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MAPPING THE FIELD OF COMPOSING PEDAGOGY IN FINLAND

From musical inventions to cultural participation

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Abstract

In Finland, creative music-making practices have already been included in curricular documents for decades. Music teachers working at schools have been encouraged to provide pupils with opportunities for musical improvisation and explorations, and multiple composing projects in and out formal music education offer platforms for young people to make and share their own musical works. However, the concept of composing as well as questions related to the aims and methods of teaching composing in educational settings have varied over time. It is symptomatic that the word “composing” was included in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education as late as in 2016, having so far been referred to as “musical inventions” and other euphemisms. This chapter provides an overview of recent discourse and practices related to composing and composing pedagogy in Finnish music education. The specific interest is in the role of music educators in enabling access for all kinds of students to musical meaning-making and cultural participation.

Keywords

Composition pedagogy, music-making, cultural participation, music instruction, Finland

Introduction

The task of the subject of music is to create opportunities for versatile musical activities and active cultural participation [...] The pupils are guided in developing their thinking skills and

perception by regularly providing them with opportunities for working with sound and music as well as for composing and other creative production.

(FNBE [Finnish National Board of Education], 2014)

Ever since the development of the free public school system in Finland in the 1850s, music (originally a subject called *singing*) and other arts have had a central role in the Finnish school curriculum. Ensuring that every citizen has an equal opportunity not only to learn how to read and write, but also to develop and express themselves in and through the arts, is indeed a basic right recorded in the Constitution of Finland (Finlex, 2000). Today's music education in school settings aims to be multifaceted and hands-on, providing stimulating and relevant activities for heterogeneous groups of pupils with various needs. Musical concepts and skills are learned through multiple activities, such as singing, playing instruments, moving, and listening to music – as well as composing one's own music. In the most recent core curriculum for basic education (Grades 1–9), “composing and other creative production” of music is expected to be taught to all pupils at all grades (FNBE [Finnish National Board of Education], 2014).

In Finland, general music instruction is offered free of charge in pre-schools (age 6), schools (ages 7–16), and upper secondary schools (ages 16–19). In addition, and after general education, there are various opportunities for music education (see Korpela et al., 2010). A wide network of music schools provides affordable basic education in the arts, primarily for children and young people, on an extracurricular basis. Instruction in music schools is goal-oriented and follows the objectives and key contents as stated in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in the Arts (FNBE [Finnish National Board of Education], 2017). In the extended syllabus of the recently introduced core curriculum, composing and improvisation (treated as a singularity) are included as one of the four main objectives of tuition (*ibid.*). Moreover, in many music schools, it is now possible to choose composing (instead of a musical instrument) as the main subject. For a lifelong learner, institutions of liberal adult education provide a natural setting to continue or begin a musical hobby. Vocational and higher education offer opportunities for earning a degree in music, including in composing.

Although it is nowadays possible to receive teaching in composing throughout the whole system of formal music education, the focus of this chapter lies in the context of basic education, as it is the school system that provides general music instruction for every child in Finland.

To compose or not to compose?

The idea of creative music-making in Finnish schools is by no means unprecedented. Muukkonen (2010, p. 66; see also Suomi, 2019) shows how the evolution of music instruction from singing hymns and patriotic songs to active and diverse music education has happened gradually, often following the international trends and current research and methods (e.g. Orff and Dalcroze) in the wider field of music education. The development of technology and the establishment of the International Society for Music Education (ISME) in the 1950s opened particularly important doors to the wealth of modern educational thinking and ideas that were quickly adopted and applied in Finnish school classrooms and music teacher education (Louhivuori, 2005). In addition to the importance of singing, the curricular documents of the time also recommend the inclusion of other activities, such as music listening and musical invention exercises. By the 1970s, the understanding of the importance of giving pupils opportunities to express their own musical ideas and creativity in the school classroom was already established, and the journey toward the “ethos of versatility” (Muukkonen, 2010) in music teaching was well on its way. This ethos is also clearly displayed in the current core curriculum with its emphasis in the importance of providing pupils with opportunities to “learn music in many different ways” to support the development of their “musical skills and understanding as well as holistic growth and cooperation skills” (FNBE, 2014, p. 141).

It is then all the more curious that despite this early awakening to the significance of creativity and active student participation in the music classroom, it took decades before the term *composing* (in Finnish, *säveltäminen*) was first mentioned as a content area in the curriculum for basic education. Prior to the most recent core curriculum (FNBE, 2014), which came into effect in 2016, creative music-making activities were referred to with various euphemisms, such as “musical inventions.” In the former core curriculum (FNBE, 2004), for instance, teachers were advised to offer opportunities for pupils to “experiment with their own musical ideas” and make “small-scale sound collages and improvisations.” It almost looks like the writers of curricular documents did their best to avoid speaking of composing. One can only guess at the reasons behind it. Perhaps there was something too solemn about the word composing? Something that sounded more like an exclusive right reserved for those with a “special talent,” rather than an activity that could be taught to and exercised by anyone in the school classroom? Or, maybe the nineteenth century’s Romantic ideal of the “innate nature of creative genius” (Burnard, 2012, p. 10) was still looming around, preventing policy-makers and music educators from considering that there could be several ways of being and becoming a composer?

Be that as it may, the limited and individualistic view of musical creativity is finally challenged in the present curricular documents. Both the Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNBE, 2014), which boldly urges schools to offer pupils occasions for composing already from the

first grade onwards, as well as the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in the Arts (FNBE, [2017](#)), which instructs the extracurricular music schools to encourage all their students to compose their own musical works, place composing at the very center of music educational activities. It is also clear that the writers of the current Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNBE, [2014](#)) have understood composing in its *widest sense*: composing can include various creative activities from songwriting and riff-building; to facilitated group-improvisation and sound explorations with body percussion; to the invention of improvisatory textures and soundscapes inspired by other art forms; to remixing and other forms of digital composing; to the more traditional forms of note-based composing, and so on. Composing is, in other words, understood in a much broader meaning than as a form of specialized musical expertise practiced only by highly educated (and/or exceptionally talented) professionals. Rather, a role of music instruction in school is considered to be “to encourage the pupil in developing a *creative relationship* with music” (ibid., p. 488, emphasis by the author). An important part of this development process is the inclusion of composing one’s own music or in collaboration with others.

Equipping music educators for teaching composing

It is important to note that Finnish schools have full autonomy, and teachers receive significant independence in applying the aims of the core curriculum to their own teaching. The national core curriculum offers the basis for education providers to outline their local curricula, in which it is possible to consider the local specificities and needs of the pupils more distinctively (FNBE [Finnish National Board of Education], [2016](#)). At its best, the pedagogical freedom, unrestrained from ready-made instructional methods, leaves a lot of room for the teacher’s imagination and innovative ideas. As noted by Randles and Muhonen ([2014](#)), there are a number of possibilities for a skillful music teacher to incorporate composing original music with pupils as part of classroom activities in the Finnish school. On the other hand, however, teachers might experience the feeling of working alone with little help in their efforts of putting the curricular objectives into practice. Especially generalist class teachers, who (typically) are not specialized in music but often expected to teach music in Grades 1–6, may consider their musical and didactic skills to be insufficient and, therefore, struggle to implement the learning content of the core curriculum in music teaching (Suomi, [2019](#); Vesioja, [2006](#)).

It appears that the eagerness of policy-makers to give composing a pivotal role in music education has not yet fully transferred into the everyday practices of classrooms. According to reports and surveys (e.g. Juntunen, [2011](#); Partti, [2016](#)), composing is not regularly taught in schools, and the majority of teachers consider themselves ill-equipped for teaching and facilitating composing

in diverse classrooms (Partti, [2016](#); Suomi, [2019](#)). In many countries, the emphasis of music teacher education programs appears to be more on performance-based studies than in creative music-making pedagogy (e.g., Deemer, [2016](#)). Similarly, in Finland, pre-service teachers gain wide general knowledge of music and didactics and spend a substantial portion of their studies practicing several instruments and ensemble playing, whereas opportunities to develop the skills in teaching composing are few and far between (Ojala & Väkevä, [2013](#)). It is therefore hardly surprising that music teachers find it easier to facilitate reproductive learning practices, such as playing songs from school music textbooks, even at the cost of opening up opportunities for pupils' composing processes. In a nationwide survey conducted among Finnish music teachers (Partti, [2016](#)), only one third of the participants estimate their own skills to be good in teaching creative music-making in the classroom. According to the teachers, the main challenges in teaching composing at school are related to large group sizes, the lack or scarcity of training in composing pedagogy during their own teacher education, and the lack of time. Furthermore, as much as 80 percent of the participants express their need for in-service training in composing pedagogy. The study conducted among students in the primary teacher program in Finland (Suomi, [2019](#), p. 196) paints an even bleaker picture of the situation. Students report that they were given little or no opportunities for creative music-making during their studies. Unsurprisingly, the lack of music composing opportunities during the studies directly correlates with their perceived skills in teaching it in their future classrooms (*ibid.*, p. 212).

Recently, the contradiction between curricular aims and classroom practices has been widely acknowledged. An increasing number of initiatives and in-service programs are being developed to promote composing and equip teachers with resources and skills for facilitating composing in the music classroom. Many of these initiatives result from a collaboration between music education institutions and the wider music sector, including the music industry. An example of such collaborative efforts is the *BiisiPumppu* [SongPump] project (2013–2014), which was designed to encourage school children to compose their own music as well as to equip teachers to incorporate composing as part of their music lessons. The *BiisiPumppu* project was organized by the Finnish Composers' Copyright Society (Teosto) and implemented by some of the most renowned Finnish songwriters and music producers, who would work alongside the teachers to provide guidance in pupils' composing processes. According to the study on the project (Partti & Ahola, [2016](#); Partti & Väkevä, [2018](#)), the composer/teacher partnerships were particularly successful when the collaborators found a way to make use of each other's expertise and experience as their mutual learning resource. Another recent composing pedagogy project is *Säpe* (2016–2020), a collaborative effort between three higher music education institutions in Finland, funded by the Finnish National Board of Education. The *Säpe* project provided continuing education for music educators working in

various settings from schools to music schools, to liberal adult education institutions. A concrete result of the project is the edited online publication *Resepejä säveltämisen ohjaukseen* [Recipes for facilitating composing] (Hartikainen, [2017](#)), a collection of ideas, best practices, and methods for teaching composing in schools and music schools. The “recipes” are shared by the *Säpe* participants and trainers to be freely used and applied by colleagues in their own work.

The rapid development of inexpensive and easily available music technology has further enabled possibilities for classroom composing. Mobile devices, in particular, offer several prospects for group-based composing – but only if these opportunities are put to use in music classrooms. The *Future Songwriting* project (2018–2020) utilized the novel prospects opened up by mobile music-making devices. The recently finished project was a European cooperation, initiated and coordinated by the Finnish Composers’ Copyright Society (Teosto) and co-funded by the European Commission under the Creative Europe program. *Future Songwriting* took place in 15 schools in Finland, Germany, and France with the aim of strengthening and developing technology-enabled composing practices in music education (Partti, Weber, & Rolle, [2023](#)). The specific emphasis of the project was in in-service training to upgrade teachers’ professional skills and knowledge related to the use of digital technology in the service of creative music-making. In the project, a team of three trainers, with their background in the music industry and education, first provided teachers with workshops for learning how to use tablet computers in the classroom composing and, thereafter, continued to work alongside the teachers as they begin to implement their new skills with their own pupils.

Educating music teachers toward creative agency

An important starting point for the classroom composing projects mentioned above has been the centrality of composing in the recent curricular documents on the one hand, and the reported gap between curricular aims and classroom activities on the other. Indeed, supporting the work of music teachers is essential, and research-based development projects, such as *Future Songwriting*, among others, can have an essential role in equipping teachers with current know-how and skills, as well as encouraging them to undertake novel methods in music teaching. As pointed out by the Finnish music educator and scholar Sari Muhonen ([2014](#), p. 13), “Unhooking internalized practices and tried and trusted methods demands effort, some degree of courage, and being ‘tuned’ towards inquiries.” Furthermore, the process of change often not only requires transformation in the teacher’s mindset, but also, and importantly, support from outside – be it emotional, financial, structural, or collegial. As the results of the study on the *Future Songwriting* project suggest, development projects may have an important role also in helping to facilitate professional learning communities among teachers

(Partti et al. 2023). At their best, these communities enable the development of one's skills through collaborative activities with one's colleagues.

Certainly, of equal importance to the support provided for the teachers already working in the field is the systematic development of the programs educating future music teachers. The teachers of tomorrow will work in increasingly diversifying societies and will be required to possess not only various musical skills and deep know-how, but also a wealth of other competencies, such as media and technology literacy and an ability to swiftly adapt in and cultivate diverse learning environments (e.g., Opetusministeriö, 2007). Supporting the student teachers' development in versatile teaching and creative musicianship thus calls for teacher training during which students are offered multiple opportunities for creative examinations and discoveries in music as well as in teaching and learning. Muhonen (2014, p. 13) urges music teacher education institutions to support the student teachers' development into *creative agency*, to recognize and value their individual creative endeavors and collaboratively explore, stretch, expand, and create new practices.

An example of recent efforts to model and support the development of creative agency is the *Kuule! minä sävellän* project [Hear this! I'm composing], a major collaboration among the Sibelius Academy, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, Finnish National Opera and Ballet, and Helsinki Music Centre, with its roots in the Very Young Composers (VYC) program of the New York Philharmonic (Taideyliopisto, 2019). In the project, children and young people are provided with opportunities to compose and hear their own compositions performed by Philharmonic musicians. The creative work is guided by professional composers and student teachers of the Sibelius Academy, but the leading principle is to let children initiate all the creative ideas and decisions. The development of creative agency of the young composers is supported by ensuring that the role of the adult is not to control and supervise, but to assist the child by discussing their ideas, and to help them to further develop and finally notate the ideas for the musicians. For the student teachers participating in *Kuule! minä sävellän*, the project provides chances to practice means to facilitate and scaffold children's composing processes in ways that put the child's individual creativity and voice in the front and center. Rather than orientating the young composers to a certain direction, or composing *for* them, the project invites the student teachers and other adults to believe in and respect children's capability and agency and partake in the effort of collaborative creativity.

The aforementioned composing projects also highlight an inquisitive and bold attitude as a central part of the growth into creative agency; that is, the fearlessness to venture into musical explorations that are free from established notions of "right" and "wrong." As reminded by Kanellopoulos (2007), these kinds of explorations are based on *risks* and form the very core of

creative music-making, in which “risk is welcomed and, in fact, what can occur by mistake can be more satisfying” (p. 133). An ongoing challenge for the Finnish music teacher education institutions is therefore to open up more opportunities for supporting students’ creative agency. Indeed, this should be understood as the *starting* point for teaching, rather than an “add-on” or a separate “composing task” to be squeezed into the already crammed course structures. Advancing creative agency in our institutions probably also means a shift in focus from the emphasis on content, curriculum structure, and students’ enculturation to existing musical traditions only, to the ways we could better support the student teachers in becoming agents in their own learning communities and creators of new cultural content.

Composing as a means to cultural participation

In addition to the increased emphasis put on the importance of composing in the Finnish curricular documents, the justifications and meanings of composing also appear to have somewhat expanded over the years. The tendency of previous curricula to include creative music-making as a supplementary element to accompany the more principal activities – especially singing and instrument playing – is being replaced by the new understanding of the fundamental importance of composing. Instead of limiting the role of composing in school to an effective means to learn *about* music, the current Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNBE, 2014) views composing in the context of wider educational aims, such as the development of the pupil’s creative thinking and collaborative skills.

This shift in focus is well aligned with current research literature in music education. The Finnish music education researchers Juha Ojala and Lauri Väkevä (2013) approach composing as a musical exploration and a form of playing. Central to this view of composing as a *practical research process* (ibid., p. 10, translation by the author) are the possibilities that creating one’s own music offers for pupils to “come to terms with the world and with other people” (ibid., p. 17, translation by the author). Ojala and Väkevä further argue that composing can empower pupils to take their place as creators of musical culture by offering ways to experiment and evaluate various combinations and possibilities of tones and sounds. This is to say that through creative explorations, it is possible to also make explorations into *ourselves* (see also John-Steiner, 2000) and to find one’s own voice among other voices.

The journey of composing from the margins of educational activities to the center of music instruction is ongoing. The future challenges for Finnish music education include, among others, the question of how to better advance the development of music education institutions where the

cultivation of experimental attitude through the creation of new cultural content is central. A good starting point for such development work is in helping student teachers and music teachers to begin to recognize and utilize the everyday opportunities for creative music-making. This might not necessarily require carrying out large-scale composing projects. Instead, composing can be seen as a cross-curricular pedagogical activity embedded in daily music-making activities, as reminded by the Finnish music teacher educator Marja Ervasti (2013, p. 113). In a similar vein, Sari Muhonen (2014) discusses her own experiences as a teacher in the Finnish school. For her, the development of *songcrafting* (Muhonen, 2016), a collaborative way of composing in a classroom, has worked as a rewarding way to include composing “as part of everyday classroom activities” (Muhonen, 2014, p. 7). Nurturing this kind of “everyday creativity, creativity with a small c” (ibid., p. 13) has also transformed her awareness of the teacher’s role as a collaborator in creative processes with her pupils. The most crucial feature for a teacher who wishes to advance an experimental attitude and creative activities in his or her classroom might not be the high-level competence in composing, but “the ability to learn, inquire, create in collaboration, and support these skills in his or her students,” as stated by Muhonen (ibid., p. 13).

An ever-deeper understanding of the many opportunities that composing can offer to *all kinds of pupils* to participate in musical meaning-making – regardless of their cultural background, ways of learning, or levels of musical knowledge, for instance – opens up new opportunities for a more inclusive and equal music education. Understanding composing as a creative activity accessible to anyone welcomes young and older learners to participate in the processes of creating and carrying out new musical ideas and interpretations, and, ultimately, to find their place as authors, reformers, and innovators of culture (Ojala & Väkevä, 2013; Toivanen & Partti, 2017). It is in this way that composing music could be seen as a powerful way to support the development of “active cultural participation” (FNBE, 2014, p. 141) in Finnish schools.

Reflective questions

1. What kinds of justifications and meanings of musical composing can you identify in the curricular documents of your country?
2. How can music educators advance every students’ participation in musical meaning-making?
3. In which ways are music teachers in your country equipped with resources and skills for facilitating composing in the music classroom?

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