dimensions remain 'contradictory considerations over the aim of education' (Liasidou, 2012, p. 19). But Resonaari's leadership provides us with insight on how inside and outside classroom action can be one and the same, and how musical agency can be constructed to have direct implications for individual agency. A story told by the organisation founder exemplifies this idea:

A new teacher at Resonaari came to me concerned about a student who started crying during his lesson. He told the teacher that his peers from comprehensive school did not like him, often beating or bullying him and calling him stupid . . . 'I really don't like this life' the student said. The teacher listened empathetically asking about what was happening at school and how he felt about it. Then she came to me, as a colleague, asking if that was the right thing to do? I said yes, indeed it was. But added that next time it might be best to listen briefly and then get him back to playing. Everyone needs empathy, but [as a music teacher] you can give this student the power that comes from the music, by teaching him as much as possible. And this actually happened . . . This student got to play the guitar better and better and there came a day when the same kids came to him, saying, 'Oh, you are stupid but you play so well! Come play in our

band . . . you are the best guitarist in school!’ We have to teach and teach – the power is there.

This vignette emphasises that teachers cannot hide behind the ‘illusion of choice’. Rather, they must consider their roles as activists and be ‘prepared to assert [ideals] plainly and publicly if there is to be genuine progress toward equality for all children and their families’ (Kenworth & Whittaker, 2000, p. 223).

### **Teacher activism: Rupture that arises from productive tensions**

As our third research question focuses on teachers as activists, we begin by examining perspectives on the teaching profession at Resonaari. Carr and Kemmis (1986) define the three dimensions of the profession as: a practice based on theoretical knowledge and research; an overriding commitment to the well-being of students; and the right and the capability to make independent judgements free from external control and constraints to be adopted in any particular situation (pp. 220–221). This tripartite definition is tantamount to a rich understanding of autonomy, which Bottery and Barnett (1996) connect to expertise and altruism, and which Sachs (2003) describes as a teacher’s capability to make independent choices and to have control over his or her work.

Unpacking and elaborating on Sachs’ (2003) aforementioned notion of activist teaching profession, we suggest that teacher activism, within Resonaari’s pedagogical and organisational work, is manifested by the following four characteristics: (1) high motivation; (2) internal framing and communicative capacity; (3) ethical commitment; and (4) imaginative adaptation.

Our observations suggest an abundant preoccupation with these characteristics. For instance, the teacher speaks about motivation:

I am regularly looking for and trying to find things I don’t do very well.

And the organisation leader speaks about anticipating emotions:

We need to be a little bit angry . . . but we need to address that well.

The organisation leader also articulates that a strong ethical commitment is present:

When involved in teaching and running a school, I have to ask [myself], ‘what is the ethical promise I am ready to make to the students coming to my door?’

All of these elements characterise an activist disposition and culminate in an intense commitment to imaginative adaptation that, as we have seen thus far, can be written large or expressed in daily practice. Establishing oneself as a ‘reflective practitioner’ who sees uncertainties in the learning platform (Schön, 1983, p. 300) appears prominently at Resonaari, as this teacher makes evident:

This mother came with the idea that she would get something for her kid that would increase his motor skills and improve his eye-hand coordination . . . she obviously had read it somewhere. I said that he was not in that stage yet and it would not be fun for him . . . So I taught the mom to play the piano a little bit and also the kid, and we played the drums and made a band and just goofed around a bit. Eventually, he actually started to make rhythms and we could play real songs . . . It was just like fireworks! The mom obviously realised how much her kid enjoyed [it] and how much it was helping him . . . I wanted to [project onto the mother] the joy that the kid could have. And at the end the mom said that she saw something in her son she hadn't seen before . . . Probably five years ago I wouldn't have done that, I would have probably explained all the things about the brain, what affects the right and the left side of the brain, and so on.

The *Figurenotes* system is another example of imaginative adaptation at Resonaari. The students have learned to incorporate it as a way to decode music as well as a tool to help them to gain independent musical agency. The teachers are constantly developing further innovations in order to address their students' needs. As the organisation leader argues:

What we want is for them is to go out, make music outside Resonaari . . . The music, not their relationships with the teachers [is what is important].

In this way, it is their capacity for self-sufficiency, for creation, for growth that is independent from the requirements of the school or teacher that is most important. This ostensibly un sentimental view of the teaching and learning process can be seen as radical. Of course, making the learning situation as secure and comfortable as possible for the students is deeply embedded in Resonaari's practice. But their aim does *not* appear to reside in efforts to represent the presupposed therapeutic power of Resonaari's pedagogy, or the enchantment of classroom action, where interaction is mistaken for learning. Activism, however, also involves labouring toward an 'ethical promise' that requires us to think of the complex set of engagements that not only take place within any classroom, but also spill over and beyond it. As the teacher argues below, the aim is found in the internal transformation of students:

When they understand what is happening [musically], they may start thinking to themselves 'I can learn to play music . . . I am good because I can play. My father cannot play music, but I can . . .' and this is wonderful to me, because they leave here and they go home, and usually they take a taxi because the metro is too complicated, but I'm sure that when they start to think 'I'm good and I'm learning to play more and more' it also makes them to think 'tomorrow I'll take the metro'.

This activist disposition, which starts with transformative and critical thinking toward oneself and others, also goes beyond the vanity of 'winning' pedagogies. Furthermore, Resonaari's internal pedagogical challenges are matched by projects that promote students' capacities to make and learn music outside the institution. This is a key element in constructing inclusion and is exemplified by how Resonaari is starting to 'close the circle' and hire their ex-students to become Resonaari's teachers. This recent project – linked to



governmental efforts on behalf of disabled individuals' employment – establishes inclusion in service of citizenship, and conflates labour and learning in a meaningful manner. As explained here by the organisation leader:

Our two full-time musicians are disabled people so they have a contract where the working hours are limited to 6 hours a day and [we] also get some employment money from the city. We needed to think what they would do for those 6 hours a day: how long they can concentrate, what is a good task for them, how much individual practising and playing together, many-sided education, different instruments, performing in different venues and so on.

Merging labour and learning even further, the organisation leader manifests ethics, imaginative adaptation and a keen understanding of how to communicate his activist vision by placing these same musicians at the centre of a professional development activity for teachers. Speaking of the reversal of roles in terms of who 'ought' to lead the professional development of teachers, and generating a *rupture* on the expectations of expertise, the organisation leader states:

So now this 'expert teacher' looks different and talks a little bit differently. It was nothing like: 'oh, how nice that some individuals with disability are joining in' but it was real music education and they were leading it. I give a lot of workshops and usually people come after the course to thank me, saying: 'thank you it was so great' and proceed to tell me what they are doing . . . The normal feedback. But after this [workshop run by] our musicians . . . It was the first time that I got all kinds of email feedback . . . People were writing long stories about how they felt in that seminar and how they understood something new about the interaction and the role of the teacher. It was such a surprise for them.

The key, then, is not simply the high motivation that Resonaari embodies, but its source. We argue that the motivation arises from a series of productive tensions that are fundamental to the activist disposition we find represented by Resonaari and its members. To fortify this argument, we identified the following tensions: a tension between being realistic and challenging one's assumptions; a tension between ambitious pedagogy and an absence of zealotry toward one's classrooms and one's students; and a tension between changing policy and unveiling the language or the hidden elements of educational and musical endeavours.

### Concluding remarks

As we have argued in this article, despite an inclusive paradigm in educational thinking and policies, inequities and segregation continue to exist in institutional music education. Disability, age, learning difficulties and socioeconomic restraints all endure as exclusionary markers, limiting access to music education and cultural services. Overcoming these unjust practices and tacit misconceptions requires that, as teachers, we understand that 'policy is pursued by a vantage point and constitutes a subjective endeavour that is contingent on interpretation' (Gale, 2001, p. 134). Indeed, educative and policy environments are

contiguous 'multidimensional and interactive networks made of structures and actors' (Liasidou, 2012, p. 74); therefore, they are in need of constant adjustment and re-design.

The practices at Resonaari can be seen as a manifestation of why we should not fetishise policy, but rather recognise that it is always open to interpretation and susceptible to our input (O'Reagan, 1992). At minimum, the practices presented herein show a new configuration of the role and impact of 'place-based' solutions at the individual, institutional and policy level. The role of Resonaari among other music schools in Finland is distinctive, and this distinction begins by pointing out how often traditional institutions fail to plausibly approximate care *and* empowerment. Unfortunately, in some ways, the practice of caring has often resulted in the perception of people with disabilities as powerless (Morris, 1997, p. 54), led by 'care managers' who take power in their professional hands (Oliver, 1996, p. 56). In contrast, Resonaari offers empowerment *beyond* care and protection, creating connections between music and the outside world, and between pedagogical leadership and the modelling of possibilities for students.

Returning to the central vignette of a student who was considered 'stupid but who can play so well' by his peers, we might now consider that the ethical considerations, inextricably interwoven between teaching and learning of marginalised individuals, are much more complex than the practical dichotomies that special education – be it 'gifted education' and 'remedial education' – usually allows. Indeed, the case of Resonaari offers us an entry point to bypass these stagnant limitations, focusing rather on an activist stance toward a complex representation of both teachers' institutional agency and students' individual agency that is strongly mediated by music, whilst at the same time moving beyond it.

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