

## **Challenging the salvation stories in music education: Adolescent music school students narrating their musical ecosystems**

*Hanna Backer Johnsen*

*Music education tends to portray marginalized students—for example those with foreign backgrounds or from low-income families—as needing to be "saved" by music education. While these stories are potentially helpful when securing funding and promoting socially driven initiatives as part of institutions' inclusive aims, they simultaneously risk obscuring the complexities of meaningful music making and overlook the lived experiences of the young people involved, thereby perpetuating structural inequities. This article addresses the question of inclusion from the perspective of the students themselves by exploring adolescents' experiences in Floora, a social innovation within the Basic Education in the Arts music system in Finland, providing access to regular instrumental tuition at music schools for children and young people who would not otherwise be able to participate due to socio-economic barriers. The empirical material has been generated through interviews with adolescents in Floora and analyzed through narrative inquiry. The findings articulate how students' experiences of regular music tuition do not align with benevolent professional salvation stories. Rather, the findings point to the complexity of meanings given to music making and instrumental learning, creating a whole ecosystem of social and musical encounters where agency can be achieved or challenged far beyond music schools. Recognizing the multiplicity of young peoples' musical worlds and viewing these worlds as interconnected requires professional responsibility and genuine knowledge sharing among all involved, fostering the potential for social justice and more democratic practices within music schools.*

Keywords: adolescents, music schools, musical ecosystems, salvation stories, social innovations

### **Introduction**

An increased research focus on social inequalities in education has pointed out structures and socio-economic factors that perpetuate the exclusion of certain individuals or groups of people from educational systems, including music education (e.g., Wright, 2010, 2015). Researchers have shown how children and young people from well-educated and wealthy families have easier access to extracurricular music education (e.g., Hahn et al., 2024; Hofvander Trulsson et al., 2015) generating inherited privileges in meritocratic educational

systems (Väkevä et al., 2022). In the Nordic region, where this study was situated, the mechanisms of exclusion have been widely recognized in the state-funded music school system (e.g. (Di Lorenzo Tillborg, 2021; Jeppsson & Lindgren, 2018; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2021; Laes et al., 2018; Väkevä et al., 2017), and policymakers and state funders expect quick solutions and measurable outcomes demonstrating how institutions have addressed these problems of exclusion. However, while attempting to respond to the increasing inequalities, music education policy and practice tends to inadvertently cause division between the “mainstream” and “marginalized” groups, or normal and special students – between those who fit in the system and those who need specific action to be included (Di Lorenzo Tillborg & Ellefsen, 2021; Laes, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020). These benevolent yet uncritical attempts to make music education more inclusive have created a phenomenon that is narrated through “salvation stories”: of how, for instance, students with foreign backgrounds are defined and verified through their “otherness” (Di Lorenzo Tillborg, 2021), and in which “poor children” or “youth at-risk” are “saved” through the “mystique” of music education (Baker, 2021; Cheng, 2019). While promoting and legitimating “socially driven” music education initiatives, salvation stories are manifested in endeavors for social mobility – to uplift low-social class children through music education initiatives – or normalization through “soft techniques” (Kuuse et al., 2016, p. 193). In these attempts to include the excluded, the mechanisms of inequality in the system itself may remain hidden (Väkevä et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2020), and the complexities and ambivalence in these initiatives go unreflected upon (Baker, 2021; Boeskov, 2022; Kolbe, 2023). Consequently, inclusion has become a debated concept among scholars, and, as suggested by Gert Biesta (2019), can be considered as a “moving position” depending upon who are outsiders and insiders, and as “shifting the terrain” that encompasses the “need for transforming the very field where positions can be held and taken” (p. 97). This view stands in sharp contrast to so-called “inclusive” goals aimed at accommodating, tolerating, or transforming difference to maintain harmony or consensus (Laes & Kallio, 2015) within educational settings.

This study explores this phenomenon through *Floora*, a social innovation (Väkevä et al., 2017) within the Finnish *Basic Education in the Arts* extracurricular education system. Social innovations can be described as “initiatives in a particular part of society – an organization, a practice, or an area of activity that signal a promising path of wider social change” (Mangabeira Unger, 2015, p. 233 in väkevä et al., 2017). The extracurricular system includes nine art forms and tuition is mostly offered in separate art schools including music schools. Subsidized by the government, music schools provide individual instructions mainly for children and young people in various instruments, voice, and musicianship skills, and follow a nationally regulated curriculum. Traditionally, entrance exams have served as a gatekeeping mechanism, privileging those who either demonstrate early abilities or who have had prior exposure to musical training. Within this context, *Floors* was initiated in 2013 by a small group of individual instrumental teachers with the mission to offer goal-oriented music tuition to supplement the basic school system and as a remedy for the socially unequal extracurricular music education system. *Floors* was organized as a separate project taking place in multiple music schools in Finland. Through *Floora*, participants were provided free instrumental lessons and equal access to high-quality music education, including one-to-one

and group lessons (Backer Johnsen et al., 2025). Participants were recruited in collaboration with professionals working in regional child welfare departments, social and immigrant services, and public schools (Laes et al., 2021). During the 10 years (2013–2023) of its existence, *Floora* reached approximately 600 children and young people across the country and nearly 60% of the participants in *Floora* were first or second-generation immigrants. Altogether about 80 instrumental teachers were involved in different music schools. The teachers' salaries were paid through external funding from private foundations, the state and municipalities, administrated by the Amabile Association established in 2013 to run *Floora* and apply for funding.

The aim of this narrative study is to challenge established perspectives of social inclusion in music education to better account for students' experiences, critically examining the discourse in which young students become the *targets* of inclusion. The study seeks to understand what constitutes a meaningful musical environment for students – their *musical ecosystem* (Barrett & Westerlund, 2024) – and how music school studies, and *Floora* as a social innovation with inclusive goals, contribute to this meaning-making. The concept of musical ecosystem, as experienced by the students themselves, is used to refer to the interconnected (Niemi, 2021) musical, social, and material whole wherein the participating students live, learn, and act.

## Research approach

### *Research question*

This narrative inquiry approaches human experience and action as a “purposeful engagement in the world” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). While experience in this pragmatic-phenomenological understanding greater than what can be expressed through language and never fully mirrors a person's felt meanings (Polkinghorne, 2007), individual narratives are nevertheless seen as communication (Chase, 2018) and “meaning making through the shaping of experience; a way of understanding one's own or others' actions; of organizing events, objects, *feelings, or thoughts in relation to each other*; of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions, events, *feelings, or thoughts over time (in the past, present, and/or future)*” (p. 549, emphasis in original). Focusing on the relationality – in this case adolescent music students and their actions within their musical environments – makes space “for narratives that express meaning without necessarily achieving coherence” (p. 550). Therefore, examining “how narratives actually work in social life requires attention to [...] circumstances that call for ambiguity” (p. 550). To bring forward the students' experiences, the following research question is addressed:

What meanings do adolescents give to their instrumental learning and music-making within *Floora* and beyond?

By focusing on experience and shedding light on adolescents’ local knowledge (Barrett & Stauffer, 2012), this study also addresses “institutionalized inequalities and how these may be resisted and/or changed” (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 80). The music school students’ local knowledge and experiences are seen as keys to understanding and unfolding the possible mechanisms of inequality within the music school system.

*Empirical material*

The empirical material was generated through individual semi-structured narrative interviews with five voluntary participants, students Kai, Oliver, Anna, Sandra and Linn (pseudonyms) aged 15–20 years who participated in *Floora* for 1 or more years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Research participants

Name (pseudonym)	<b>Kai</b>	<b>Oliver</b>	<b>Anna</b>	<b>Sandra</b>	<b>Linn</b>
Age	16	17	15	20	16
Years of participation in <i>Floora</i>	4	6	1	2	4
Years of regular instrumental lessons	4	6	8	8	4

Each participant was interviewed 3 to 4 times, with each interview lasting 35 to 60 minutes. A minimum of 1-year participation in *Floora* was the criterion for participating in the research. The interviews were conducted with a 1 to 3-week interval, which allowed time for reflection in between the meetings. Due to COVID-19, only two interviews took place at the local music school, while all the others were conducted via Zoom. Two of the adolescents brought their mothers with them in the interviews, as the possibility of having a trusted person in the interview was mentioned in the invitation letter. The researcher also kept a diary to help reflect on the research process, ethical considerations, and positionalities.

In the interviews (Phase 1) the adolescents were invited to describe their experiences of instrument lessons, the meanings they gave to instrumental studies in their music school, their motives to join *Floora*, and their musical life outside the music school. The participants were asked to bring examples of their favorite music to create a space where it was possible not only to discuss their preferred music but also important events, memories, feelings, and thoughts about music and everyday life. In addition, the adolescents were guided to draw a map illustrating the places and people significant to them (Visser et al., 2015).

*Method of analysis*

The empirical material was analyzed vertically and horizontally (Polkinghorne, 1995, 2005). Since “experience has a vertical depth” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138) the analysis process started by analyzing each narrative account by focusing on each individual’s experiences and purposeful engagements with music and instrumental learning, both inside and outside the

music school environment – their experienced musical ecosystem. The vertical analysis process (Phase 2) involved several rounds of carefully listening to and reading the interviews and making notes, continuing with narrative configuration including color-coding the different events, happenings, feelings, and thoughts of the students, finally connecting these elements to structure the uniqueness and complexity of each student’s actions into meaningful and temporally organized wholes – emplotted stories.

A horizontal analysis (Phase 3) aimed at finding common elements *across* the five emplotted stories (Polkinghorne, 1995), and to reconfigure narratives about where music school institutions’ stand within students’ musical ecosystems. The commonalities illustrate the complexity and interconnectedness within adolescents’ musical ecosystems that condition students’ experiences with music. As pointed out by Westerlund (2008), “learners’ earlier experiences condition not only cognitive processes but also the forming of social relationships during the learning processes” (p. 88). An overview of the research process, including interviews and transcription and the vertical and horizontal analysis, is presented in Figure 1. The five emplotted stories were member-checked by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and visualized into figures, one figure for each student (Figures 2–6).

The analysis was guided by the concept of *ecological agency* (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Agency is a much discussed concept within sociology, and different understandings have been developed as to “what it means to act in and through music” (Karlsen, 2011b, p. 111). Seen from an ecological perspective, agency is not something students inherently *have*; it is rather something they can *achieve* through the social process of interactions with their surroundings (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Agency, then, becomes a phenomenon wherein both the students and the environment are affected by their engagement. The ecosystemic perspective (Barrett & Westerlund, 2024; Niemi, 2021) enabled exploring the musical spaces in which adolescents lived, learned, and acted – such as music schools, school, and home – as interrelated and in “dynamic interplay with each other” (Otto et al., 2023, p. 16).

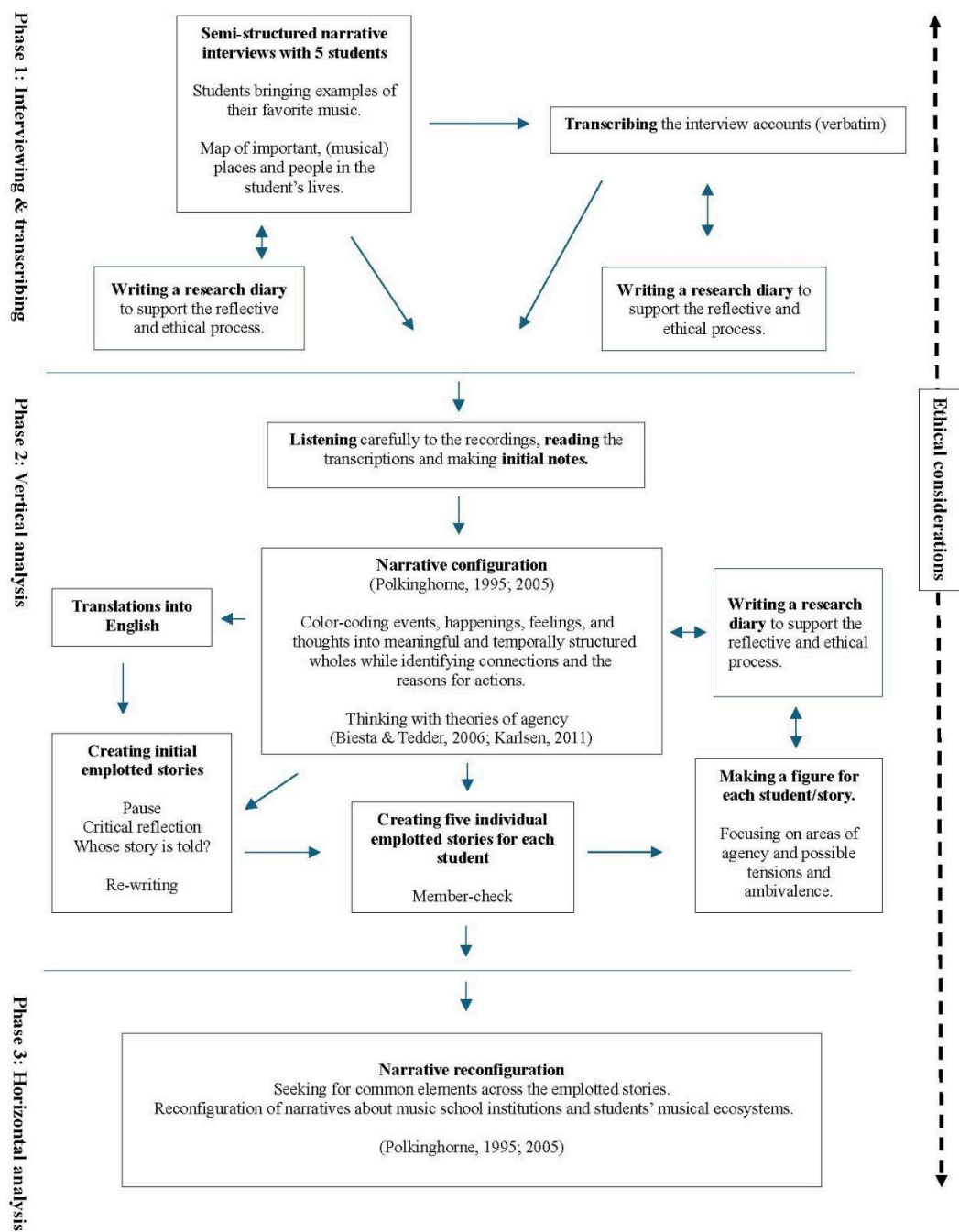


Figure 1: Overview of the research process, including the vertical and horizontal analysis.

### *Ethical considerations and (de)limitations*

The study was reviewed by The Ethical Review Committee of Uniarts Helsinki, and the ethical concerns related to research *with* young people (Christensen & James, 2017) were taken into account throughout the process. The research procedures included seeking informed consent from adolescents and parents, and a central part of the research process was to pursue dialogue while being aware of the possible power asymmetry (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) when interviewing young people and individuals from various cultural backgrounds

(Cook-Sather, 2020). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and acknowledging my dual role as both a researcher and program administrator was central, particularly to mitigate potential pressure on students. The students were assured that their decision – whether to participate or not in the research – would have no negative impact on their relationship with the program or their music schools. Clear and transparent communication was prioritized to ensure that students and parents understood the purpose of the research, the nature of the empirical material being generated, and the measures taken to protect their anonymity. The invitation to students to participate in the research was distributed through their instrumental teachers because of the strict protection of the students' personal information. However, this might have impacted who participated in the research, or students' motivation to participate according to how their teachers informed them about the research.

### ***Floora students' experienced musical ecosystems: The vertical analysis***

The five emplotted stories created through the vertical analysis process, describing the individual adolescents' musical interactions, were organized under the following titles: 1. A lot in me is about music; 2. I don't necessarily feel that I belong to the music school family; 3. It surprises me that I still continue to play this instrument; 4. I'm the kind of a person who likes to learn new things; 5. I like to be there where I have friends. Musical, social, and personal elements influence each other in the adolescents' activities and learning, both in terms of the physical location of *where*, *when*, and with *whom* the music activity takes place, but also in relation to *why* music or playing an instrument is experienced as meaningful or challenging. The emplotted stories encompass descriptions of instrumental lessons, activities in music schools or music in general education, composing, playing games, listening to music with friends or alone, and of participating in concerts, festivals, and music camps. Further, the stories articulate areas of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006), as well as areas of possible tensions and ambivalences within the adolescents' ecosystems. The tensions should, however, not be understood as exclusively negative, but as areas where their possibility to achieve agency is challenged. The five following emplotted stories, including the connected figures (see Figures 2–6), represent the experienced musical ecosystem of each adolescent as outcomes of the vertical analysis.

#### ***Anna's story: A lot in me is about music***

*I started playing in the first grade in an afternoon club, but I also took lessons at the music school and joined the orchestra there. However, at some point my motivation dropped because the songs we played were not interesting. After a break I continued because I really liked my teacher, and I could develop my skills better with the teacher's help. The second level test was quite easy, but I don't think that it tells anything about my musical knowledge. Of course, it's nice to show what you have learned but it's not so important. At home I play many instruments. I also write my own music, and I've become quite good at accompanying myself. A lot in me is about music. Once I went to a folk music*

*festival and played in a big festival ensemble. I really enjoyed it with my friend. I've found those songs again and I've played them over and over again. I do all of this outside the music school. I haven't gotten so much help from anywhere to become more professional. I dream about writing my own music, that's what I would like to do. Music has had such an impact on my life. But it's more about if you have good luck or not. Now the most important thing for me is climate change, like protecting the environment, protecting the animals... and of course, that there would be no racism and transphobia, no sexism, no ableism... all these. That no one would feel excluded. If I had the power to change things then I would do it through writing music! But you can't have an impact if nobody is listening.*

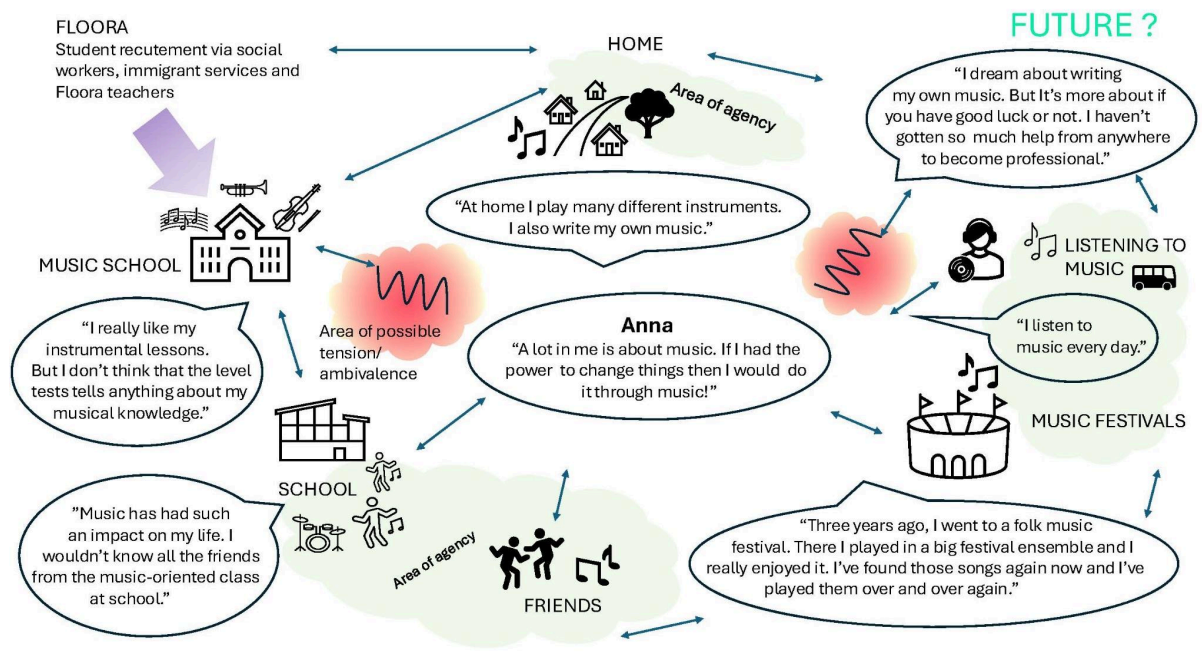


Figure 2: Anna's Experienced Musical Ecosystem

**Oliver's story: I don't necessarily feel that I belong to the music school family**

*I was the one who wanted to play an instrument, I knew it already in [home country]. No one in my family is a musician or plays an instrument. It was a nice hobby as we had moved to Finland. The lessons at the music school gave me a kind of "boost" for my self-esteem. Or I mean, I don't have a problem with my self-esteem, but it felt nice. People who just arrived in this country need a hobby... they need something. But I think that I wouldn't have needed it. I would still have made it here. I didn't feel that it helped me in the integration process. Now I've been playing for almost six years with the same teacher. It's always nice to come once a week. We're quite open with each other, since we have known each other for such a long time. But I don't necessarily feel that I belong to the music school family, it's not such a big deal. I'm connected to my teacher, and I haven't been involved so much in the music school's other activities. I was in the orchestra for a while, but they were much younger than me. In secondary school I went to a music-oriented class. I'm glad that I was accepted because there were nice people. I joined the school's orchestra and played in concerts and with classmates at different events. It was fun. My life is full of music and many friends have come through music.*



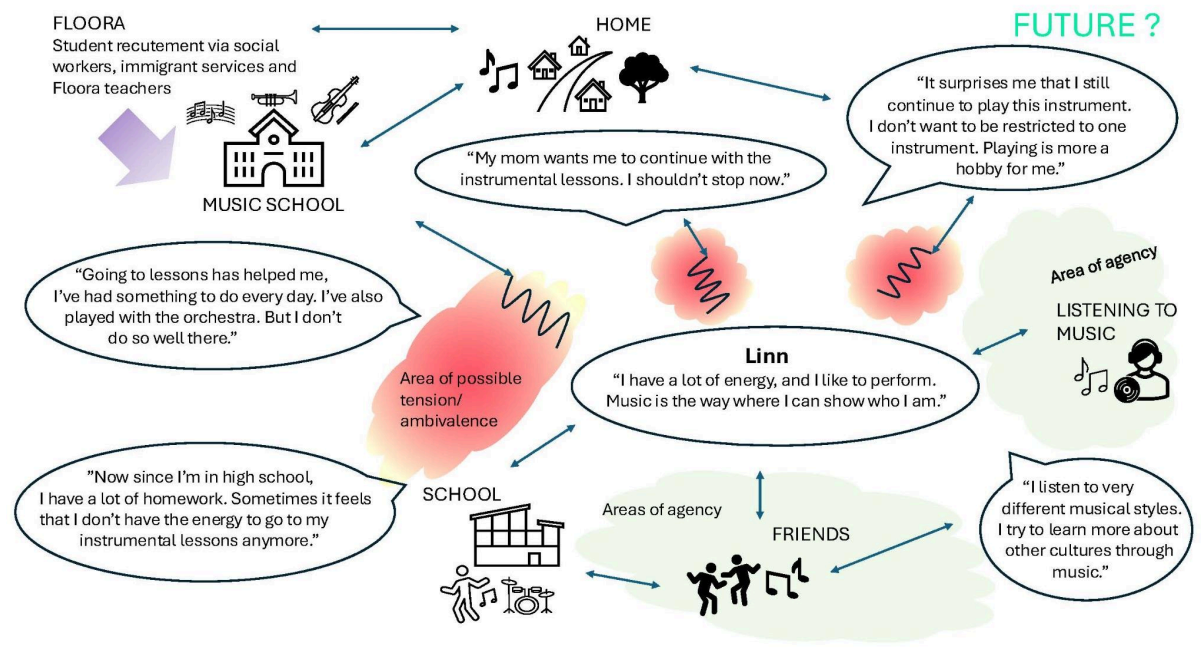


Figure 4: Linn's Experienced Musical Ecosystem

**Kai's story: I'm the kind of a person who likes to learn things**

Everything started in the music lessons in primary school. It's because of my music teacher that I got interested in this instrument. And then I talked to my mom who had heard of Floora. I first joined a band club...but that wasn't really my thing and then I ended up here at the music school. I thought it would be a nice, new skill. I'm the kind of person who likes to learn new things and don't give up so easily. In my secondary school I had the opportunity to join a band, and it was really fun. I made new friends there. I learned many new things in the band that helped me with my instrument, especially playing with a percussionist. It opened my musical world. All the band members had different musical tastes, and I got to know different genres, which I had never heard before. Every year a rock event was arranged where all the bands in the school performed. Our first gig at this event, performing on stage for 400 pupils, was a powerful musical experience. Afterwards I was surprised how many people liked it. They came to me and said: Wow, you are such a good player! It felt so good. And then we got more gigs after that. But as I started high school we didn't continue with the band. Once I joined a band at the music school because they needed a player for a gig, but it was not so fun because I didn't know any of the band members. However, my teacher at the music school has taught me so much and is a very important person in my life. It's always fun to play, and it's very hard to imagine a life without music so I will probably play my instrument my whole life. But maybe not as a job, more like a hobby.

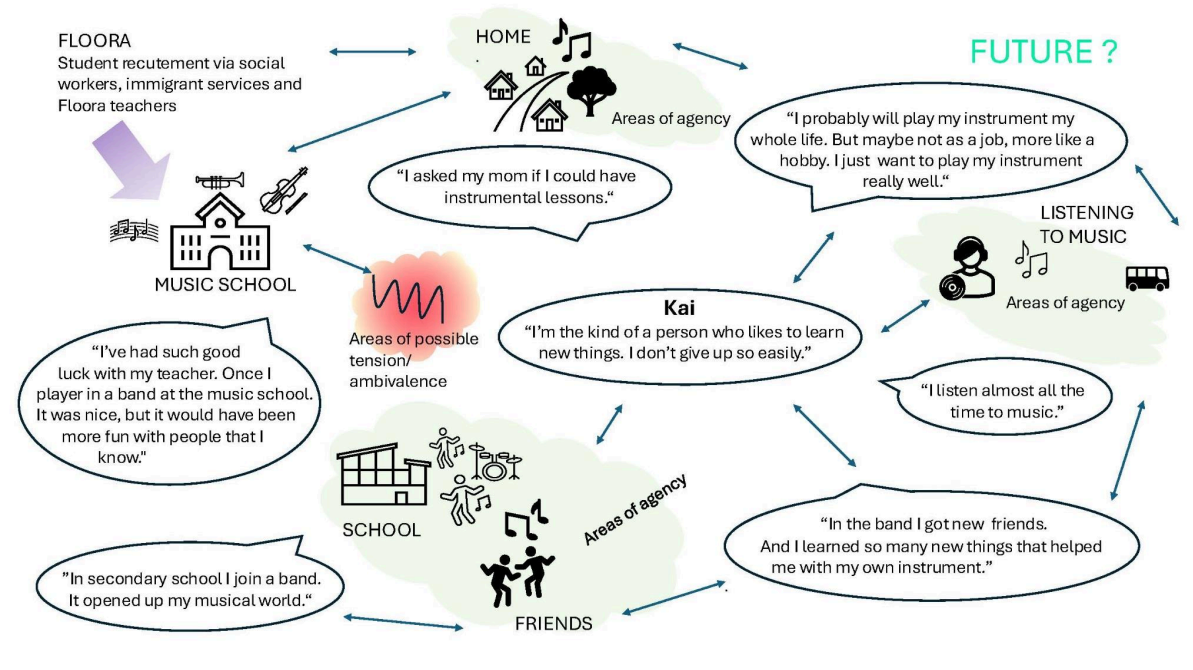


Figure 5: Kai's Experienced Musical Ecosystem

**Sandra's story: *I like to be where I have friends***

*I started to play when I was seven years old, and I like it very much. At some point I had a three-year break, but then I continued because my teacher told me that there was a possibility to join Floora. I like to go to my lessons once a week. I talk with my teacher about different things that have nothing to do with my instrument, things that have happened in my life. My teacher is a very close person to me and always asks me what I want to play. It's me who decides what to play. But it hasn't always been like that. At some point, during my worst teenage years, I didn't want to go to the lessons, I just wanted to hang around with my friends. The others in the orchestra were much younger than me, and I didn't have so many friends. Well, you don't need friends there, but I like to be where I have friends, I don't feel motivated to go to rehearsals if there are no friends. That's one reason why I had a break. There are still no friends in the orchestra, so I rarely go there. But I practice the pieces and then I participate in the orchestra now and then. I only play in concerts where I know it will go well, when I've practiced. I'm afraid of failing. I haven't done any level tests in the music school. I just want to have this as my hobby. I've also performed in solo concerts when I was younger. But I don't like it anymore to be alone on the stage. However, it's a wonderful feeling when I succeed, when I play a piece well. I will probably play this instrument my whole life as a hobby. But I would like to play the electric bass, too. I have talked with my teacher about this, but I can only choose one instrument. I need to pay for the lessons if I choose an additional instrument.*

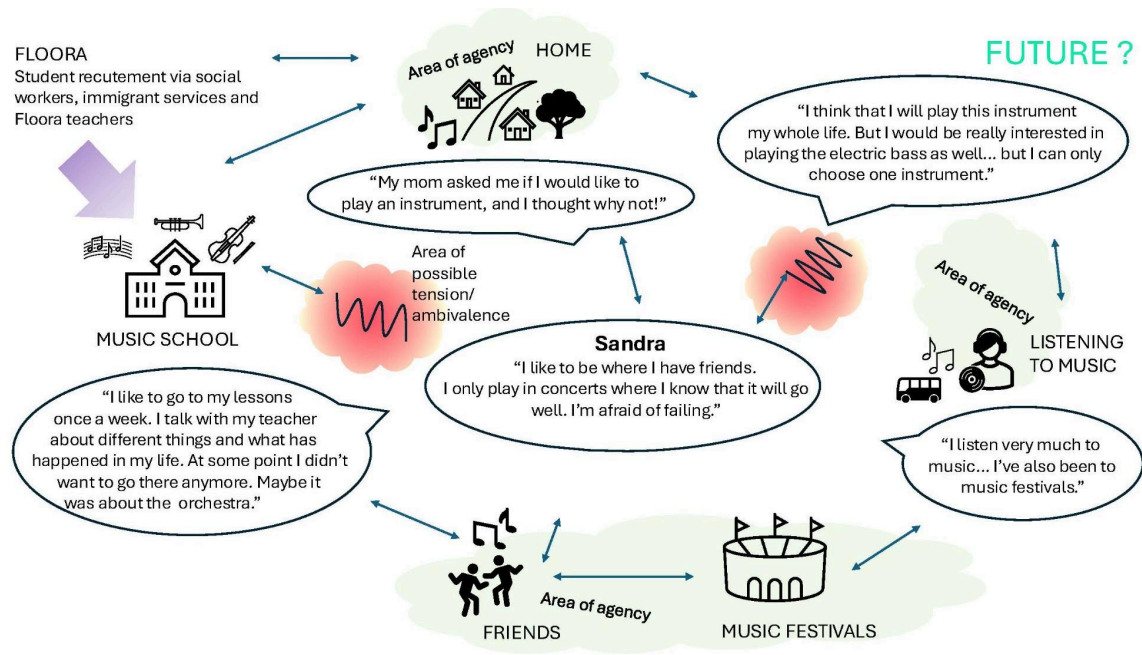


Figure 6: Sandra’s Experienced Musical Ecosystem

### Students’ stories informing music schools: The horizontal analysis

As the outcome of the horizontal analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995, 2005), three common elements across the adolescents’ stories can be identified in relation to their experiences of music and instrumental learning in the music school and beyond: 1. Openness, trust, regularity, and the importance of the teacher; 2. Expanding social and creative landscapes; and 3. Lack of motivation, ambivalence, discomfort, and feelings of non-belonging.

First, the reason that the adolescents joined *Floora* was either connected to the family’s economic situation or because having a meaningful hobby was perceived as important by the parents and the adolescent when arriving in the new country. As the adolescents’ stories illuminate, trust and open communication is the foundation for a good relationship between the instrumental teachers and the students. While a safe and trustful relationship should be a prerequisite for all educational settings, the adolescents’ stories highlight the importance of listening and talking about “everything” during the instrumental lesson (Sandra), even things that have little, or nothing, to do with music. In addition, the rhythm of coming once a week to the lessons is valued by all adolescents, providing regularity in their everyday life (Linda).

Second, the adolescents in *Floora* refer to expanding social and creative landscapes and how they are actively seeking new experiences, friends, and social contexts with and through music. Music is described as a way to communicate and find new social relationships (Kai and Oliver), as a means to express themselves while playing or composing music (Anna) and to expand their knowledge in different areas of their musical and everyday social life (Linn,

Oliver, Anna, Kai). The experiences of music and playing an instrument are complex, pointing at feelings of joy and agency, but also of different strategic steps taken to find their way with music outside the music school setting. This includes joining a band, applying to a school with a music-oriented program, playing in the school's orchestra, going to summer music camps or festivals with friends, listening to music, and composing at home. These experiences are transformative for the adolescents' musical and social identity and are areas of achieved agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006).

Third, none of the adolescents identify themselves as "*Floora* students". However, a perceived distance from the music school's social environment and its practices is present across the stories, depicting a lack of motivation, ambivalence, discomfort, and feeling of nonbelonging, especially in relation to group activities or performances within the music school (see Figures 2 to 6, areas of tensions and ambivalence), but also in relation to parents and their future musical life. This is expressed, for example, by Oliver: "I don't feel that I belong to the music school family...but it's not such a big deal. I feel that I belong to my teacher". Anna places herself "above" some commonly used practices within the music school: "I don't think that the level test tells anything about my musical knowledge... Of course, it's nice when you show what you have learned, but it's not so important." The absence of friends at the music school is one of the main reasons for the lack of motivation, as described by Sandra: "I don't feel motivated to go to the rehearsals if there are no friends." Kai explains that it was not so fun to play in the music school's gig because he did not know any of the band members. In other words, the adolescents are emotionally detached from the music school's social system as a whole, the instrumental teacher being the exception.

In addition, the absence of the possibility to try out different instruments at the music school influences the students' motivation: "I don't want to be restricted to one instrument" (Linn). Even though all adolescents liked their chosen instrument, they still expressed a concern about being restricted to one instrument only, and hoped for more opportunities of experimentation, both with other instruments and writing music. Their dreams stand in the periphery of the music school setting. While all adolescents express that their chosen instrument is likely to remain an important part of their future life, a tension between "my dream" and their experienced institutional reality is present. In Anna's words, reflecting how she could become more professional in writing music: "I haven't got much help from anywhere" and "It's more about if you have good luck."

## **Discussion**

At a first glance, when engaging with the narratives and stories of the adolescents participating in *Floora*, their everyday use of and engagement with music reflects patterns identified in earlier research on adolescents' musical lives and the multifaceted meanings given to music activities (e.g., Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2023; McFerran, 2019; North et al., 2000; Parker, 2020; Saarikallio, 2023). For example, Oliver, Kai, and Anna revealed that they are actively looking for learning opportunities outside formal settings and for continuous support for their own musical goals (Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2023). They take full advantage

of the opportunities to access different musical worlds through the internet, and like to listen to music when multitasking with games, social media, and when studying (McFerran, 2019). Sandra and Linn expressed that they value a nonstressful music-making environment without the pressure of having to specialize too quickly (Després & Dubé, 2020). However, a deeper engagement with the adolescents' experiences in *Floora* unveils challenges connected to these findings when critically examined in relation to music-making in socially driven music initiatives like *Floora*. While the adolescents in *Floora* have a good relationship with music and their instrumental teachers, and feel that music and playing their instrument will remain an important part in their future life, their stories reveal a gap between their multiple ways of *being* musical in their musical ecosystem as a whole compared to the music school system in which the path is more scripted. In other words, the findings highlight that the adolescents in *Floora* define music-making in their own terms, which are broader than the conventions of institutional music education (Karlsen, 2011a; North et al., 2000; Sæther, 2008).

### *Complicating the “socially driven” in institutionalized music education*

The *social* in music is a key element for understanding how young people “create and re-create” (Kanellopoulos, 2010, p. 119) musical worlds within their everyday ecosystem. Music, far from existing in isolation, is imbued with significance shaped by the environments in which it emerges. Turino (2009) has highlighted that music-making “fulfills different social functions” (p. 95) depending on where, when, and for what purpose it takes place. One essential aspect is the “sociality” (p.99, emphasis in original) of the music-making process. However, by acknowledging the “social” in music on an individual and *personal* level, it is possible to acknowledge the complexity of the “social” in *institutional* music education. While young people are living in multicultural, intermediated, and digitalized environments and have access to musical worlds more than ever before (Grindheim et al., 2021), researchers have highlighted the complexity and ambiguity of music-making, music education practices, and socially driven music education programs (Baker, 2014, 2021; Boeskov, 2022; Kertz-Welzel, 2016; Schmidt, 2021). The adolescents’ stories in this study support calls to take a more sensitive and critical stance towards over-simplifying attributes of “social” and the “socially driven” musical activities, such as those concerning an institution’s ambitions of inclusion (Baker, 2021, p. 279). In other words, as the young music students in *Floora* express their rich musical lives, in which social connections and context condition their experiences with music on a *personal* level, their stories simultaneously bring out the mixed feelings of being part of institutionalized music education, depicting experiences where they had not felt included as part of its social formation. In this sense, the adolescents’ possible expectations of finding a social and participatory community (Turino, 2009) in the music school context were only partly (or not at all) fulfilled.

### *Changing the perspective: From target groups to agents*

As addressed through the adolescents’ stories, music education institutions – including social

innovations like *Floora* – can enhance encouraging and creative relationships between teachers and students. However, inclusive ambitions that emphasize the need for special programs and tailored interventions for a target group (Di Lorenzo Tillborg & Ellefsen, 2021) tend to overlook the significance of students’ lived experiences and may challenge their efforts towards ecological agency. In addition, expectations of a desirable and legitimate “outcome” for *Floora* may also be related to tendencies of *normalization* (Laes, 2017). In Finland and other Nordic countries, normalization has become a foundational principle shaping educational policy and political decision-making, meant to ensure that every individual can live a life as normal as possible (Kristiansen, 1999). However, the ideology of normalization is not unproblematic, as it makes a distinction between the “normal” and the “abnormal” (Laes, 2017, p. 5). Seen from the perspective of students’ experienced musical ecosystems, pursuing equitable opportunity and inclusion on equal terms in music education is less about normalization, and more about enabling students’ agency and creating meaningful musical and social encounters. For example, the adolescents did not define themselves as “*Floora* students”, and even less in need of being “saved” or “cared” for by the music school and their teachers. Rather, in the students’ own stories, such as Anna’s perspective that “A lot in me is about music”, Oliver’s, that “I don’t necessarily feel that I belong to the music school family”, and Kai’s “I’m the kind of a person who likes to learn things”, the most significant aspects were, on the one hand, their musical identity and social experiences, and on the other hand, a sense of alienation which, however, did not prevent their musical agency. In fact, the adolescents were actively seeking new ways to connect with music and friends and taking strategic steps towards accomplishing their (musical) goals. We may thus ask, *who* or *what* are the institutions saving in the name of music education?

Consequently, a change in focus that goes beyond the normalization and saving discourses of disadvantaged groups can provide new directions towards a more ecological and holistic understanding of music education. As suggested by Carson and Westvall (2024), teaching should be “less about ‘helping others’ in a traditional, top-down way and more about facilitating the kinds of engagement and empowering interactions that are perhaps best understood as a form of co-creation” (p. 11). Acknowledging that music schools, and teachers, are just *one* part of a young person’s musical ecosystem enables support of their *multiple* ways of being musical, beyond the “informal/formal dichotomy” (Johansen, 2014, p. 92). Perceiving the “other” parts of the student’s ecosystem as competing with the teacher’s professional work within the music school – or ignoring the experienced ecosystem altogether – can hinder students’ attempts to achieve agency. From an ecological point of view, the relationship between music school students, teachers, and the institution calls music genuine dialogue to be able to explore new musical worlds together. Understanding agency as a reciprocal movement provides room for inclusion as a transformative force for *all* involved.

### *Towards a genuine sharing of power and knowledge within musical ecosystems*

While the purpose of the state-funded music schools in Finland has historically been to educate professional musicians (Heimonen, 2002), primarily serving students pursuing higher music education studies, music schools today in the Nordic countries have a dual role of

preparing future professionals and providing education for all (Heimonen, 2024; Tuovinen, 2024). The ideal of “a good relationship to music” (Björk, 2016, p. 2) has been a central value guiding teaching and learning within music schools. However, broadening the articulation of the purpose of the music school even further is vital for the institutions to remain relevant in today's societies (Hahn et al., 2024; Juntunen & Partti, 2023). This requires music schools to move away from ecological ignorance when focusing too narrowly on learning outcomes, and towards *ecological awareness* (Barrett & Westerlund, 2024, p. 16), allowing them to acknowledge students’ inherently social experiences and the social-ecological challenges deeply intertwined with matters of “justice and fairness” (p. 16). Music schools’ inability to acknowledge students’ ecosystem urges music educators and institutions towards “letting music go [...] once in a while” (Cheng, 2019, p. 231) and to critically reflect on their professional responsibilities (Backer Johnsen et al., 2025) and their societal tasks. By doing so, student’s everyday realities – such as not enough access to different instruments or challenges with concrete steps towards a professional career – could become visible instead of being hidden behind the aims of unidirectional inclusion. Acknowledging this allows students’ different musical and social worlds to work together and support each other, instead of being separated (Karlsen, 2011b). In other words, the mere possibility of having been invited to participate in regular instrumental lessons and orchestra rehearsals at a music school through *Floora* does not mean that this is automatically perceived as meaningful by the adolescents themselves. Therefore, as Kertz-Welzel (2012) points out, we can only be successful teachers as long as we understand students’ worlds and what matters to them.

Finally, this study’s findings suggest that knowledge sharing between *all* participants, both professionals and students within music school institutions, would offer an interesting path forward. While opening up the spaces where important decisions concerning young peoples’ lives are made is already encouraged on a governmental level in Finland (such as through the Finnish Government’s National Child Strategy, 2022), there is still “a disturbing absence of children’s perspectives, needs, and aspirations in contemporary educational policymaking” (Barrett, 2017, p. 176), including in music education policies. Efforts are indeed made to consult young people, but they often remain superficial, “a form of asking and listening rather than a vehicle for genuine power sharing” (Tuovinen, 2024, p. 37). This reveals a troubling pattern of adult normativity and deeply cemented adultism (Janes, 2024; Sundhall, 2017) that stands in the way of more age-inclusive practices, policies, and radical imagination (Wall, 2022). Childism (Janes, 2024; Wall, 2022) could be not only a response to these barriers, but also a means for broader systemic critiques of norms in society and in music education, since it seeks to transform prevailing understandings around children and young people, as well as around “the social and political foundations on which children’s lives and experiences are already imagined and pre-constructed” (Walls, 2022, p. 260). Actively seeking imagined open spaces of joint learning and knowledge sharing within music schools as *part* of the ecological surroundings could offer unexpected beginnings and opportunities for the institution. Taking the “risk” of welcoming the students’ ecosystems into the musical classroom requires professionals to navigate in chaos (Johansen, 2024), since teachers and leaders have the responsibility to engage with complexity rather than avoiding it. By acknowledging this

responsibility – and acting upon it accordingly – new (hybrid) musical identities (Westerlund et al., 2024) may arise that can transform the music education field to one wherein agents live and create *with* the world.

### **Concluding words**

This article has aimed to provide an alternative way to understand the meanings young adolescents’ give to their instrumental studies and their perceptions of where music schools stand within their experienced musical ecosystems. By adopting a more reciprocal approach to inclusion – one that acknowledges the complexity of young peoples’ musical worlds and seriously considers the ambiguities within institutionalized music education – the use of grandiose “salvation stories” in music education is challenged. Consequently, rather than overpowering the lived experiences of those who are “the targets” of social inclusion, recognizing students’ areas of achieved agency and why they matter to them can empower music school leaders, teachers, and policymakers to foster more democratic learning environments – for all. The stories of the adolescents in this study thus shift the focus from one-directional grand narratives on how music “saves” people, toward unfolding the agency of the participants themselves. Ultimately, this calls for a radical reimagining of how young people are perceived within music education institutions and socially driven initiatives in music, not as passive recipients, but as co-creators of meanings, values, cultures, and educational change.

### **Acknowledgements**

I warmly thank all the students who participated in this research and generously shared their stories. I am also grateful to the Music Education Doctoral Community at the University of the Arts Helsinki for their support during the preparation of this article. My sincere thanks go to Professors Heidi Westerlund and Geir Johansen, as well as Tuulikki Laes, for their insightful guidance. Finally, I extend my appreciation to The Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland, Sibelius Academy Foundation, Victoriastiftelsen, and Otto A. Malms Donationsfond for their financial support of this study.

### **References**

- Backer Johnsen, H., Johansen, G., & Laes, T. (2025). The paradox of social innovations within music schools: Taking critical responsibility in transformative practice. In T. Laes, G. Biesta, & H. Westerlund (Eds.), *The Transformative Politics of Music Education* (1st ed., pp. 63–80). Routledge.  
<https://www.routledge.com/The-Transformative-Politics-of-Music-Education/Laes-Biesta-Westerlund/p/book/9781032494951>

- Baker, G. (2014). *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's youth*. Oxford University Press.
- Baker, G. (2021). *Rethinking Social Action through Music: The Search for Coexistence and Citizenship in Medellín's Music Schools*. Open Book Publishers.  
<https://directory.doabooks.org/handle/20.500.12854/64628>
- Barrett, M. S. (2017). Policy and the Lives of School-Aged Children. In P. K. Schmidt & R. Colwell (Eds.), *Policy and the political life of music education: Standpoints for understanding and action* (pp. 175–190). Oxford University Press.
- Barrett, M. S., & Stauffer, S. L. (Eds.). (2012). *Narrative soundings: An anthology of narrative inquiry in music education*. Springer.
- Barrett, M. S., & Westerlund, H. M. (2024). *Music Education, Ecopolitical Professionalism, and Public Pedagogy: Towards Systems Transformation*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45893-4>
- Biesta, G. (2019). *Obstinate Education: Reconnecting School and Society*. BRILL.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uahelsinki/detail.action?docID=5847337>
- Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2006). How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement. *The Learning Lives Research Project*.
- Björk, C. (2016). *In Search of Good Relationships to Music*. Åbo Akademi University.
- Boeskov, K. (2022). Ambiguous Musical Practice: Rethinking Social Analysis of Music Educational Practice. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 30(2), 163–182.
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (Third edition). Sage Publications.
- Butler-Kisber, L. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Based Perspectives*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526417978>
- Carson, C., & Westvall, M. (2024). Art for All's Sake. Co-Creation, “Artizenship” and Negotiated Practices. In M. Westvall & E. A. Akuno (Eds.), *Music as Agency: Diversities of Perspectives on Artistic Citizenship* (pp. 8–18). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003440840>
- Chase, S. E. (2018). Narrative Inquiry: Toward Theoretical and Methodological Maturity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (Fifth edition, pp. 546–575). SAGE.
- Cheng, W. (2019). *Loving Music Till It Hurts*. Oxford University Press.
- Christensen, P., & James, A. (2017). *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*. Routledge.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in today's schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(2), 182–191.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1705091>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Després, J.-P., & Dubé, F. (2020). The Music Learner Voice: A Systematic Literature Review and Framework. *Frontiers in Education*, 5, 1–13.
- Di Lorenzo Tillborg, A. (2021). *Music Education and Democratisation. Policy processes and discourses of inclusion of all children in Sweden's Art and Music Schools*. [[Doctoral Thesis (compilation), Malmö Academy of Music]., Lund University, Malmö Academy of Music].  
[https://lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/portalfiles/portal/95502079/Di\\_Lorenzo\\_Tillborg\\_Adriana\\_2021\\_Music\\_Education\\_and\\_Democratisation\\_Policy\\_processes\\_and\\_discourses\\_of\\_inclusion\\_of\\_all\\_children\\_in\\_Sweden\\_s\\_Art\\_and\\_Music\\_Schools.pdf](https://lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/portalfiles/portal/95502079/Di_Lorenzo_Tillborg_Adriana_2021_Music_Education_and_Democratisation_Policy_processes_and_discourses_of_inclusion_of_all_children_in_Sweden_s_Art_and_Music_Schools.pdf)
- Di Lorenzo Tillborg, A., & Ellefsen, L. W. (2021). Policy and leadership discourses in Sweden's Art and Music Schools: The inclusion of refugee children. *Music Education Research*, 23(3), 348–361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2021.1929138>

- Finnish Government. (2022). *[The parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee] National Child Strategy*. (Committee Report. No. 2022:16). Publication of the Finnish Government.  
[https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163977/VN\\_2022\\_16.pdf?squence=1&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163977/VN_2022_16.pdf?squence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Grindheim, L. T., Borgen, J. S., & Ødegaard, Elin Eriksen. (2021). In the Best Interests of the Child: From the Century of the Child to the Century of Sustainability. In *Childhood cultures in transformation: 30 years of the UN convention of the rights on the child in action towards sustainability* (pp. 13–36). Brill | Sense.
- Hahn, M., Björk, C., & Westerlund, H. (Eds.). (2024). *Music Schools in Changing Societies: How Collaborative Professionalism Can Transform Music Education*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003365808>
- Heimonen, M. (2002). *Music education and law: Regulation as an instrument* [Doctoral dissertation]. Studia Musica 17, Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki.
- Heimonen, M. (2024). Music Schools—In Search of Equity. *The Finnish Journal of Music Education*, 27(2), 96–102.
- Hofvander Trulsson, Y., Burnard, P., & Söderman, J. (2015). Bourdieu and Music Learning in a Globalised World. In P. Burnard, Y. Hofvander Trulsson, & J. Söderman (Eds.), *Bourdieu and the Sociology of Music Education* (pp. 209–222). Ashgate.  
<https://www.routledge.com/Bourdieu-and-the-Sociology-of-Music-Education/Burnard-Trulsson/p/book/9780367597337>
- Janes, H. L. (2024). *Childism in the private music studio: Listening to and learning from children through the mosaic approach*. Toronto University.
- Jeppsson, C., & Lindgren, M. (2018). Exploring equal opportunities: Children’s experiences of the Swedish Community School of Music and Arts. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 40(2), 191–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X18773153>
- Johansen, G. (2014). Sociology, music education, and social change: The prospect of addressing their relations by attending to some central, expanded concepts. *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education*, 13(1), 70–100.
- Johansen, G. (2024). School Music Education and the Society of Tomorrow – the Necessity of Navigating in Chaos. In J. L. Aróstegui, C. Christophersen, J. Nichols, & K. Matsunobu (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of School Music Education* (pp. 15–27). SAGE Publications.
- Jordhus-Lier, A., Graabræk Nielsen, S., & Karlsen, S. (2021). What is on offer within Norwegian extracurricular schools of music and performing arts? Findings from a national survey. *Music Education Research*, 23(1), 62.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2020.1866518>
- Juntunen, M., & Partti, H. (Eds.). (2023). *Musiikkikasvatus muutoksessa: Vol. DocMus Doctoral School Publications 20*. University of the Arts Helsinki.
- Kanellopoulos, P. A. (2010). Towards a Sociological Perspective on Researching Children’s Creative Music-Making Practices: An Exercise in Self-Consciousness. In R. Wright (Ed.), *Sociology and Music Education* (pp. 115–138).
- Karlsen, S. (2011a). *Music education in multicultural schools: Report from the Nordic research project “Exploring democracy: Conceptions of immigrant students’ development of musical agency”*. Sidsel Karlsen.
- Karlsen, S. (2011b). Using musical agency as a lens: Researching music education from the angle of experience. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 33(2), 107–121.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X11422005>
- Kertz-Welzel, A. (2012). Children’s and Adolescents’ Musical Needs and Music Education in Germany. In P. S. Campbell & T. Wiggins (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Children’s*

- Musical Cultures* (1st ed., pp. 371–386). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199737635.013.0022>
- Kertz-Welzel, A. (2016). Daring to Question: A Philosophical Critique of Community Music. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 24(2), 113–130.  
<https://doi.org/10.2979/philmusieducrevi.24.2.01>
- Kolbe, K. (2023). (Un)settling Institutional Hegemony. Challenges of Diversity Strategies in the ‘western’ Classical Music Sector. In A. Bull, Scharff, Christina, & Laudan, Nooshin (Eds.), *Voices for change in the classical music profession. New ideas for tackling inequalities and exclusion*. (pp. 69–80). Oxford University Press.
- Kristiansen, K. (1999). 18. The impact of Normalization and Social Role Valorization in Scandinavia. In R. J. Flynn & R. Lemay (Eds.), *A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and Impact* (pp. 395–406). Les Presses de l’Université d’Ottawa | University of Ottawa Press.  
<https://books.openedition.org/uop/2507>
- Kuoppamäki, A., & Vilmilä, F. (2023). Young people navigating musical lives: Considering arts participation as agency in cultural authorship. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 1321103X231199965. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X231199965>
- Kuuse, A.-K., Lindgren, M., & Skåreus, E. (2016). “The feelings have come home to me.” Examining advertising films on the Swedish website of El Sistema. *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education*, 15(1), 187–215.
- Laes, T. (2017). *The (im)possibility of inclusion: Reimagining the potentials of democratic inclusion in and through activist music education*. Sibelius-Academy, University of the Arts.
- Laes, T., & Kallio, A. A. (2015). A beautiful cacophony: A call for ruptures to our ‘democratic’ music education. *Finnish Journal of Music Education*, 18(2), 80–83.
- Laes, T., Westerlund, H., Sæther, E., & Kamensky, H. (2021). Practising civic professionalism through inter-professional collaborat. In H. Westerlund & H. Gaunt (Eds.), *Expanding Professionalism in Music and Higher Music Education. A Changing Game*. (1st ed.). Routledge.  
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003108337-3/practising-civic-professionalism-inter-professional-collaboration-tuulikki-laes-heidi-westerlund-eva-s%C3%A6ther-hanna-kamensky?context=ubx&refId=fd6c7c5-8147-4b64-840d-6caa259c2589>
- Laes, T., Westerlund, H., Väkevä, L., & Juntunen, M.-L. (2018). Suomalaisen musiikkioppilaitosjärjestelmän tehtävä nyky-yhteiskunnassa. Ehdotelma systeemiseksi muutokseksi [The role of the music school system in today’s society. A proposal for systemic change]. *Musiikki*, 48(2), Article 2.
- McFerran, K. (2019). Crystallizing the relationship between adolescents, music, and emotions. In K. McFerran, Derrington, P., & Saarikallio, S. (Eds.), *Handbook of Music, Adolescents, and Wellbeing* (pp. 3–14). Oxford University Press.
- Niemi, H. (2021). Education Reforms for Equity and Quality: An Analysis from an Educational Ecosystem Perspective with Reference to Finnish Educational Transformations. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 11(2), 13–35.
- North, A. C., Hargreaves, D. J., & O’Neill, S. A. (2000). The importance of music to adolescents. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70(2), 255–272.  
<https://doi.org/10.1348/000709900158083>
- Otto, D., Scharnberg, G., Kerres, M., & Zawacki-Richter, O. (2023). Introduction: Distributed Learning Ecosystems. Concepts, Resources, and Repositories. In D. Otto, G. Scharnberg, M. Kerres, & O. Zawacki-Richter (Eds.), *Distributed Learning Ecosystems: Concepts, Resources, and Repositories* (pp. 1–12). Springer Nature.

- <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-38703-7>
- Parker, E. C. (2020). *Adolescents on Music. Why Music Matters to Young People in Our Lives*. Oxford University Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5–23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 137–145.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007). Validity Issues in Narrative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(4), 471–486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406297670>
- Saarikallio, S. (2023). Musiikin tunnekokemukset toimijuuden ja hyvinvoinnin rakentajina [Emotional Experiences of Music as Builders of Agency and Well-being]. In M. Juntunen & H. Partti (Eds.), *Musiikkikasvatus muutoksessa: Vol. DocMus-tohtorikoulun julkaisuja 20*. Tekijät ja Taideyliopiston Sibelius-Akatemia.
- Sæther, E. (2008). When minorities are the majority: Voices from a teacher/researcher project in a multicultural school in Sweden. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 30(1), 25–42.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X08089888>
- Schmidt. (2021). Multiple hierarchies as change-innovation strategy: Ambivalence as policy framing at the New World Symphony. In R. Wright, G. Johansen, P. A. Kanellopoulos, & P. Schmidt (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to Sociology of Music Education*. Routledge.  
<https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.uniarts.fi/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429504631-16-23/multiple-hierarchies-change-innovation-strategy-patrick-schmidt?context=ubx&refId=960f623f-9cac-431d-96d1-52202e0a1c68>
- Sundhall, J. (2017). A political space for children? The age order and children’s right to participation. *Social Inclusion*, 5(3), 164–171. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i3.969>
- Tuovinen, T. (2024). Children as collaborators in music schools: Locating student voice in professional landscapes. In M. Hahn, C. Björk, & H. Westerlund (Eds.), *Music Schools in Changing Societies* (pp. 33–48). Routledge.
- Turino, T. (2009). Four fields of music making and sustainable living. *The World of Music*, 51(1), 95–117. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41699865>
- Väkevä, L., Westerlund, H., & Ilmola-Sheppard, L. (2017). Social Innovations in Music Education: Creating Institutional Resilience for Increasing Social Justice. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, 16(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.22176/act16.3.129>
- Väkevä, L., Westerlund, H., & Ilmola-Sheppard, L. (2022). Hidden elitism: The meritocratic discourse of free choice in Finnish music education system. *Music Education Research*, 24(4), 417–429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2022.2074384>
- Visser, K., Bolt, G., & Van Kempen, R. (2015). ‘Come and live here and you’ll experience it’: Youths talk about *their* deprived neighbourhood. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(1), 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.933196>
- Wall, J. (2022). From childhood studies to childism: Reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations. *Children’s Geographies*, 20(3), 257–270.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912>
- Westerlund, H. (2008). Justifying Music Education: A View from Here-and-Now Value Experience. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 16(1), 79–95.  
<https://doi.org/10.2979/pme.2008.16.1.79>

- Westerlund, H., Hahn, M., & Björk, C. (2024). Music schools as forerunners towards collaborative professionalism. In M. Hahn, C. Björk, & H. Westerlund (Eds.), *Music Schools in Changing Societies: How Collaborative Professionalism Can Transform Music Education* (pp. 12–29). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003365808>
- Wilson, A., Hunter, K., & Moscardini, L. (2020). Widening the gap? The challenges for equitable music education in Scotland. *Support for Learning*, 35(4), 473–492. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12328>
- Wright, R. (Ed.). (2010). *Sociology and Music Education*. Ashgate.
- Wright, R. (2015). Music education and social reproduction. Breaking cycles of injustice. In C. Benedict, P. Schmidt, G. Spruce, & P. Woodford (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education* (pp. 340–356). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199356157.001.0001>