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Institutional collaboration creating new spaces for young people's musical authorship

The case of G Songlab

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This chapter discusses the institutional collaborations required from a state-funded music school system for it to be able to thrive in urban environments and be transformed in the face of rapid changes in a diversifying society. Using the G Songlab initiative in Finland as an example, I will consider the potential of cross-sectoral institutional collaboration in creating new opportunities for music learning, or – as Christopher Small (1998) suggests – for *musicking* in open spaces. By using the concept of musicking, Small refers to musical acts as exploring, affirming and celebrating musical and social relationships of the living world (Small, 1998, p. 142, p. 185). In his view “it is in those relationships that the meaning of the [musical] act lies” (p. 13). These relationships concern all participants involved in musical acts but also social structures behind them. In that sense, for Small, “all musicking is ultimately a political act” (p. 213). In this chapter, the conditions for multiple collaborations are thus viewed from the perspective of young music learners, music and youth educators, and institutions in music and youth education.¹

Music schools and the Basic Education in the Arts (BEA) in Finland

Finland is well-known for its nationwide network of music schools operating within the Finnish Basic Education in the Arts system (*Taiteen perusopetus*, henceforth BEA).² However, due to various socio-economic, cultural and regional mechanisms such as tuition fees, pupil selection or availability of music tuition, music and art education do not reach all young people equally (e.g. Aluehallintovirasto 2014). Consequently, fewer than 5% of children and adolescents learn music on an extra-curricular basis in publicly funded music schools (p. 40). At the same time, recent statistics on children's and adolescents' out-of-school activities (Hanifi & Huomo, 2020) reveal that approximately 30% of girls and 20% of boys learn an instrument in their leisure time. A majority of these young music learners thus participates in music activities in either informal or non-formal spaces such as peer groups or activities offered by municipal youth work or the private sector (Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2017). Particularly young people living in districts with lower socio-economic status and young people with a multicultural background, including the Indigenous Sami people in Finland, tend to be absent from out-of-school arts programmes (e.g. Vismanen et.al. 2016; Kallio & Länsman 2017). This shows how important it is that music education providers and policy makers increase their

¹ In addition to being a music school teacher, the author also works as a coordinator, workshop leader and researcher in the G Songlab initiative.

² BEA is a voluntary activity that is goal-oriented and progresses from one level to another, also giving students a basis for vocational studies or higher education.

awareness of the structures and practices that, in Susan O'Neill's (2012) words, "empower some [young people] and prevent others from purposeful and positive music engagement" (p. 4).

Girls' and boys' participation in out-of-school music activities varies from one another in many respects. Among students participating in formal music programmes, more than 70% are girls (Aluehallintovirasto 2014), whereas boys largely prefer self-directed learning with peers in informal musical spaces such as popular music bands (e.g. Hanifi & Huomo, 2020; Green, 2001).³ Along with the gendering of musical practices, age might also become a barrier when participating in music activities, as Finnish music schools favour an early start with instrument studies. Research shows that for young people who become interested in music later in adolescence, finding a place for learning music in a formal education context might be harder (Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2017). Consequently, one may ask: *who* is the BEA system *for*, and *how* can music institutions develop the resilience that is needed to respond to the ongoing transformation of how music education can be provided and accessed?

Students as authors of musical culture

One of the powerful signs of the ongoing social and cultural change placing new demands on 21st-century music education is how digital communication and social media have changed young people's creative culture over a very short period of time (e.g. Hanifi & Huomo, 2020; Eleá & Mikos, 2017). In music, video tutorials and digital platforms have made autonomous music learning and independent artistic creativity more accessible than ever before. Making their own music as socially and "publicly recognised action" (Harré, 1983) often takes place from the comfort of the young "bedroom-producers" home studios. At the same time, our study on young people's musical life courses in Finland (Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2017) revealed that adolescents making music in non-formal settings, such as activities offered by municipal youth work, actively seek for learning opportunities and ongoing support for their music making. As O'Neill (2012) importantly points out, "we must deepen our understanding of music learners in terms of who they are and what constitutes their current musical and cultural ecologies" (p. 10). Indeed, in traditional views of music education young people are often seen as presenters and reproducers of existing musical culture rather than as creative agents and "authors of culture" (Väkevä & Ojala, 2013). There is thus an evident need for institutional change in music schools which instead of solely focusing on transmitting collective music traditions should also take young people's own initiatives and musical authorship as an equally relevant starting point.

G Songlab as a social innovation

G Songlab⁴ was created in 2018 to supplement the existing formal music education in Finland and to reconsider music education particularly from the angle of the aspirations and needs of young people. G Songlab can be seen as a social innovation (Mangabeira Unger, 2015): an attempt to create new kinds of educational spaces for supporting young people's active participation in the arts (Brown & Associates LLC, 2004; Vanherwegen & Lievens, 2014; Villarroja, 2015), their musical agency (e.g. Karlsen, 2011) and their creative cultural authorship through songwriting. Social innovations refer here to attempts "to design initiatives in particular parts of society – an organisation, a practice or an area of activity – that signal a promising path of wider social change" (Mangabeira Unger, 2015, p. 233). As Väkevä et al. (2017) suggest, such innovations can work as "catalytic events that provide

³ While many girls stop learning an instrument in formal music schools by the age of 15, many boys of that age have not even started yet. The statistics show that boys often wait until their twenties to start to learn an instrument. Furthermore, despite a long history of teaching popular band instruments in Finnish school music education, girls are still a clear minority in out-of-school popular music practices.

⁴ The name of the initiative, *G Songlab*, stands for a collaboration with a Finnish loudspeaker brand *Genelec*.

new conditions for understanding the social system and its operations” (p. 130). The G Songlab initiative has been built on the idea of establishing new cross-structural dialogue between formal music education and the non-formal youth sector. The initiative has brought together a wide range of societal stakeholders that share an interest in creating novel opportunities and environments for music learning, social integration and even wider wellbeing through joint artistic work – musicking. Along with a group of researchers, the initiative has created partnerships with music schools, communal youth services, the City of Helsinki, and the global music industry. By collaborating with municipal youth clubs and local music schools and by combining the teachers’ and youth workers’ expertise, G Songlab has offered songwriting workshops open-access and free of charge for young people interested in writing their own music.

In G Songlab workshops, the participants collaboratively write songs and produce their own music that can also be shared in online communities. The digital learning environment strengthens cultural integration by enabling group work and peer learning between participants with diverse musical and cultural backgrounds and from various parts of the world. Particularly for young people who make music in non-formal settings, networking with other young songwriters creates continuity for their musical activities and gives them an opportunity to feel a sense of community. For music school students, the workshops open up new creative spaces for experiencing cultural authorship. All in all, the workshops aim to offer tools for expressing and articulating the young people’s own views in and through artistic work; supporting their musical agency and authorship; creating companionship; and encouraging collaboration and active citizenship. Thus, similarly to Small’s (1998) idea of musicking, in G Songlab songwriting is seen as a means for exploring, affirming and celebrating musical and social relationships on multiple levels.

Multi-level collaboration and learning networks

G Songlab creates collaboration and learning networks on three levels: between 1) young people operating in diverse musical spheres; 2) professionals working in music schools and those working in youth clubs; and 3) institutions and youth services. For young people, the workshops open up individual and collective pathways for active arts participation (Brown & Associates LLC, 2004; Vanherwegen & Lievens, 2014; Villarroya, 2015) through what we have called *musical authorship* (Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2023). As Väkevä and Ojala (2013) suggest, creative musical expression can be understood as a form of exploring one’s own lifeworld and inventing new semiotic spaces that enable collaboration with others in various forms. Gee (2005) refers to social spaces in which individuals with various backgrounds and capabilities come together and strive for shared endeavours as “affinity spaces”; spaces that evolve into places for sharing expertise and knowledge by crossing social and cultural boundaries determined by age, class, ethnicity, gender or education (O’Neill, 2012). Music education can thus also become a safe space for addressing sensitive topics by offering opportunities for distancing those topics from the individual’s immediate experience.⁵ In this way, supporting young people’s equal right to creative expression can have significant integrative benefits not just for individuals but also more widely in society.

For music school teachers and youth workers, G Songlab has provided opportunities for “expanding their professionalism” (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021) through teamwork between professionals who come from very different sectors. G Songlab creates and trains interprofessional workshop leader teams that benefit from the know-how of both music and youth education. From the perspective of music school teachers, such collaboration can offer opportunities for exploring their professional identity – “moving from seeing oneself as the ‘carrier of musical knowledge’ to becoming a ‘co-constructor of experimental and collaborative musical learning environments’” (Juntunen et al., 2014, p. 9). Thus, the role of a teacher or a mentor can rather be that of a “more experienced agent, helping

⁵ G Songlab workshops have been successfully used in work with young refugees.

[the participants] to identify and pursue their ambitions and interests” (p. 12) and thereby supporting their independent authorship and agency. Moreover, the workshops encourage participants to join in shared endeavours, thus promoting peer learning, a sense of community, and the value of diversity. As in all relationships – musical or social – what becomes central is “the mutual commitment and respect, shared interests and openness towards the views of others” (Juntunen et al., 2014, p. 10) that can be practised when working together in joint artistic efforts with others.

In G Songlab, the networking and collaboration between music education institutions and youth services have taken many forms. In addition to funding allocated for the initiative, the collaborating partners have offered their expertise and contributed the working hours of their staff, the physical premises and studio equipment to host workshops, and access to their social networks and platforms.⁶ This kind of collaboration tests and develops the sort of cross-sectoral professionalism and institutional resilience (Väkevä et al., 2017) that is required in social innovations and vital for renewing the structures in music schools in rapidly changing environments. As a social innovation, G Songlab has made the existing local services more accessible also for those young people who are typically absent from extracurricular music education, such as young people finding their personal interest for music later in their adolescence, or those who, because of their social or cultural background, have not even known about the opportunities to study in music schools.

New landscapes for music schools

By using the G Songlab as an example, this chapter has discussed the potential that cross-structural institutional collaboration holds when initiating and designing social innovations for music schools and 21st-century music education. By introducing a songwriting workshop concept built on a collaboration between music schools and municipal youth services, I have exemplified how music schools can support young people’s creative agency, cultural authorship and social integration through songwriting. The chapter suggests that in a rapidly diversifying world there is an increasing need for imagination and a rethinking of the mental and physical spaces in which musical learning takes place; social spaces that are not restricted to progressively proceeding learning paths that start at a very early age or are related to requirements in terms of skills and experience, but rather allow musical participation and learning in different forms and for different ages, and with varying aims and intensities. It is therefore argued here that because of their expertise and long-term experience, music schools could take a front-line role in promoting young people’s equal rights for meaningful and *transformative* musicking (Small, 1998) in various musical spheres. In this process, however, music schools need to ask themselves what and whom their education is meant to be for, and what their values and objectives might be when designing novel landscapes for music education.

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⁶ During the Covid-19 pandemic, these networks have enabled G Songlab online and hybrid workshops and webinars that have reached young songwriters widely in Finland and in other countries.

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