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Children as collaborators in music schools: Locating student voice in professional landscapes

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Introduction

Collaboration has been increasingly discussed and promoted in education research since the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, children and young people, the foremost stakeholders in education, are often denied the status of collaborative partners, a status which would allow their voices to be heard in democratic decision-making processes also related to their education, including music education. Even in a country such as Finland, which has committed strongly to the values of democracy and child well-being, consistent implementation of human rights obligations concerning children has only recently taken several strategic steps, including formation of a National Child Strategy, in order to strengthen inclusion and participation of children and young people in public decision-making processes in society (Finnish Government, 2021). These policy enactments are also relevant in the context of publicly funded music schools, in which children's participation in policy processes has been limited; an example of this is the failure to collect student perspectives as part of national evaluations of the music school system. While the construction of educational policies in Finland is expected to be based on collaboration between different stakeholders such as municipalities together with other interest groups in society, including trade unions and employer organisations (Vitikka et al., 2012), it was only with the most recent curricular reform in 2017 that children's participation in constructing music school policies was explicitly included in the policy guidelines.

Research on children's well-being has highlighted the need to critically reconsider collaborative work where professionals collaborate *for* central stakeholders rather than *with* them (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 69). Engaging stakeholders such as students or parents in decision-making has not been ranked among policymakers' top priorities during the past decade in the vast majority of education systems in countries in and outside Europe (OECD, 2019). In educational settings, students and families are rarely invited to work alongside teachers and administrators at decision-making

tables, with the result that educational policies and pivotal decisions are made on behalf of students and families rather than together with them. Top-down policymaking and hierarchical practices have been criticised in the context of music education, where “music education policy appears to be something that is ‘done to’ and ‘received by’ children rather than ‘constructed with’ children” (Barrett, 2017, p. 177).

Childhood scholars have pointed out that many of the problems related to children’s status result from ageist thinking in which children are categorised and discriminated against because they are considered incapable of participating in matters concerning their own lives owing to their age (James et al., 1997/2015). In music education, however, something within the field itself appears to be influencing students’ status, since even attaining the age of majority is insufficient to grant them a greater role in educational decision-making. Educational governance through deliberative processes involving students is still a remarkably recent phenomenon in higher music education too (Bennett et al., 2019), considering that researchers have been able to show that the development of students’ artistic agency can be hampered by the dynamics of power in the teacher–student relationship (Gaunt, 2009). Among the few studies on students’ and teachers’ collaborative processes in higher music education, Latukefu (2010) has noted “how little we try and find out about what our students bring to us” (p. 181).

In this chapter, I will identify some of the path dependencies that contribute to the phenomenon of non-deliberation in publicly funded music schools; in particular, children’s and young people’s lack of voice regarding the aims and means of music school education. I will contextualise the discussion in the framework of Finnish music school education to identify the space for collaboration between policy and professional practice in which student voice could establish a role. Rather than assuming that democratic processes can be grounded in egocentric conceptions of “child-centredness”, I draw upon a stance in which the emphasis is on the social dimension of voice, child-in-relation, while at the same time strongly emphasising the need for educational institutions to consider students’ participation beyond learning, that is, beyond mere access to knowledge and the training of skills (Biesta, 2006).

The overall argument in this chapter is that although children’s and young people’s access to collaborative and democratic processes is potentially afforded through responsive classroom relations, these collaborative processes between teachers and students are embedded in, and therefore enabled but also restricted by, the broader institutional, political, and economic contexts. This complexity of matters related to collaboration with children and young people calls for an examination of the purposes of music school education, which in Finland, as in other countries, are rooted

in the music schools' historical and national past as well as in contemporary societal needs. In publicly funded and governed Finnish music schools, the lack of autonomy at the level of political and artistic decision-making is historically related to the initial motives for establishing those schools, namely the need to educate professional musicians for different sectors in society (Heimonen, 2002). Organising and designing music school education from the point of view of those applying for higher education degree studies narrowed the scope for local deliberation and decision-making as the preprofessional studies designed were used as the minimum standard and guiding benchmarks not only for those aiming for professional studies but effectively for *all* wanting to pursue music school studies. This effectively reduced the potential plurality of choice for all students.

Through their continued task of providing preprofessional studies as preparation for higher music education, the music schools, together with the higher education institutions, become a part of what could be described as an *institutional ecosystem* that consists of a variety of components and related elements (Klemenčič & Hoidn, 2020). From the point of view of student voice, elements in this institutional ecosystem thus need to be worked on simultaneously so that music schools can act as sites of citizenship and civic involvement also for the students. This also includes the state administration's active participation in safeguarding children's inclusion in public decision-making processes. Recent evaluations of children's participation in Finnish society have identified a need for development especially in child impact assessments undertaken by the government and in the follow-up of such processes both in terms of legislative preparation and administrative decision-making (Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2020).

The chapter makes the case that when collaboration aims at enhancing democracy in music school practices, it is imperative to bring together not only actors responsible for child and youth affairs, public authorities, and teachers, but also children and young people themselves. The argument aligns with studies from higher education (see e.g., Taylor & Bovill, 2018) that have identified a growing emphasis on legitimising and engaging students to work in partnership as a countermove to the neoliberal regimes of performativity and outcome accountability (see also Biesta, 2017).

The participatory turn in public policy

Outside education, public institutions' interest in participative and deliberative approaches has grown in a variety of social and institutional contexts since the beginning of the 2000s. What has been described as a participatory turn in public policy has included efforts to develop deliberative democracy and extra-parliamentary forms of participation, for instance, participatory budgeting, associated with the idea of including citizen input in decision-making within the public sector (Bherer et al., 2016, p. 225).

Enhancing civic engagement, deliberation *by* the people rather than deliberation *for* the people, has been construed as a radical transformation of democracy. The idea of “co-production” of public services, with citizens and professionals collaborating, has constituted a way of changing welfare policies and practices from more traditional models where public officials design services and citizens are designated as more or less passive beneficiaries and recipients of those services.

Democratic values and the participatory role of children in society are reflected in child legislation in many countries, including the Nordic countries. However, explicit consideration of and policies for children’s rights regarding recreational activities, such as extracurricular music school education, are a fairly recent phenomenon (Lallukka, 2014). In Finland, children’s participation in decision-making about their music school studies mainly takes place within the day-to-day practices with music school teachers, which is considered insufficient in relation to the decision-making processes outlined in the Local Government Act 410/2015. It was only in 2021 that a cross-sectoral, administrative instrument, the National Child Strategy, was formed to bring a new element to the content of public policy: the requirement that the perspective of children be taken into account at all levels of public administration and in all forms of public service. This national strategy aligns with contemporary policymaking in the wider European context. For instance, within the transversal programme “Building a Europe for and with children” launched in 2006, the Council of Europe has developed a series of strategies aimed at advancing the promotion of children’s rights. During the work with the fourth strategy for the rights of the child, launched in 2022, children from ten member states were involved in the consultative process (Council of Europe, 2022).

As efforts are growing in societies to reform public leadership and implement policymaking processes that are more citizen- and community-focused, public institutions such as music schools are challenged to look for meaningful ways to bring children into decision-making processes. An initial move suggested in contemporary childhood scholarship is to reconsider attitudes and assumptions about children. Since the 1990s, a growing body of literature has challenged and interrogated the theoretical orthodoxies that have informed childhood research. Conceptualising the child as incapable of having a voice has eroded children’s rights through misguided assumptions about children’s lack of cognitive, emotional, and experiential competence to contribute to decision-making in their own lives (James et al., 1997/2015). Childhood scholars have pointed out that conceptualisations of children in terms of what they will become rather than who they are here and now; in other words, the refusal to see children as full human beings and as subjects of rights has prevented them from

being viewed as fully “social” and therefore as being qualified for political participation.

The sociologist and child-rights researcher Roger Hart (1992) was among the first to attempt to problematise the issue of children’s participation in society, drawing attention to the degree to which adults and institutions afford or enable children to participate in their communities and formal organisations. In Hart’s view, the opportunity to express opinions, for example, through consultation, could be considered more as token participation, as there were no guarantees that it would have an impact if the decision-making power was entirely in the hands of others (see also Klemenčič & Hoidn, 2020). While consultation could be used to integrate young people’s views and experiences into policymaking, it could thus still be considered as a form of asking and listening rather than a vehicle for genuine power sharing since the person(s) seeking the information still had unilateral control of both the agenda and the process. Hart (1992) maintained that different forms of participation allowed for different “degrees” of agency or participatory engagement by children and young people, from projects characterised by “token” involvement rather than genuine participation to reciprocal, collaborative partnerships (pp. 9–14). Consequently, he argued that professionals and institutions need to rethink how they worked in order to enable children and young people to initiate their own projects and to support them in carrying out their own decisions together with others.

As already indicated, a central concept in research on children’s participation is that of “voice”, related to the many ways in which students can participate in educational decision-making beyond representative politics (Mitra, 2004). The rhetoric of “voice” was mobilised by the civil rights movements in Europe and other parts of the world to express the right to participate more broadly in public life. Stuart Hart (2002) defined voice as the expression of personal perspectives in order to develop the capacity for existential thought and choice.

The educationalist Gert Biesta (2006, p. 133) has contributed to an understanding of voice as having a social dimension: a human being’s capacity for action, hence freedom, depends on the ways in which others take up that person’s initiatives, therefore going beyond personal expression. Biesta criticises ideologies of “child-centred” education that focus on the egocentric existence of individuals, and further disrupts conceptualisations of a “centre”, cautioning that educational democratisation should not be understood as a process of bringing others into the centre, i.e., into existing systems by including those defined as being “outside” by others who are “inside”. Truly democratic politics is collective action emerging from the presupposition of equality as the starting point, not confined to the sphere of political decision-making or conceived as merely a form of

government created for the people, but rather participation in both the construction and transformation of social life. In relation to education, Biesta (2019) thus suggests that education is neither about making students fit into “existing ways of thinking, doing and being” (p. 3) nor about telling them what they should desire, but “to provide space, time and curricular forms for encountering and working ‘through’ one’s desires” (p. 1). It is noteworthy that Biesta’s conceptualisation of individual desire does not build upon ego-centred freedom, but rather invites individuals to ask whether what they desire is worth desiring in order to live well on a planet with “limited capacity for meeting all that is desired from it” (p. 1).

As Biesta (2013) observes, children’s lives in and outside school “are permeated by questions about togetherness-in-plurality” (p. 118) as well as negotiations of the intrinsic aspects of democratic participation, dissent, and difference. Biesta does not seek an answer to the question of “freedom” within a temporal framework; rather, he maintains that education should create opportunities for political existence. These views are supported by children’s rights’ scholars who point out that

it is through learning to question, to express views and having their opinions taken seriously, that children will acquire the skills and competence to develop their thinking and to exercise judgement in the myriad of issues that will confront them as they approach adulthood.

(Lansdown, 2001, p. 6)

Locating student voice: from learning outcomes to enhancing democratic politics in education

A central question in education is how student voice is located within policy enactment. Dana Mitra (2004) points out that, compared to the initial student voice movements in the 1960s, the re-emergence of the concept of student voice in the 1990s was geared not so much towards children’s political agency, rights, and empowerment as towards improving student learning outcomes. In music education, the body of literature on student voice is small even by the 2020s (Després & Dubé, 2020; Finney & Harrison, 2010; Spruce, 2015). However, this absence of the child perspective in music education research is not exceptional: in educational research, attempts to discover the stages of children’s learning were dominated by the interests of developmental psychologists up until the end of the 1990s. This research focus neglected to seek access to children’s perspectives (Kellett, 2010), a lack that was also brought up in music education research by a number of music education scholars at the end of the 1990s (see e.g., Burnard, 1999; Kanellopoulos, 1999). Consequently, a large part of music education research involving student perspectives has been limited to students’ musical learning and learning conditions in adult-designed learning

environments (e.g., Hallam et al., 2012; McPherson, 2005; McPherson & Renwick, 2001).

Work on locating student voice in music education can benefit from Biesta's (2010a) invitation to examine the extent to which the prior voice initiatives have expanded outside the realm of socialisation: in other words, whether student voice has been used more to inform educational agendas than to enable students themselves to participate in agenda setting, for example by allowing them to participate in initiating projects and formulating project goals. When participants are not involved in posing questions and formulating the issues in the first place, the process itself delimits the area in which to act, thus leaving no real possibility of their having an influence. Voice initiatives can also be censorial so that only "safe" issues and socially expected responses are encouraged.

Klemenčič and Hoidn (2020) argue that some of the problems relating to student participation are caused by a focus on individual learning and classroom interaction that is too narrow, suggesting that the processes cannot be fully removed from the broader institutional and political contexts in which they are embedded. This means that educational institutions need to identify their role in the shaping of individuals' possibilities for action and in the orientation of individuals' choices. Additionally, policy needs to support collaboration between students and public service providers. Taylor and Bovill (2018) suggest considering the curriculum as a co-created, ongoing, dynamic, and emergent formation enabling greater scope for individuals to be educational actors. Scholarship within the learning sciences (see Sawyer, 2011) has also supported the idea of a balance between script and structure, and flexibility and improvisation, since the most effective teaching in classroom interactions can be characterised as *collaborative emergence*, an open-ended, emergent, and improvisational process between teachers and students. In such processes, the outcome is not scripted but can include unpredictability and contingency (Sawyer, 2011).

To contextualise the discussion, I will next examine this topic within the education system in Finland with a focus on how curricular policies, processes, and procedures of government agencies and local authorities frame collaborations within the Finnish music school system.

Educational governance through decentralisation and collaboration

In Finland, the network of music schools forms a linearly progressing system together with upper-secondary vocational training and universities of applied sciences along with the university-level studies at the Sibelius Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki (Väkevä, Westerlund & Ilmola-Sheppard, 2017). Some of the features of these publicly funded music schools and their development into a nationwide, standardised

network can be attributed to the Finnish ideals of accessibility in education and educational continuity that grew in importance during the post-war reconstruction of the country (Heimonen, 2002). Since the 1980s, a prominent feature of the Finnish education system is the decentralised form of governance where decision-making power has increasingly been transferred to local education providers with substantial autonomy granted to teachers, and to collaboration between different stakeholders and consideration of multiple viewpoints when constructing education policies (Vitikka et al., 2012). As a consequence, Finnish music schools adopted a similar structure of governance in the 1990s to public schools: a national core curriculum providing a general framework as the basis for developing local curricula.

During the latest music school curricular reform, a new element was introduced in the policy process because the core curricula stated that local curricula should be drawn up “as far as possible with pupils, their guardians and other parties” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017, p. 8). By strengthening the role of local music school decision-making, individualised learning paths and student choice in curriculum content were further supported: music schools were allowed to locally determine the allocation and the amount of instruction and lesson hours for studies. By transferring more decision-making power to local music schools and by loosening local constraints on assessment and study structures, the changes in the core curricula further reduced the national comparability of music school studies and local curricula which before 2017 had striven to be more uniform and nationally standardised.

Although Finnish music schools and comprehensive schools share the same age group of children and young people, the specific regulation on arts education in Finland sets dual tasks for music schools: preparing future professionals for their careers and providing music education for all. As a result, learning trajectories in music schools have historically been designed with specific consideration of the vocational demands of higher music education institutions and professional musical life in the country. Alignment of music school studies began in 1970, when the first national curriculum with assessment frameworks was mandated for use in music schools. This national curriculum also included a commensurate degree course system between music schools and the Sibelius Academy, the only music university in the country (Heimonen, 2002, p. 192).

Historically, music schools’ eligibility for state funding depended on their compliance with the uniform degree system (Finnish Board of Schools, 1970). A legal framework through which music schools implemented a nationally uniform system of examinations with a standardised testing model and assessment framework was at odds with the rest of the Finnish education system in which nationally standardised testing systems are not

used and teachers can choose their own assessment methods (Vainikainen et al., 2017). Whereas national and provincial school inspections were already abolished in Finnish comprehensive schools in the 1980s and there is no external inspection or control of teachers, music schools have maintained a self-monitoring system of assessment juries and study frameworks that give guidelines for structuring the studies at each stage of the learning process, similar to the principal methods of assessment in higher music education. Initially, students and teachers were excluded from the external summative assessment. This situation originated from a hierarchical model established in the 1960s when the local music school's performance was assessed by external inspectors from the Sibelius Academy. This hierarchical model remained dominant assessment practice in music schools until 2017, and in some music schools also after the curriculum reform.

Whilst this assessment tradition was initially justified on the grounds of quality assurance, providing standardised music school studies through a joint study framework was also considered a contribution towards equality, since it enabled music students throughout the country to receive standardised education wherever they lived (Ritaluoto, 1996). Historically, however, how students progressed in their studies in effect also determined the continuation of their right to study in music schools: in the 1970s, the national curriculum specified the grade students needed to achieve in examinations in order to continue their studies. Some music schools have continued a policy of making the first year of studies a "probational year" during which the student's suitability for music school studies is assessed. The evaluation of students' progress also started in the 1970s, when the curriculum allowed students to be given different amounts of instruction based on their "progress and ability" (Finnish National Board of Schools, 1970, p. 2). Up until 2002, studies in a second instrument were to be offered mainly to students who applied for vocational studies (Finnish National Board of Education, 1995).

Overall, the model that was designed and would enable students to apply for higher education emphasised specialisation on one instrument. During the historical construction of the system, the institutions' ability to produce professionals constituted the rationale for funding, and students' "success" in their studies was connected to this. Differential treatment and merit-based exclusion of students by music school teachers have been identified in recent studies on music schools (Elmgren, 2019, 2021) suggesting that the predictions made for children based on their assumed potential create hindrances to recognition both for children considered as talented and those not identified as such, since it is no longer the children as persons who are the top priority, but rather their musical potential. Any policy practices that produce differential treatment of students undermine the pursuit of democratic processes that build on the presupposition

of children and young people's status as equal, legitimate participants. Children's and young people's position in music schools thus appears to be characterised by a tension between the policy aims: the national education policy encourages them to participate actively in shaping their education, yet at the same time these collaborative processes are subjected to the expectation that music schools should provide pre-professional studies that, historically, have also contributed to the tradition of student screening. Hence, a closer examination of the policies from the students' point of view raises a concern about the extent to which the music schools' dual task and the institutions' inclinations towards student selection have generated discrimination in terms of opportunities provided for students. These are phenomena that are apparent not only in music education but also in other areas of child policy that require institutions to fulfil different, often conflicting roles in society (Pirnes et al., 2010).

Presupposing a continuation with specific vocational studies therefore adds another component to emergent, flexible configurations of practices and highlights the fact that music schools are *collaborative spaces within ecosystems* where curricular policies, processes, and procedures of government agencies and local authorities frame the collaborations and are part of the ecosystem that shapes students' and teachers' social action and hence the possibilities for collaboration. The multiple viewpoints that need to be considered in local curricula in music schools are acknowledged in the core curriculum of basic education in the arts:

When the curriculum is drawn up, consideration is given to the individual needs and abilities of pupils, the tradition of the art form and the local cultural heritage, changes taking place in the art form nationally and internationally, the requirements set by further studies and the characteristics of the educational institution and its operating environment.

(Finnish National Agency for Education,
2017, p. 8)

From the point of view of collaboration, which implies an element of open-endedness in the processes and thus unforeseen outcomes, a central question for local decision-making appears to be to what extent the music schools can stretch their institutionally interdependent practices in unexpected directions and dimensions. In other words, the question might be asked to what extent they can take on children's and young people's initiatives and collaborate within this social ecology when a number of the decisions regarding the study structures are pre-established because of the dual tasks guiding those decisions, including "the requirements set by further studies" (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017, p. 8).

From the teachers' point of view, a central question relates to the extent to which study paths in music schools are in danger of staying scripted, making teacher autonomy more procedural and assigning teachers the role of bringing children into existing systems (Biesta, 2010a). In other words: if the plans exist before the individual, what does it mean for the music schools and the students – and for collaboration – if no genuine choice is involved for the students after all, neither for those pursuing music as a hobby, nor for those who are planning to apply for admission to higher education?

Within the Finnish music school context, the few studies that have sought children's perspectives on music schools suggest that the musical learning that children and young people find meaningful would incorporate learning with others, be multidisciplinary, take place with many different people, and allow them to experiment with multiple instruments, types of music and ways of making music (see Tuovila, 2003). Enabling children to engage in processes of exploration, investigation, and discovery in their ways of being in the world would suggest an element of open-endedness in the processes as opposed to set standards of musicianship legitimised by outside authorities. In this way, student voice can become an important driver of change.

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, I have put forth an idea of music schools as *collaborative spaces within ecosystems* to highlight the fact that music school practices are historically accumulated, thus emphasising the need to look at the potential for collaboration with children in relation to how music schools function within the wider music education ecosystem and what roles the schools are considered to fulfil in society. The case of Finland has illustrated how the societal role of music schools has continued to embed both the need to cater for future music professionals – the task that began during post-war reconstruction – and the need to provide music education for all. Similar tensions generated by this dual task have been identified in other Nordic countries (see e.g., Jordhus-Lier, 2021). The question from the point of view of music school teachers is whether their role as guardians of already-made decisions undermines the potential for music school education to expand outside the realm of socialisation (Biesta, 2019).

The policy framework for Finnish music schools has only fairly recently, in 2017, increased their local governance and level of autonomy to the extent that they could use their discretionary power to move beyond nationally standardised learning trajectories into professional studies. However, in making a choice to disrupt the linearity of pre-professional pathways (Väkevä et al., 2017) with local deliberation, music schools may at the

same time disrupt students' equal opportunity for higher music education. The question remains of how to work towards a sustainable solution.

From the point of view of the collaborative potentials in music schools, I identify several implications for practice. For educational leaders in music schools, working towards forms of collaborative professionalism that include the children's voices would make it possible to identify points that regulate the conditions for collaboration and create a lack of autonomy at the level of local political decision-making, i.e., the ways in which music school education continues to be scripted, controlled, and historically governed. A careful reconsideration of the underlying assumptions of linear learning trajectories could help the schools to identify spaces for emergence where choice is available and where the anticipated linear processes can be altered, i.e., where platforms for policy enactment can be established with the children and the communities to which the institutions reach out.

As the participatory turn in public policies suggests, it is no longer viable that a social service is merely made available *for* citizens. For example, it cannot be automatically assumed that, based on their professional expertise and expert position, art professionals can make all decisions on the contents of art education on behalf of the users of those services (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021). Enabling children and young people to have an impact on public decision-making through representative politics and direct, organised involvement in matters concerning their own lives can open up opportunities to understand children's own perspectives on meaningful artistic engagement. Such collaboration would further allow children as central stakeholders to define what they experience as aspects of quality and value in music education.

If music schools open up their practices for democratic processes, they challenge assumptions of learning trajectories that are inevitable (James et al., 2015), thus furthering a more pluralist view of cultural life and cultural expressions (Négrier & Dupin-Meynard, 2020). In beginning to identify how they regulate the conditions for subjects to emerge, or in Biesta's (2013) terms, their "coming into the world" (p. 143), music schools can also resist predefined assumptions and categories ascribed to musicianship. It is thus the collaborative potential of the schools that determines how different ways of being a musician can co-evolve within the institutional ecosystem of music education as its institutions continue to redefine their relations to each other, to the general public, and to their central stakeholders: children and young people. It is crucial to acknowledge that the freedom implied within this collaborative professionalism is characterised by relationship rather than self-dependence. Within these professional landscapes, music schools can, through such collaborative professionalism, become driving forces for participatory decision-making and policy enactment. By so doing, they not only support a variety of ways

of meaningful artistic engagement, but also develop into prominent sites of collaborative work and civic involvement.

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