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Special Issue Editorial: “Care Ethics in the Education of Children Gifted for Music”

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Abstract

This editorial introduces the Special Issue, “Care Ethics in the Education of Children Gifted for Music,” addressing the tension between accelerated, performance-driven training and the holistic, socio-emotional flourishing of young musicians. Specialised music education, often content- and mastery-focused, has been criticised for neglecting children’s rights and contemporary understandings of well-being. In response, this Special Issue presents five articles that centre Care Ethics as a relational and structural framework for transformation. Drawing on Gilligan, Held, Noddings, and Tronto, these contributions explore care across four dimensions: theoretical critique, systemic analysis of global institutional practices, relational ecosystems of family and community, and innovative pedagogical approaches. Together, they show that moving beyond high-pressure conservatory models requires shifting from technical detachment to “ecosystems of care” that protect rights, agency, and authentic aesthetic flourishing. The Issue asserts that technical excellence and ethical care are inseparable, co-constituting a sustainable, meaningful musical life.

From the “Secret Garden” to Care Ethics in Gifted Music Education

For over a century, specialist music education for gifted children has been characterised by a persistent tension: the drive for elite, performance-driven outcomes versus the holistic, socio-emotional development of the child. Supporters of specialised talent development argue that these programmes provide students with clear pathways to higher education and professional music careers, which are often perceived as more efficient than what is available elsewhere. In contrast, critics—including individuals and professional associations—view specialised programmes as elitist and unsustainable, representing opportunities for what they consider “the select few” (see discussion in López-Íñiguez, 2024; also, López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2023; López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023).

Historically, these performance-centric environments for young, gifted learners have been closely linked to 19th-century conservatory traditions, often described as “black boxes” or “secret gardens” due to their opacity and inaccessibility (e.g., Burwell et al., 2017; Miksza et al., 2021; Rostvall & West, 2003). The system has also been criticised for being in a state of “deep sleep,” failing to acknowledge evolving societal needs, children’s rights, or contemporary psychological understandings of well-being, instead prioritising technical performance outcomes (e.g., Pozo et al., 2022). Consequently, children gifted for music have historically been viewed as high-functioning assets to the institution, fuelling a culture of hyper-visibility, the idealisation of the virtuoso, and a preoccupation with professional prestige and success (see discussion in López-Íñiguez & McPherson, this Special Issue).

This Special Issue, *Care Ethics in the Education of Children Gifted for Music*, responds to these critiques by proposing a radical reframing: the integration of Care Ethics as a robust

relational and structural framework for transformative gifted music education¹. Drawing on the intellectual lineage of Carol Gilligan (1982), Joan Tronto (1993; 2013), Nel Noddings (2013), and Virginia Held (2006), the contributions explore care across four interrelated dimensions: theoretical critique, systemic analysis of global institutional practices, the relational ecosystems of family and community, and innovative pedagogical approaches. The synthesis of these peer-reviewed articles demonstrates that moving beyond high-pressure conservatory models requires a shift from narrow technical mastery toward “ecosystems of care” that safeguard the rights, agency, and authentic aesthetic flourishing of gifted children. In this way, technical excellence and ethical care are presented not as competing priorities but as inseparable, co-constitutive halves of a sustainable and meaningful musical life.

The Intellectual Lineage of Care

The foundations of this issue rest upon the pioneering work of Gilligan (1982), who first identified an ethical perspective grounded in a unique moral orientation that prioritises interpersonal obligations and connections over detached, universal principles. This framework was extended into the educational sphere by Noddings (2013), who maintained that the relational bond between educator and learner is the fundamental prerequisite for impactful teaching. In Noddings’ view, the teacher must practise a deep, receptive attentiveness and shift the focus toward the student’s needs to authentically perceive and address the learner’s reality.

Held (2006) further elevated this lineage by arguing that care ethics is not merely a subset of traditional moral theories but a self-contained and sovereign philosophical system. Held critiques the prevailing model of individualistic liberalism—which views society as a

¹ See the related research project: <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/caring-for-musically-gifted-children/>

collection of self-sufficient actors—suggesting instead that human beings are inherently social and defined by their mutual dependencies. In the context of gifted music education, Held’s work implies that the ethical worth of a performance-oriented system should be judged not by how strictly it adheres to meritocratic ideals or competitive fairness, but by its ability to nurture actual human connections and the welfare of those involved.

However, care is not just an interpersonal act; it is a political and structural one. Tronto (1993; 2013) transitioned care ethics into the public domain, outlining a multi-stage process of care that encompasses everything from initial recognition to collective action, all of which demand institutional accountability and civic unity. In the musical realm, López-Íñiguez and Westerlund (2023) have argued that a systemic approach to care (i.e., the politics of care) is essential for breaking down the culture of emotional distance that frequently defines high-stakes artistic environments. Furthermore, as López-Íñiguez and McPherson have highlighted in this Special Issue, global systemic failures often result in gifted children being viewed as instruments for institutional success rather than as self-governing individuals entitled to a holistic and well-rounded existence.

Building on these foundations, the five papers in this issue construct a narrative that advocates for moving beyond historically opaque and insulated pedagogical cultures towards a more humane, relationally attuned ecosystem. To awaken these conservative systems and address the extreme polarisation surrounding giftedness and talent in music—from high recognition to the erasure of the gifted child—this Special Issue promotes a radical centring of Care Ethics. This philosophical shift is not merely about adopting a paternalistic or “soft” approach towards gifted children (see discussion on care ethics critiques in López-Íñiguez, *in press*); it is a robust relational framework that redefines the very purpose of music education.

Articles Within This Special Issue

1. The Theoretical Provocation: Aesthetic Care

The conceptual anchor of this Special Issue is provided by Li and López-Íñiguez in their article, *“Rethinking Gifted Music Education Through Aesthetic Care: A Critical-Theoretical Perspective.”* The authors address the historical conflict between technical training (meeting external standards) and the cultivation of human meaning. They argue that gifted children are uniquely vulnerable to identity-related strain and perfectionism precisely because of the music education traditions that prioritise technical mastery at the expense of well-being. By integrating Tronto’s (1993) care ethics with Foucault’s (1988) notion of “aesthetic existence,” they propose a framework of Aesthetic Care. This framework transforms the teacher-student relationship into a relational, perceptual, and ethical orientation. The authors articulate ten pedagogical principles—including dialogic aesthetic engagement, co-agency in creation, and responsive attunement—that serve as a roadmap for nurturing sustainable musical identities. In this view, the teacher is not just an instructor but an “aesthetic caregiver.”

2. Global Realities: Institutional Tensions

Moving from theoretically-driven discussions to the systemic level, López-Íñiguez and McPherson offer a sobering global perspective in *“Issues and Approaches to Gifted Education in Specialist Music Programs Globally: Insights From Institutional Leaders.”* In this collective case study of 81 leaders across 68 specialist music programmes in 25 countries, the authors illuminate the internal dynamics of these historically secluded specialist institutions. They identify a profound division in institutional philosophy within such high-stakes music education settings, which range from “Serving Gifted Children” (i.e., programmes that focus on holistic enrichment and the child’s rights), to “Gifted Children

Serving the System” (i.e., programmes where the gifted child is viewed as a vehicle for institutional prestige and professional production). The study highlights critical ethical failures, including reports of mental and physical strain in elite systems, and argues that institutional leadership must move beyond entrenched inertia to recognise gifted children as individuals with rights, rather than merely potential professional products.

3. The Family Ecosystem: Relational Attunement

Care is not confined to the conservatory walls; it begins in the home. From this perspective, Bağrıaçık and Avcu address the critical role of the family in “*Development and Validation of the Ethics of Care Scale for Parents of Musically Gifted Children (ECS-MGC) in Turkey.*” To move away from a purely achievement-oriented approach to parenting, the authors devised a 22-item scale grounded in Tronto’s (2013) five phases of care. This tool allows for the measurement of relational attunement—the degree to which parents recognise their gifted child’s feelings (*caring about*) and assume responsibility for their holistic needs (*caring for*), rather than merely their practice schedule. This study provides a vital psychometric bridge between high-level performance and the daily lived experience of caring for young gifted individuals within the family ecosystem.

4. Community and Socio-Political Ecosystems: Unmet Needs

The systemic nature of care is further examined in the study by López Cruz et al., “*Development of Musically Gifted Children in Chilean Youth Orchestras: Ecosystems of Care and Unmet Needs.*” Through a multiple case study involving the Foundation of Youth and Children’s Orchestras of Chile (FOJI), the authors identify a disparity between institutional goals and the lived experiences of students. They highlight “unmet needs” in emotional support and basic rights, suggesting that deficiencies in care often reflect structural

power dynamics. The paper advocates for educational ecosystems to align with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989), prioritising mental health and personal development alongside specialised musical training.

5. Practical Transformation: Pedagogy in Action

The Special Issue concludes with a vision of what a “caring pedagogy” looks like in practice. In “*Gamification, Popular Musics-Based Repertoire, and Mixed Instrumentation in Music Enrichment: A Case Study With Gifted Learners in Spain*,” Isidoro García-Díaz demonstrates how to dismantle the rigid hierarchy of the traditional model. By employing gamification mechanics (badges, missions, and role assignments), popular music, and mixed instrumentation, the programme (TalentiaCC) cultivates a sense of belonging and agency. The study identifies five design principles—*scaffolded roles, short narrative, moderated collaboration, adaptable repertoire, and clear criteria*—that can be “built into” the curriculum. This approach demonstrates that high intellectual ability flourishes most effectively in environments that prioritise the student’s voice and socio-emotional development.

Conclusion: A New Agenda for Care in Gifted Music Education

Collectively, these five papers argue that the education of children and adolescents gifted for music must undergo a paradigm shift. Drawing on the legacies of Gilligan, Held, Noddings, and Tronto, this Special Issue demonstrates that technical excellence in music and ethical care are not mutually exclusive, but essential to a flourishing musical life. By constructing “ecosystems of care” that integrate aesthetic cultivation with relational attentiveness, the contributions reframe gifted music education as a space not only for artistic development, but also for rights, dignity, and human flourishing.

In sum, the five papers in this Special Issue establishes a potent and necessary new agenda for the transformation of gifted music education. They argue that the persistent prioritisation of high-stakes performance output, which has dominated this field for centuries, is unsustainable and ethically untenable. We can no longer leave these children within non-transparent and emotionally detached pedagogical systems, where human flourishing becomes a secondary or accidental outcome, if it is secured at all. To continue down this path is to remain complicit in the “deep sleep” of systems that too often prioritise institutional prestige over the authentic voices of the children they are meant to serve. Thus, the ecosystems of care provided in this issue demand a holistic awakening, establishing that:

1. *Technical excellence and ethical care are co-constitutive.* High-performance outcomes are not authentic expressions of talent if they are achieved through coercion, detached professionalism, or the sacrifice of a child’s socio-emotional and physical well-being. A musical career that subsumes a gifted child’s entire identity is not a “successful” one.
2. *Pedagogy must evolve into an aesthetic perceptual orientation.* The concept of Aesthetic Care (Li & López-Íñiguez) challenges the teacher to see the “whole child” and to recognise music as a medium for authentic self-formation, rather than just a discipline to be mastered. Teachers must become “aesthetic caregivers” who attune their instruction to the unique needs and agency of each student.
3. *Educational leadership must become architects of care.* The global systems analysis (López-Íñiguez & McPherson) reveals that institutional structures must explicitly prioritise “serving gifted children” over ensuring “gifted children serve the system.” Leadership must cultivate a culture of relational attunement rather than technical

detachment, moving beyond Tronto's phase of merely *caring for* outcomes to actively *caring with* students.

4. *Care must be ecosystemic and rights-based.* Our responsibility extends from the intimate family setting (Bağrıaçık & Avcu), where parents must be supported in practising empathetic relational care, to the broader community and structural levels (López Cruz et al.). True care means ensuring every child has the structural opportunity to “receive care” and that these opportunities are aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989).
5. *Pedagogical transformation must be built into the design.* The final case study (García-Díaz) demonstrates that inclusive and highly engaging enrichment can be achieved by design—through gamification, non-traditional repertoire, and collaborative structures—showing that excellence need not be synonymous with exclusion.

This proposed “agenda” does not seek to lower the standards of musical achievement; rather, it seeks to fundamentally elevate them by establishing a sustainable, humane, and authentically creative path to music professionalism—provided it remains, at every stage, the gifted child's own informed choice. This Special Issue is a call to action for educators, researchers, parents, and institutional leaders to overcome the systemic inertia of traditional conservatory culture and to build a future in which the child gifted for music can flourish not within a “secret garden” apart, but within an ecosystem of care—both as an artist and as a human being.

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