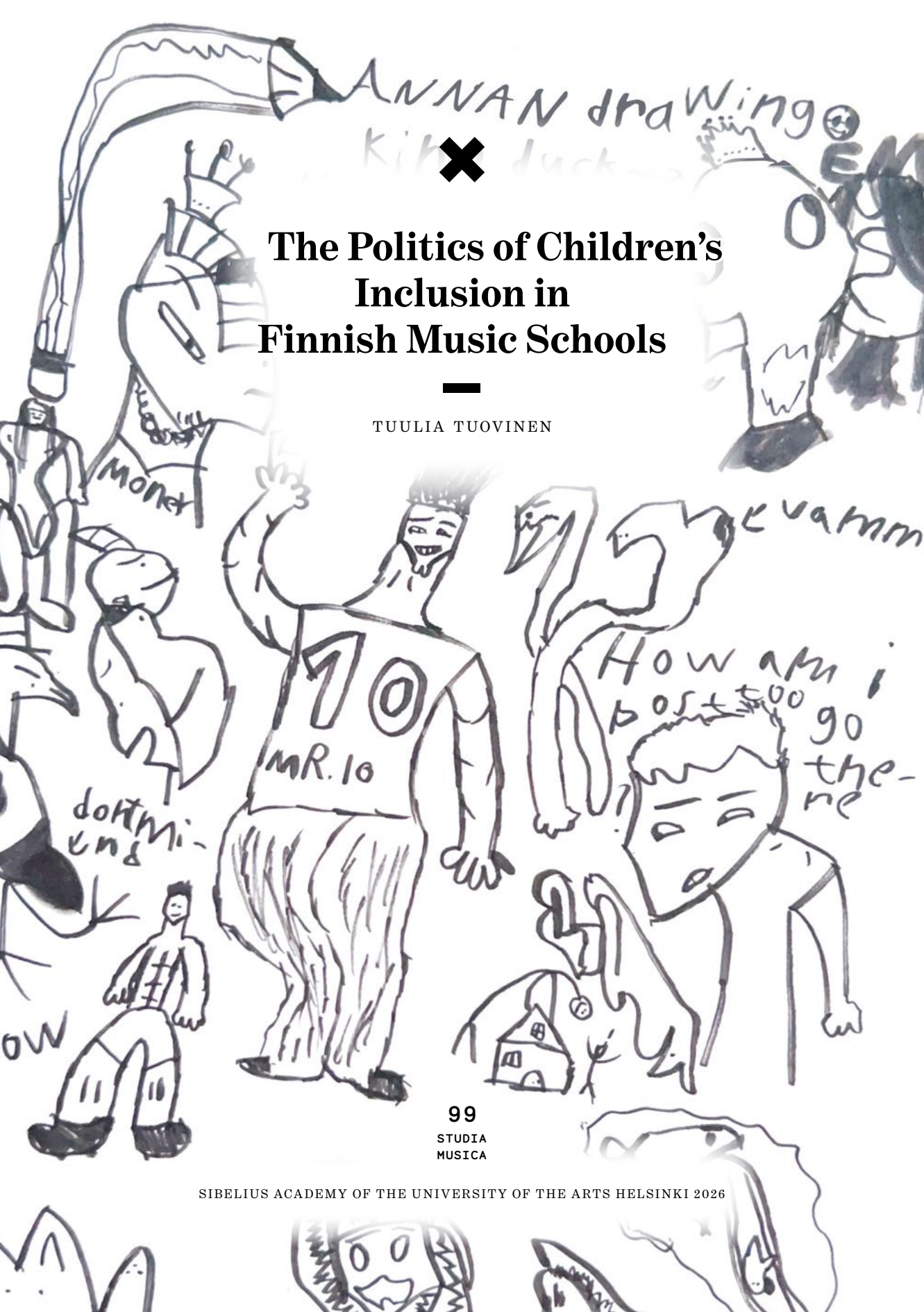




The Politics of Children's Inclusion in Finnish Music Schools

TUULIA TUOVINEN

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Abstract

The paradigmatic shift toward participatory governance in contemporary policy making has established public engagement as a fundamental principle of national strategies and policy frameworks across diverse contexts. Despite this strong national commitment to democratic values and participatory principles, children and young people are however frequently excluded from collaborative partner status in policy processes. This exclusion constitutes a critical contradiction between stated democratic principles and actual participatory practice within educational governance, where processes such as the national curriculum development are framed as collaborative efforts between the public administration and various stakeholders. This study addresses the identified disjuncture between policy aspirations and their practical realization by exploring children's inclusion and policy co-construction in music school education as part of Basic Arts Education in Finland. Situated within the multidisciplinary field of child perspectives studies, this practitioner-inquiry employs methodological approaches from developmental work research and cultural-historical activity theory. Three central questions guided the research: How do children and young people co-construct music school practices when their agency and decision-making are supported by their teacher? What institutional dynamics and democratic possibilities emerge within such co-constructed policy processes? How does the co-construction of music school practices with students contribute to broader understandings of participatory governance and inclusion in music education?

The study's empirical material comprises multiple data sources generated during a twelve-month formative intervention conducted in two music schools. The intervention involved 25 music school students (ages 9–15) who planned and implemented their own projects in peer groups under the practitioner-researcher's

guidance. Video recordings of group lessons were supplemented by student interviews, student-teacher conversations conducted through a messaging application (WhatsApp), and a practitioner-researcher diary of the intervention process. The study incorporated music school policy review, including examination of national curricular frameworks and assessments. The analysis involved several iterative steps using diffractive methodology. Ethical protocols included securing informed consent from guardians and participating students.

The findings indicate that children's inclusion in music schools can be enhanced by supporting their agency through experiences of relevance, social connectedness, and ability to act. This requires attention to both individual skill development and horizontal and socio-spatial relationships within students' music-making, as their aspirations and agentic orientations are constituted through relational processes. Students' opportunities to influence significant matters revealed how individual needs are interconnected with social relationships, with music-focused classes providing important peer networks and social support. The analysis showed that enhancing inclusion requires not merely addressing access and representation but also reimagining the various conceptualizations and frameworks through which children and their musical learning are understood, managed, and administered. While music schools' historical mandates and institutional affiliations have reinforced linear progression expectations, structured according to professional study requirements, this study contends that policies formulated and enacted without children's direct participatory engagement render their experiences of inclusion increasingly arbitrary. Understanding student agency as an ecological achievement necessitates fundamental theoretical and practical reconsideration of how musical development is understood and facilitated in music education. As a whole, the study suggests that allowing children and young people to bring their perspectives to music education can restore art's meaning-making capacity to fundamental questions of human and social existence.

Keywords: Basic education in the arts, children, co-construction, democracy, developmental work research, inclusion, music school, public policy

Tiivistelmä

Osallistava hallinto ja julkisten palvelujen yhteiskehittäminen ovat vakiinnuttaneet kansalaisten osallistumisen kansallisten strategioiden ja politiikkikehysten lähtökohdaksi moninaisissa konteksteissa. Huolimatta vahvasta kansallisesta sitoutumisesta demokraattisiin arvoihin ja osallistumisen periaatteisiin, lapset ja nuoret jäävät Suomessa usein ilman asemaa tasavertaisina yhteistyökumppaneina politiikkaprosesseissa. Tämä poissulkeminen muodostaa merkittävän ristiriidan julkilausuttujen demokraattisten periaatteiden ja niiden käytännön toteutumisen välillä myös koulutuksen hallinnossa, jossa esimerkiksi opetussuunnitelman perusteiden laatimisen kuitenkin nähdään perustuvan julkishallinnon ja eri sidosryhmien väliseen yhteistyöhön. Tämä tutkimus vastaa tähän haasteeseen koulutuspoliittisten tavoitteiden käytännön toteutumisessa tarkastelemalla lasten osallisuutta ja julkisten palvelujen yhteiskehittämistä osana taiteen perusopetuksen musiikkioppilaitoksia. Lapsinäkökulmaisen tutkimuksen monitieteiseen kenttään sijoittuva opettajatutkimus hyödyntää metodologisia lähestymistapoja kehittävästä työntutkimuksesta ja kulttuurihistoriallisesta toiminnan teoriasta. Tutkimusta ohjasivat kolme keskeistä kysymystä: Miten lapset ja nuoret yhteiskehittävät musiikkiopistokäytäntöjä silloin, kun opettaja tukee heidän toimijuuttaan ja päätöksentekoaan? Millaisia institutionaalisia dynamiikkoja ja demokraattisia mahdollisuuksia yhteiskehitetyissä politiikkaprosesseissa syntyy? Millä tavoin oppilaiden kanssa toteutettu musiikkiopiston käytäntöjen yhteiskehittäminen voi edistää laajempaa ymmärrystä osallistavasta hallinnosta ja osallisuudesta musiikkikasvatuksessa?

Tutkimuksen empiirinen aineisto koostuu videoiduista ryhmätunneista osana formatiivista interventiota, jossa 25 musiikkiopisto-oppilasta (ikäjakauma 9–15-vuotta) suunnittelivat ja toteuttivat omia projektejaan vertaisryhmissä

opettajatutkijan ohjauksessa. Interventio toteutettiin kahdessa musiikkioppilaitoksessa kahdentoista kuukauden aikana. Ryhmätuntien videotallenteita täydennettiin oppilashaastatteluilla, oppilaiden ja opettajan välisillä keskusteluilla viestintäsovelluksessa (WhatsApp), sekä opettajatutkijan tutkimuspäiväkirjalla. Tutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin myös musiikkiopiston ohjausjärjestelmää kansallisten opetussuunnitelman perusteiden ja valtakunnallisten arviointien kautta. Analyysi toteutettiin useiden iteratiivisten vaiheiden kautta diffraktiivista metodologiaa hyödyntäen. Tutkimuseettisten periaatteiden mukaisesti tutkimukseen osallistumisesta varmistettiin suostumus huoltajilta ja oppilailta.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että lasten osallisuutta musiikkiopistoissa voidaan vahvistaa tukemalla heidän toimijuuttaan merkityksellisyyden, sosiaalisen yhteenkuuluvuuden ja pystyvyyden kokemusten kautta. Tämä edellyttää huomion kiinnittämistä yksilölliseen taitojen kehittämiseen sekä oppilaiden välisiin horisontaalisiin ja sosio-spatiaalisiin suhteisiin musiikin tekemisessä. Oppilaiden mahdollisuudet vaikuttaa heille merkityksellisiin asioihin toivat esiin sen, kuinka yksilölliset tarpeet kietoutuvat sosiaalisiin suhteisiin. Musiikkipainotteiset luokat tarjosivat oppilaille tärkeitä vertaisverkostoja ja sosiaalista tukea. Tutkimus osoittaa, että osallisuuden edistäminen edellyttää julkisten palvelujen saatavuuden ja lasten päätöksentekoon osallistumisen lisäksi myös lapsiin ja heidän musiikilliseen oppimiseensa liitettyjen käsitysten ja kehysten uudelleentarkastelua. Vaikka musiikkiopistojen historialliset tehtävät ja institutionaaliset sidonnaisuudet ovat muodostaneet musiikkiopisto-opintoihin lineaarisen etenemisen odotuksia ammattiopintojen vaatimusten näkökulmasta, tämä tutkimus esittää, että ilman lasten suoraa osallistumista laaditut ja toteutetut politiikat tekevät heidän osallisuuden kokemuksistaan sattumanvaraisia. Lasten toimijuuden ymmärtäminen osana erilaisia suhteita edellyttää myös musiikillisen kehityksen uudelleen tarkastelua. Kokonaisuutena tutkimus esittää, että lasten kanssa toimimalla ja heidän näkökulmiaan ymmärtämällä on mahdollista palauttaa taiteen merkityksenantoja inhimillisen olemassaolon peruskysymyksiin.

Asiasanat: Demokratia, kehittävä työntutkimus, julkinen politiikka, lapset, musiikkiopisto, osallisuus, taiteen perusopetus, yhteiskehittäminen

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Additional published works by the author relevant to the dissertation

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Tuovinen, T. (2023, October 7). Visions for sustainability in Finnish music schools: children's inclusion as a condition for achieving the objectives of sustainable development. 3rd European Music School Symposium, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Vienna, Austria.

Tuovinen, T. (2022, July 16). "I feel that he doesn't listen to us when we have choir": An intervention study towards the inclusion of student voice in music education. In L. Chen-Hafteck & W. Brooks (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 24th International Seminar of the ISME Music in Schools and Teacher Education Commission (MISTEC)* (pp. 129–139). International Society for Music Education.

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1. Introduction

This dissertation aims to contribute to bridging the policy-practice gap that I initially identified and began to explore within my professional practice as an instrumental teacher in publicly funded and governed Finnish music schools. By rethinking democratic participation in the public sphere (Biesta, 2012; Fraser, 1990) in my own professional context, I set out to investigate how children and young people use and acquire the skills of deliberation in decision-making about their own music making and learning when time and space for participation are created. By engaging in dialogue with the children and young people, I aimed not only to elicit their perspectives and explore their experiences, but also to gain a broader understanding of the co-construction process and the potential for student agency within public music school education. Through this dialogue with children and young people, this study focused on exploring the future-oriented possibilities of the educational practices that place children as central stakeholders in the Finnish music school system, specifically in order to investigate aspects of children's inclusion in the Finnish music schools: the ways in which these institutions could take into account children's perspectives and experiences and involve children in decision-making in the co-construction of music school policy.

In this study, by inclusion I refer to the decision-making power of individuals in their own lives, and in civil society more broadly, and their opportunities to belong to entities where they can invest in the common good and connect to different sources of well-being and interactional relationships that increase the meaning of life (Isola et al., 2017). This understanding highlights both participatory and social dimensions (Kiilakoski et al., 2012) and centres on individuals' lived experiences, conceptualising inclusion as a deeply experiential state where a sense of participation is created through having influence (Isola et al., 2017; Kiilakoski et al., 2012). Through its participatory dimension, inclusion

connects closely to democracy and democratic participation. By engaging in dialogue with children and young people as part of their everyday activities, I understand democracy not merely as electoral or representative government, but as an overarching way of living together (Dewey, 1916/1997), where all individuals have equal opportunities to contribute to and benefit from the society's resources and decision-making processes.

This study's attempts to engage children in the negotiations of shared life start from the assumption that students can speak (Rancière, 1991, 1999), recognizing that they do not "lack a capacity for speech, nor that they are producing noise" (Biesta, 2010a, p. 540). Democracy is thus understood here as an existential rather than developmental matter (Biesta, 2013), pursued through dialogue within shared practices of civic life (Biesta, 2013; Mouffe, 2013). By understanding democracy as something that needs to be "constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganised" (Dewey, 1937/1987, p. 182), democracy is not regarded as static or permanent, but rather as something that requires investments of time, resources, and attention – attempts to move from the actual to the possible (Dewey, 1916/1997; Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007).

Recognizing that young people's initiatives are often concrete and related to their everyday lives (Regional State Administrative Agency, 2017), and that meaningful participation takes place in everyday situations where children and young people can exercise influence over matters affecting their immediate environments (Finnish Government, 2019; Kiilakoski et al., 2012), this study posits that schools and other public institutions play a central role in promoting democracy and participatory modes of public governance (Prime Minister's Office, 2023; see also Biesta, 2006a, 2019; Dewey, 1916/1997; Männistö, 2022). This shift toward participatory governance reflects a broader transformation in how public institutions conceptualize the relationship between state and citizen, moving from hierarchical service delivery to collaborative partnership models. Engaging citizens in the co-construction of public policies (Pestoff, 2006; Vaillancourt, 2009, 2013), where citizens and stakeholders work together with public authorities in the collaborative design and creation of public policies, has constituted a way of changing welfare policy and practice away from more traditional models in which public authorities design services and citizens act as beneficiaries and recipients of these services. The acknowledgement of the limitations of children's involvement in representative forms of democracy has underscored the necessity to develop forms of children's participation beyond representational and retrospective forums (Després & Dubé, 2020) in order to allow children to have the opportunity to be actively involved in the construction of community life.

While the rhetoric of "student voice" or "students' voices" has been used in education to describe the many ways in which students can participate in educational decision-making (Mitra, 2004), this study adopts a broader conceptual framework of voice positing that "voice" can be expressed by children through multiple communicative forms, aligning with perspectives that consider that language constitutes merely one among many communicative modes through which individuals can express substantive ideas and engage in social participation (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; see also Sommer et al., 2010). Thus, considering that children's right to express their views is not limited to oral expression – in other words, children's representation in public life can be understood to be not only about their voice but also about their agency, namely their capacity to act and contribute to their environment (Esser et al., 2016; see also Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010) and their ability to exert control over and give direction to their lives – this study employs a relational framework of agency that necessitates attending to how agency is achieved (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Edwards, 2007; Klemenčič, 2021). This understanding acknowledges that the mere exercise of voice, the right of expression, is not enough, but requires space, an audience (listeners), and influence (impact) (Lundy, 2007). This conception of participation is also foundational to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as implementing Article 12 of the Convention – which establishes the right of children to express their views freely in all matters affecting them – requires "consistent and ongoing arrangements" to ensure effective implementation (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, para. 12).

This framework of voice is further developed through the work of the educational theorist Gert Biesta (2010a), who has contributed to recognizing voice as having a social dimension, not existing in a vacuum but becoming active in dialogue with others. From this understanding of voice and public space (Biesta, 2012), a person's capacity for action, and therefore freedom (different from liberal freedom-as-sovereignty), depends on the ways in which others take up her initiatives; hence voice extending beyond personal expression. The "who" of a person – in this case, the child – is revealed through speech and action (Arendt, 1958; Biesta, 2012), not in the sense of an identity, but rather in the sense of how one is, or tries to be, in and with the world (Biesta, 2021). The use of the term "public" highlights the particular dimension and quality of social interaction that promotes interaction across difference and is oriented towards the democratic values of equality, freedom and solidarity (Biesta et al., 2014). This understanding of the public sphere, in which education is seen as an essential component in the promotion of those forms of human action through which freedom can appear, concerns the particular forms of action and relationship that are possible in "public" spaces, and which are different from the private or market domains

(Biesta, 2012). The construction of the public sphere is therefore considered to be an ongoing process of "becoming public", the achievement of a form of human togetherness in which "action is possible and freedom can appear" (p. 693).

Within this study's understanding of inclusion, public services – such as music schools in Finland that provide arts education to children and young people – are understood as part of the wider network of public provision that potentiate meaningful communal life. Reframing music schools as public participatory spaces where children and young people can engage in decision-making about their educational experience and issues that affect their lives thus emphasizes that children's participation is not peripheral but is central to creating these institutions that offer opportunities for children to invest in the common good and to connect with different sources of well-being and interactional relationships that have the potential to contribute to living a life that is fruitful and inherently meaningful. These views further draw attention to the public quality of music school education: for a public good to have social and societal significance, it is essential that individuals are involved in deliberations about the public good and issues of togetherness in plurality (Biesta, 2013). The rationale for pursuing this relational vision of music school education is based on the understanding that no direct relationship can be established between music engagement and a specific benefit (Odendaal & Hodges, 2021; Westerlund, 2002). This underscores the necessity for stakeholder representation (Fraser, 2008) and fostering interaction on the premise of equality (Biesta, 2017a; Rancière, 1991, 1999).

The notion of "politics of inclusion" is employed in this study to denote that these processes, through which individuals seek to arrive at collective decisions regarding public issues and ways to organise common life, are not about reaching consensus but embracing plurality, conflicting alternatives, and ongoing negotiation. This standpoint is informed by the conceptualisations of Chantal Mouffe (2005), who posits that political questions always involve decisions that require making "a choice between conflicting alternatives" (p. 10). To understand the political as the ever-present possibility of antagonism acknowledges the absence of a final foundation and the undecidability that pervades every order. From this viewpoint, rather than seeking undisputed and consensual democracy, the rejection of "closure" is considered as an "important guarantee that the dynamics of the democratic process will be kept alive" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 33). This understanding is reinforced by Biesta (2013), who argues that civic participation and the capacity to engage in ongoing negotiation with others holding different views are inherent to educational spaces. As he contends, "it is not only irresponsible to try to keep

political existence away from the school; it is also impossible to do so, because the lives of children and young people – inside and outside the school – are permeated by questions about togetherness-in-plurality" (p. 118). While this study posits children as legitimate stakeholders in music school education and seeks the co-construction of music school policy through participative processes, it also acknowledges that such processes are inherently complex and characterized by multiple voices and perspectives (Engeström, 2001a), requiring analysis of actions taken in music schools within longer-term historical dynamics.

Finnish educational governance represents a unique context for examining democracy and the co-construction of public policy, as collaborative governance has been a functioning practice in Finland since the 1990s (Vitikka et al., 2016). The construction of educational policy is seen as the result of collaboration between different stakeholders, building on a considerable degree of professional autonomy for teachers as part of the Finnish educational culture of professional collaboration (Sahlberg, 2018). Although inclusion and civic participation are at the core of Nordic welfare policies, children and young people continue to have a limited role in policy processes. Despite the policy rhetoric, it appears that democracy is acknowledged but not actioned in Finnish classrooms (Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017). The recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) to the Finnish State party have included ensuring the active participation of children and young people in the formation of education policies. The central challenge of the changes in the reform projects and programmes under different ministries for children's participation has been their distribution remaining at the upper level, neglecting implementation in the life of municipalities and citizens (Council of Europe, 2011).

In Finnish child policy, inclusion is identified as a key element in children's well-being (Ministry of Justice, 2020). The importance of inclusion for well-being has also been observed in arts education, where inclusive structures have been found to strengthen the well-being of children and young people (Kotilainen et al., 2011). Previous evaluations of child welfare services report that feeling heard and understood, experiencing genuine recognition of agency, and having opportunities to exercise influence and build trust are at the core of meaningful interaction for children and young people (Peltola & Moisio, 2017). The experience of being heard, and of being able to influence decisions in one's life that promote individual well-being, is reflected in society as social sustainability. Children's well-being in childhood predicts their well-being in adulthood, including their capacity for employment and civic participation.

One of the key barriers to child participation is the lack of awareness that respecting children's views is not just a model of good pedagogical practice or policy making but a legally binding obligation (Lundy, 2007), secured by various

forms of national legislation (e.g., the Constitution of Finland) and ratified international conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In addition to recognizing the equal status of children as subjects of rights, children's rights scholarship emphasizes the need to overcome the misconception that an adult's judgment of the child's best interests can override the obligation to respect all of the child's rights under the Convention, including the right to be heard and for children's perspectives to be taken into consideration (Ruggiero, 2022). The assessment of the best interests of the child, which must be made on a case-by-case basis, must therefore include respect for the child's right to express his or her views. According to the interpretation of the Convention, the best interests of the child cannot be met without opportunities for children to express their views, to be heard, and to be taken seriously. Children's ability to express themselves and have their views considered is essential for realizing fundamental human rights (Iivonen & Pollari, 2022).

In the context of music education, it has been argued that the marginalisation and often blatant exclusion of children is based on deeply rooted developmentalist constructions of young children (Young, 2021; see also Prout, 2005). By observing the absence of children's voices in policy discussions, this present study identified further shortcomings in the commitment of public authorities to seek children's perspectives in national evaluations of this study's context, music schools, and the Basic Education in the Arts more widely (e.g., Koramo, 2009; Kurkela & Tawaststjerna, 1999; Tiainen et al., 2012). These findings align with broader research on children's participation in Finland, which suggests that the main problems with children's participation rights in Finland are not in the legislation, but in the lack of systematization, implementation, and training (Pajulammi, 2014).

Building on these theoretical foundations and methodological considerations, this dissertation acknowledges the need to explore how policy rhetoric translates into lived experiences in local music schools. Several practical and policy-inspired questions have thus motivated me to undertake this study: How might public services, such as music school education, be co-constructed through collaborative processes with children and young people, rather than simply for them, as an approach to children's participation that is also increasingly supported by various global and national policies (e.g., the National Child Strategy by the Finnish Government, 2021a; Council of Europe, 2022; Iivonen & Pollari, 2022)? What can be identified to "matter" for students (Edwards, 2017, p. 4), as they envision and implement their initiatives? Furthermore, given that education emerges as a function of and a function for society (Biesta, 2022), with society having expectations of public

educational institutions, what might be the tensions in making pedagogy public (Biesta, 2010b, 2019a; Biesta & Säfström, 2023) in a professional field that is experiencing multiple challenges in relation to participation in arts education in Finland (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021; Juntunen, 2021; Väkevä et al., 2022; Westerlund, 2021)?

As this study is firmly grounded in the context of my own work as an instrumental teacher in the Finnish music school system, it can be described as belonging to the realm of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It is based on the issues and questions that have arisen from my own reflections on the everyday practices in the various music schools where I have worked over the past two decades prior to the study. The study resonates with the aims of teacher-researcher inquiries identified by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2009), who argue that when teacher-researchers engage themselves in sustained, systematic, and intentional inquiries into educational practice, they often do so because they want to improve some aspect of their practice, whether this is to shape school reform or educational policy, or to address wider issues of equity or social justice. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle, teacher inquiries often arise from the perceived challenges in educational practice, such as perceived discrepancies between intention and reality, discrepancies that further contribute to teachers' inquiries as they imagine alternatives. In my aim to explore the collaborative process of constructing practices together with music school students, this inquiry thus shared the aims of previous teacher inquiries in which collaboration between teachers, students, or other key stakeholders has been advanced as a strategic way of seeking more equitable and democratic educational opportunities.

In addition to practitioner research, this study can be situated within studies of child perspectives (Karlsson, 2010, 2012, 2020), which examine children's and young people's experiences and views, their social participation, their actions and values, and the ways in which they express their thoughts. The study of child perspectives is described as a holistic approach that focuses on children's lives and childhood as a comprehensive phenomenon (Karlsson, 2020). To form a holistic view, this study combines different micro and macro perspectives on music school education in Finland, focusing on children's agency within an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. In addition to studies of child perspectives, the study draws on childhood studies (e.g., James et al., 2015; Prout, 2005), philosophy of education (e.g., Biesta, 2006a), political philosophy (e.g., Fraser, 1990, 2008; Rancière, 1991, 1999; Mouffe, 2000), policy studies (e.g., Pestoff, 2006, 2011) and socio-material theories and organisation studies (e.g., Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Fenwick et al., 2011).

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks within child perspective studies (Karlsson, 2020), I distinguish between the terms "child perspective" and a "child's perspective" or "children's perspectives" (see also Karlsson, 2010, 2012), with the latter sometimes used interchangeably with the term "children's voices" in educational literature. Within this conceptual framework, "child perspective" denotes adults' attention to understanding the world from a child's point of view, encompassing various studies that explore and/or explain children's perceptions, experiences and actions in the world with individual children's perspectives in mind. Conversely, a "child's perspective" or "children's perspectives" refers to the perspective of the child(ren) themselves, their own experiences, perceptions and understanding of a particular situation, including their understanding of their world (Karlsson, 2010, 2012; see also Sylva, 2010). In this study, I seek to understand music participation from the child perspective, and, through the empirical part, to elicit children's perspectives and act upon them in the co-construction of music school practices. Within this methodological approach, the child is conceptualized as a producer of knowledge: children's messages and perspectives are listened to, and their experiences and emphases are highlighted and analysed, as are their ways of acting and expressing themselves in their cultural, social, and societal contexts (Karlsson, 2020).

In this study, policy refers to the decisions and actions that deal with public issues of concern to civil society. One part of the policy is the statement of intent, which in the context of this study is the official government policy that regulates the local music schools through national legislation (e.g., the Constitution of Finland) and various ratified international conventions (e.g., UNCRC). The legislation specifically regulating music schools consists of the Act (633/1998) and the Decree (813/1998) on Basic Education in the Arts¹, the national core curricula issued by the National Agency for Education, and the local curricula drawn in accordance with the national core curricula. Considering that the official or intended local curriculum is only the first layer of the curriculum infrastructure, and therefore only the first link in the structural policy-to-practice chain, the music school policy is not only perceived in terms of principles, stated ideas, and action plans, but rather with a broader view that is interested in the outcomes: the actions actually taken in pursuit of policy decisions and statements (Anderson et al., 2023) and the actors and influences that shape policy decisions, implementation, and outcomes; in other words, what is actually done and what happens (Easton, 1953; Hill & Varone, 2021). The interest, therefore, is not only

¹ The reform of the Basic Education in the Arts Act began in 2024. The new law is intended to come into force on 1 January 2027.

in policy as an institutionalised proposal and set of rules enacted through decentralised governance with local authorities, but in a deeper understanding of the configurations of actors that shape and co-construct these policy decisions and the outcomes of these processes. Rather than viewing these decisions and actions simply as technical judgments, I draw on David Easton's (1953) understanding of public policy as "a web of decisions and actions that allocate values" (p. 130).

By acknowledging that policy contexts and governance systems are complex and dynamic, and that policymaking takes place in a context of interdependence (Gilardi, 2014), this study identified a need to build a systemic (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020) understanding of policy co-construction in the music school context. By utilizing the research strategies and methodological approaches of developmental work research (Engeström, 2015; Engeström & Rückriem, 2005), I have adopted a cultural-historical activity theoretical view on music school education in order to construct a more nuanced understanding of how the interactions between music school teachers and students have been structured by the wider societal processes and policy goals. By diffracting (Barad, 2007, 2011; Mazzei, 2014) activity theoretical perspectives into the music school setting and my professional work as a music school teacher, I have thus adopted an explicitly relational and systemic perspective (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005) on music schools and music school education. While seeking children's perspectives, I have simultaneously constructed a view of schools as social and cultural arrangements with interconnected and interacting parts within the broader institutional ecosystem (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Klemenčič, 2017), including the broader policy frameworks and scripts (Engeström, 2008) that enact the everyday actions of instrumental teaching and learning in classrooms. Some of the characteristics of this study can be attributed to the research strategies of co-research (Kulmala et al., 2023); however, the study did not involve the students as research partners in the initial planning or reporting phases of the research project. Nevertheless, listening to children's and young people's perspectives not only influenced the outcome of the shared practices during the research interventions, but also shaped the research process itself, as the collaboration required an open-ended, iterative, and evolving strategy that was not possible through a fixed, linear research plan. As a result, the research process involved several rounds of revisions to earlier plans as the study progressed, eventually extending the initially identified policy-practice gap in music school policy to broader issues of children's participation and inclusion in Finnish society.

The topic of policy participation has remained largely unexplored in music education (Schmidt & Colwell, 2017). This study is situated within an emerging body of research that explores how students can participate in the co-construction

of public policy and how student voices can be meaningfully incorporated into policy formation, which is gaining ground in Finnish educational contexts (e.g., Männistö, 2020, 2022). The study contributes to growing scholarship in music education that has challenged traditional top-down approaches to music education policy formation, advocating for more democratic processes that recognize the agency of multiple participants, including those traditionally excluded from policy debates (Barrett, 2017; Collins et al., 2019; Economidou Stavrou, 2024; Henley & Barton, 2022; Houmann & Sæther, 2020; Schmidt, 2020; Spruce et al., 2021; Wright, 2021). The conceptualizations of democracy in music education research represent a dynamic and evolving field (Allsup, 2003, 2012; DeLorenzo, 2016; Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010; Koskela, 2022; Partti & Westerlund, 2012; Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007; Woodford, 2004, 2012a, 2012b, 2018; Wright, 2010). Scholars have approached democracy in music education from multiple perspectives, emphasizing its potential as both a pedagogical approach and a broader social ideal. This study concurs with preceding views that observed an absence of emphasis on student perspectives and experiences in scholarship concerning the relationship between democracy and music education (Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010; Westerlund, 2002, 2006a).

As a whole, in this doctoral dissertation I have sought for what activity theorists have called possibility knowledge (Engeström, 2007; Sannino & Engeström, 2017) – knowledge about what new forms and patterns of objects and phenomena might be possible in human life-worlds and their social institutions – with children and young people to bridge the policy-practice gap and explore the democratic possibilities of music school education. As the tensions in educational change processes have been widely acknowledged in the fields of the arts in Finland (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021; Laes & Westerlund, 2025; Väkevä et al., 2022; Westerlund, 2021), as posited previously, in this study the exploration of the publicness of music school education is not conducted in a vacuum, pursuing egocentric ways of being, nor with the aim of establishing a common ground, understood as undisputed and consensual democracy, but rather with an interest in the ongoing challenge of achieving a common world (Biesta, 2019a) and the possibility of acting together in plurality (Arendt, 2017; Biesta, 2013; Mouffe, 2005). Hence, my interest in the publicness implied in music education is based on an understanding in which publicness is thoroughly an educational issue (Biesta & Säfström, 2023). This study is founded, therefore, on perennial questions about the relationship between public institutions and civil society, the public dimensions of the processes and practices in music education, and how these deliberations about public policy might be carried out together with children and young people.

1.1. The Participatory Turn in Finnish Child Policy

In Finland, formal education is frequently viewed as an important arena for the dissemination of democratic values, with the national commitment to democracy and equality running through the entire education system (Sahlberg, 2015). This national commitment, along with the extensive legislation on children's participation, is also seen as a strength of child and youth² participation in Finland (Council of Europe, 2011). Ultimately, the right of children to participate in all matters that affect them is based on the Finnish Constitution and various ratified international conventions. The empirical part of this research project was conducted at a time in the mid-2010s when several legislative reforms took place that obliged authorities to ensure young people's opportunities to participate in matters affecting their own lives. These include, for example, the reform of the Youth Act (1285/2016), which obliged municipalities to ensure diverse and effective opportunities for local residents to participate in the planning and development of services, regardless of their young age, and the reform of the Local Government Act (410/2015), which made youth councils mandatory in municipalities in 2015. Opportunities for children and young people to participate in co-governance were also supported by the Student Councils Act (1267/2013), which made student councils obligatory in public schools. From 2023 onwards, the establishment of regional youth councils has been mandatory for all wellbeing services counties. Increasingly, youth councils have also been granted deliberative rights and attendance privileges in municipal councils. These formal rights to speak and be present in municipal councils have been considered to provide a genuine channel for youth councils to influence decision-making processes and improve dialogue between decision-makers and young people. As part of the reformed Local Government Act, the age limit for submitting an initiative for a municipal referendum was lowered from 18 to 15 years. These developments represent significant policy shifts: until 2008, municipal officials evaluated basic services on children's behalf, whereas from 2008 young people were directly consulted on municipal youth services as part of public policy.

The latest reform in Finnish education has been characterized as the third reform in Finnish education policy: the first provided access to education (1860s),

² In this study, "children and youth" refers to all individuals under 18 years of age who are legally defined as children according to Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). By using the term "youth", this study acknowledges the distinct characteristics of older children and adolescents (typically ages 12–17) who exhibit enhanced autonomy and social cognition while remaining within the legal category of childhood and requiring protection and institutional support.

the second created educational equality (1970s comprehensive school), and the third, implemented in 2016, advanced equality further by strengthening inclusion culture to ensure students become more equal members of the school community (Rautiainen, 2017). In 2017, children's participation in the co-construction of public policies was explicitly included in the national policy guidelines for Basic Education in the Arts (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2017a, 2017b). Recent improvements also include incorporating international human rights treaties (UNCRC and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights) as binding commitments in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNAE, 2014, pp. 14-15; Custódio & Hurskainen, 2022) and Basic Education in the Arts (FNAE, 2017a, p. 10; 2017b, p. 10), alongside the reformulation of the value base for youth leisure activities (e.g., Youth Act 1285/2016).

This inclusive turn is also evident in broader cultural policy: while the previous Act on Cultural Activities in Municipalities (728/1992) focused on the municipal provision of cultural services, the 2019 Act (166/2019) emphasized supporting residents' opportunities for creative expression, cultural participation, inclusion, and community building (2§). This shift understands cultural rights not only as access to cultural resources but also as participation in cultural self-expression and meaning making (Koivunen & Marsio, 2006). Such cultural policy, emphasizing arts as a way of life and community experience, emerged in the 1970s under cultural democracy frameworks (Kangas, 1988; Pirnes & Tiihonen, 2010). By emphasizing community participation and self-defined cultural needs, this approach activated people in defining and developing cultural activities, seeking recognition for diverse cultural practices as an alternative to cultural democratization's focus on facilitating broad access to professionally curated cultural goods. This participatory discourse positioned citizens as stakeholders in public policies.

The promotion of children and young people's participation in Finnish society reflects a broader shift towards children's inclusion that has gained increasing attention from public officials since the late 2010s (Finnish Government, 2021a; Ministry of Justice, 2020). Recognition of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a binding legal agreement increased the Finnish public administration's efforts to take children's perspectives into account, aligning with European priorities of enabling young people to connect with and be heard by politicians, public administrations, and civil society organizations (Council of Europe, 2022; European Commission, 2018). This shift aligns with broader international initiatives emphasizing youth participation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024a, 2024b; United Nations Security Council, 2015). While parental involvement in educational

decision-making is established practice, there is an increasing focus on children's opportunities to influence their own education and the equity implications of participatory decision-making approaches (OECD, 2024c).

While collaborative governance has characterized Finnish education policy since decentralization in the 1990s (Vitikka et al., 2016), children's participation in music school policy construction was not explicitly included until the 2017 curriculum reform guidelines for Basic Education in the Arts. Despite Finland's collaborative policy construction involving various stakeholders³, children and young people have maintained limited roles in policy processes. Their participation occurs mainly through everyday practice with teachers, which the Regional State Administrative Agency (2017) considers insufficient under the Municipalities Act (410/2015), where everyday conversations do not constitute adequate participatory methods. Children's perspectives have further been absent from national evaluations of Basic Education in the Arts (Koramo, 2009; Kurkela & Tawaststjerna, 1999; Tiainen et al., 2012).

Similar concerns about children's absent voices in policy discussions have been raised in international music education scholarship, where "music education policy appears to be something 'done to' and 'received by' children rather than 'constructed with' children" (Barrett, 2017, p. 177). This issue is not age-specific, as educational governance through deliberative processes remains a recent development even in higher music education (Bennett et al., 2019). By the 2020s, there is still only a small body of literature on the student voice in music education (Després & Dubé, 2020; Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021; Economidou Stavrou, 2024; Finney & Harrison, 2010; Spruce, 2015). Research suggests that children are often consulted retrospectively rather than prospectively (Després & Dubé, 2020), preventing real influence on decisions since children are excluded from initial decision-making processes (Council of Europe, 2011). Rather than merely providing feedback, children need opportunities where they can also set agendas and define discussion issues (Gretschel et al., 2023). Direct participation opportunities are particularly crucial for children, who lack the voting rights and electoral candidacy available to other society members.

Evaluations of children's participation in Finnish society have identified development needs in government child impact assessments and the follow-up processes of legislative decision-making (Ministry of Justice, 2020). While many local public service providers lack effective mechanisms for obtaining and responding to children's feedback, systematic, cross-sectoral information-

³ By stakeholders I refer to the individuals and groups who can influence and are influenced by actions and policy decisions (Freeman, 2010).

gathering mechanisms for young children's experiences of municipal services also remain undeveloped (Kiilakoski & Gretscher, 2012; Ministry of Justice, 2020). Cultural services present particular feedback challenges due to their current structure (Sokka et al., 2014). In Finnish cultural policy, substantive stakeholder perception reviews have been subordinated to statistical accessibility reviews, with municipal cultural information characterized by fragmentation and scarcity (Ruusuvirta & Renko, 2022). While research exists on participation in cultural service provision, minimal research has addressed the co-construction of policy with stakeholders through democratic processes or resident involvement in cultural service planning (Kangas, 2015; Kangas et al., 2014). Consequently, significant development is needed in municipal resident involvement and the community aspects of activities (Ruusuvirta et al., 2020).

In my work as an instrumental teacher, inconsistencies that initiated this research project related to discrepancies I experienced between state regulation of music schools and real-life practices since the early 2000s. While active student participation was a policy priority (FNAE, 2002), further emphasized by the 2017 Core Curriculum reform (FNAE 2017a), I found that the National Core Curriculum and local curricula played limited roles in daily music school work. Instead, instrumental recommendations and study structures from the Finnish Association of Music Schools, which were originally designed to standardize education and support continuity into professional studies, continued structuring my work and students' studies, despite these recommendations losing official national curriculum status when the National Core Curriculum was introduced during the 1990s educational governance decentralization.

These personal observations were supported by previous music school evaluations (Kurkela & Tawaststjerna, 1999; Tiainen et al., 2012). The national evaluation of Basic Education in the Arts identified similar shortcomings: local curricula were often mere copies of the National Core Curriculum and were rarely updated (Tiainen et al., 2012). While the National Core Curriculum functioned moderately or well in other arts areas, its functionality in music was rated only satisfactory, and it proved only moderately effective as a guiding document. According to materials generated in the evaluation, teachers reported that the curriculum's learning concepts had no connection with institutional operational culture.

In the Regional State Administrative Agency's evaluation, arts institutions reported needing more flexibility and options in study structures to better accommodate children's life situations and interests (Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, 2014). The institutions also recognized collaboration with students in the design of their studies as a viable option for addressing these concerns (p. 52). Although the 2017 National Core

Curriculum reform enhanced local governance capacity, enabling music schools to transcend nationally standardized professional trajectories and offer greater curricular flexibility, survey results from 2023 continue to demonstrate student demands for increased study flexibility (Kanerva et al., 2023). The goal of implementing more citizen-centred policy-making processes continues to challenge institutions to meaningfully involve children and consider their perspectives in public administration and services (Iivonen & Pollari, 2022).

1.2. Finnish Music Schools as the Context of the Study

In Finland, music schools are part of the public, state-subsidized⁴ welfare services, which form a network of music institutions across the country. This instrumental (and vocal) music education is considered extracurricular⁵ or non-compulsory, following its own educational mission and curricula outside general education, with lessons occurring after regular school hours in public school or separate music school facilities. Since 1998, music schools have been integrated into Basic Education in the Arts alongside eight other art forms (architecture, visual arts, crafts, media arts, literary arts, circus arts, dance, theatre), forming Finland's largest arts education system providing arts education to children and young people, its main target group, as defined in the Basic Education in the Arts Act (633/1998). The latest reform of this Act began in 2024 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024a).

⁴ Finnish music schools' funding is co-financed with public funding. In the music schools that receive hourly-based government funding, the overall funding consists of approximately 53-57% government funding and 20-25% funding from municipalities. Student fees cover approximately 20-25% of the costs. Municipalities' funding differs between municipalities. In Helsinki, public support for Basic Education in the Arts institutions that receive hourly-based funding from the government totals 72% (Vismanen et al., 2016). This funding includes both government funding and municipal funding. For the general curriculum, Helsinki city's support is 18% and the state's is 1%, for a total of 19% public support. In relation to the total population, the City of Helsinki's subsidies for Basic Art Education are low compared to other large cities in Finland. Helsinki spends €8.2 per inhabitant on Basic Art Education, compared to €19.1 per inhabitant in Espoo and €17.8 per inhabitant in Vantaa (Ruusuvirta & Saukkonen, 2014).

⁵ The Finnish education system consists of early childhood education and care, pre-primary, basic and general upper secondary education, vocational education and training and higher education. The compulsory schooling consists of one-year pre-primary education for 6-year-olds and nine-year Basic Education for children aged 7–16. Post-compulsory education consists of three year general upper secondary and vocational education and training. Music schools are part of extracurricular, non-compulsory Basic Art Education that offer arts education outside general education.

Finnish music schools originate from the European conservatory tradition and have similar structures to their European counterparts (European Music School Union, 2010), maintaining a commitment to long-term, high-quality music education (Björk, 2016; Hahn et al., 2024). Despite Finland's extensive network of music schools, it is worth noting that overall this study is conducted in a context that involves a marginal group of children and young people: nationally only about 4.6% of 7–19 year olds participate in music school education (advanced syllabus), with 2.3% of 7–13 year olds participating in the general curriculum studies (Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, 2014). A 2021 survey by the Finnish Association of Music Schools reported 30,350 children and young people in music school studies (Finnish Association of Music Schools, 2022). This represents approximately 4% of the 7–18-year-old target group, whose share of the population in 2021 was a total of 740,358 children and young people (Statistics Finland, population 31.12.2021).

Except for occasional orchestral experiments or instrumental afternoon club activities (Nikkanen, 2018; Seirala, 2012), formal instrumental study in Finland typically requires seeking instruction outside public school. Unlike peripatetic tuition in the UK or American public school instrumental programs with ensembles and orchestras, orchestral instruments (e.g., strings, brass, woodwinds) are not part of regular Finnish school activities and are only accessible through extracurricular music schools.⁶ While Finnish public school music education may include rock band instruments, acoustic guitars, ukuleles, rhythm instruments, singing, or digital music-making⁷, implementation varies significantly between municipalities (Pohjannoro & Pesonen, 2009; Pohjannoro, 2010a). Due to varying school resources, high numbers of unqualified music teachers, reduced teaching hours, and diminished music studies for future classroom teachers (Juntunen, 2017; Juntunen & Anttila, 2019), not all Basic Education students achieve music curriculum goals (Laitinen et al., 2011). Recent reports identify challenges in teacher education, where future school music teachers struggle to achieve required curriculum skills and competencies (Suomi, 2019).

Similarly to some EU countries, access to state-subsidized music education in Finnish music schools has historically been regulated through entrance examinations. Since 1998, the Act on Basic Education in the Arts (633/1998)

⁶ Adult education centres expand opportunities for instrumental learning, though their tuition offerings do not encompass a wide range of instruments. Parishes and youth centres also provide various musical activities, with programs varying by locality.

⁷ The 2014 curriculum is broad in terms of its contents and does not define instruments, in grades 3–9 the instruments are specified as body, rhythm, melody, and chord instruments (FNAE, 2014, pp. 263, 422).

allowed music schools to decide enrolment procedures locally. A 2016 survey found 72% of Finnish Association of Music Schools members used placement auditions, while others used registration order or lottery (Klemettinen, 2016). The overall acceptance rate was 65% in 2019 (Klemettinen, 2019), though popular instruments like piano have lower rates. One Helsinki Metropolitan Area music school accepted only 10.2% of piano applicants in 2018 (Espoon musiikkiopisto, 2018), with rates remaining low today: 15% for basic piano studies and 12% for preparatory studies in 2024 (Espoon musiikkiopisto, 2024). Music schools have recently considered alternative entrance procedures (Kanerva et al., 2023). A 2021 survey showed a 75.2% overall acceptance rate, with 51 of 70 responding schools using registration processes, 28 using entrance examinations, and 19 using interviews, while nine schools admitted all applicants (The Finnish Association of Music Schools, 2022).

Given the limited instrumental music education in public schools and the scarce availability and high price of unsubsidised private lessons, children's instrument-playing experiences may remain constrained. While music-focused classes (*musiikkiluokat*) in comprehensive schools offer additional instruction, they reach only 3.7% of 9–15-year-olds and require placement tests (Törmälä, 2013). Children who are not admitted through entrance examinations or who cannot secure places in state-subsidized music schools may access instruction lessons through alternative providers, such as adult education centres, parishes, youth centres, or music schools following the general Basic Education in the Arts syllabus, which typically operate without entrance requirements. These studies often cost more due to the schools' limited state subsidies. To keep tuition affordable, the schools may also provide less instructional time. High costs are a particular barrier to children's cultural activities in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Vismanen et al., 2016). These accessibility challenges reflect broader systemic inequalities, as documented in the research project ArtsEqual (2015–2021) (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021; Väkevä et al., 2017, 2022; Westerlund, 2021).⁸

⁸ ArtsEqual was a strategic research initiative coordinated by the University of the Arts Helsinki and funded by the Academy of Finland's Strategic Research Council (2015–2021). The project examined the arts as a public service with equality as its foundation, investigating how the arts can address the pressing social challenges of the 2020s. Drawing on the work of over 100 scholars across five universities and research institutes, ArtsEqual identified inequality mechanisms within Finland's arts and arts education system and explored pathways toward more accessible, equitable cultural participation. The research focused on institutional change, outreach work, and the development of individualized arts services for diverse groups including children, youth, immigrants, people with disabilities, older adults, and incarcerated populations.

Contributing to these inequalities, arts institutions identify the decline in public school arts teaching as a fundamental challenge in arts education, creating alienation from arts subjects and making arts education dependent on parental activity and wealth, while shifting responsibility from Basic Education to Basic Arts Education institutions (Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, 2014). Basic Arts Education institutions have become primary implementers of arts and cultural activities, especially in smaller municipalities (Regional State Administrative Agency for Northern Finland, 2022). Basic Arts Education institutions also play a significant role in developing professional competencies. Despite only 2% of music school students continuing to professional music studies (Klemettinen, 2019), Basic Arts Education's significance becomes evident in professional pathways: 78% of vocational music students, 70% of university of applied sciences students, and 90% of Sibelius Academy Youth Department students have studied in music schools (Kanerva et al., 2023).⁹

The structure of music school education further reflects these systemic priorities, whereby music school studies have continued to focus predominantly on one-to-one individual tuition, with most group activities still taking place before the study of the advanced syllabus (Muukkonen et al., 2011). However, the system has undergone continuous transformation, with new pedagogical emphases gradually introduced through national guidance mechanisms. While ensemble playing and improvisation, for example, had rarely been included in studies in the 1990s (Pohjannoro, 2010a), these studies were included in the National Core Curriculum in 1995 (FNAE, 1995). In 2005, ensemble playing became part of examination recommendations (Finnish Association of Music Schools, 2005). The emphasis on improvisation and composition was further increased in 2017, when these subjects achieved core assessment area status alongside "performing and expression", "learning to learn and practice", and "listening and aural and structural awareness" (FNAE, 2017a, p. 48). Resource constraints limit program diversity, with most resources dedicated to individual instruction and few teachers supervising ensembles (Pohjannoro, 2010a). According to a 2019 music school survey, distribution included 75% individual instruction, 7% music theory/solfège, 7% ensemble playing, 8% early music education, and 2% other subjects, with

⁹ The significance of music schools for professional music education pathways is also evident internationally. Research in Austria, for example, reveals that 88 % of music university students considered music schools their most important pre-university educational foundation (Hahn, 2024).

only 1% of individual tuition being replaced by instrumental tuition in group settings (Klemettinen, 2019).

While the systematic integration of group teaching into individual instruction remains limited, among the transformations in music school education has been the significant expansion of musical genres beyond the traditional classical repertoire. Although historically rooted in the Western classical tradition, music schools currently incorporate diverse genres. According to 2016 music school survey data, the genre distribution comprised 82% classical music, 14% rhythm music, 3% folk music and 1% other music (Klemettinen, 2016). Despite the absence of comprehensive statistical documentation on repertoire diversity in classical music studies, there is some evidence that the combination of classical and rhythmic music is common in some instruments (Lahtinen, 2015). It is perhaps more accurate to say that while classical-based studies may incorporate various genres, rhythm music and folk music studies rarely include classical elements, creating asymmetrical genre integration across different study tracks. Classical-based studies may also not necessarily draw on the same rhythm music canon as do studies that aim for competence in pop jazz genres. Overall, teaching emphasis varies according to local priorities. In the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, for example, music schools define their studies differently: some focus on Western art music¹⁰, others offer multiple specializations such as "classical music, folk music, rhythmic music and early music"¹¹, "classical and rhythmic music"¹², or "classical, folk, rhythmic music and theatre arts"¹³. Some schools do not specify their orientations¹⁴ or do not explicitly specify their orientations but distinguish a separate folk music department and a music theatre department¹⁵.

¹⁰ See, e.g., the local curriculum by the East Helsinki Music School <https://ihmo.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/It%C3%A4-Helsingin-musiikkiopiston-opetussuunnitelma-1.8.2020.pdf>

¹¹ Pakilan musiikkiopisto. (2025). Suuntautumisvaihtoehdot [Orientation options]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://pakilanmusiikkiopisto.org/oppilaaksi/suuntautumisvaihtoehdot-2/>

¹² Musiikkiopisto Avonia. (2025) Opintovaihtoehdot [Study programmes] and Espoon musiikkiopisto (2025). Soitinopetus [Instrumental instruction]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://avonia.fi/klassinen/> and <http://avonia.fi/rytmimusiikki/> and <https://emo.fi>

¹³ Pitäjänmäen musiikkiopisto. (2025). Linjavaihtoehdot [Programme options]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <http://www.pitajanmaenmusiikkiopisto.fi/opetus.html>

¹⁴ See, e.g., the study programmes at Lauttasaaren musiikkiopisto. (2025), Länsi-Helsingin musiikkiopisto. (2025), Keski-Helsingin musiikkiopisto. (2025) and Pohjois-Helsingin musiikkiopisto. (2025). Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://www.lmo.fi>, www.lansihelsinginmusiikkiopisto.org, www.khmusiikki.fi and www.phmo.fi

¹⁵ Juvenalian musiikkiopisto. (2025). Opinnot [Study programmes]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://juvenalia.fi/kansanmusiikin-opintopolku/> and <https://juvenalia.fi/musiikkiteatteri/>

Program availability depends on staff recruitment priorities and resource allocation decisions (Pohjannoro, 2010a), as well as vocational training offerings. This institutional variability creates an educational contingency for students, since families often only prioritize proximity when choosing schools (Kanerva et al., 2023; Vismanen et al., 2016).

1.3. Interdisciplinary Methodological Underpinnings in Child Research

Research with children has many considerations that require sensitivity and reflection on all aspects of the research process, from generating research questions to disseminating findings. The recognition of children as rights holders has had significant implications for research and the emergence of participatory research methodologies, which challenge researchers to seek opportunities to co-research with children rather than research on children or for them (Christensen & James, 2017; Christensen & Prout, 2002; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). The commitment to conducting research with children in this dissertation was in line with the obligations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which made it imperative to listen to and respect children's experiences and voices, including in decisions about the implementation and conduct of the study, ensuring study decisions were responsive and dialogic rather than fixed. These considerations were situated within the research ethics of the study, where the ethical concerns constructed and practised in particular contexts required decisions to be made in situ rather than seeking universal solutions (Ebrahim, 2010).

While constructing methodological approaches, a key consideration was maintaining children's perspectives at the centre of the study. Karlsson (2010) emphasizes that child research should consider how the researcher's demarcation of the study's focus meets children's perspectives and provides space for them to share their experiences. Rather than following predetermined research designs, researchers should consider what is relevant to study from the child's perspective and what is meaningful in each phenomenon (see also Rask & Ertio, 2019). Participatory research often evolves in "a slightly messy, organic way" (Cahill, 2007, p. 300), requiring time, space, and active listening not always available in contemporary educational contexts (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). This study adopted a participatory approach to better understand children's experiences and enable their research participation. Following scholarship suggesting that group interaction can meaningfully facilitate experience-sharing (Stapp & Wolff, 2017), the methodological approach emphasized group processes to enable participants

to explore each other's experiences and views beyond what interviews alone could achieve. This approach recognized and respected non-verbal communication forms such as body language and facial expressions, including "data" beyond audible voices (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). It further acknowledged that meaning can be expressed through various modes beyond speech, exploring the fullness of children's voices, including their silences (MacLure, 2009; Spyrou, 2015).

Unlike much research focused on interview approaches, in this study I have thus sought to offer alternative ways of participation and influence beyond interview formats. Previous research highlights the limitations of interviews with children, suggesting that alternative participation methods should be developed to ensure equal opportunities for all children to communicate their experiences (Peltola & Moisio, 2017). Not all young people consider themselves capable of verbal, face-to-face communication (Aaltonen & Berg, 2015). While a dominant conception of child participation often emphasises student representation through voice (Wyness, 2013), this focus solely on verbal expression may limit other forms of participation.

Children's perspectives in music education research have been studied, for example, through observation and questionnaires (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010), interviews combined with artifact elicitation techniques such as drawing and photography (Barrett, 2017; Barrett & Smigiel, 2007; Tuovila, 2003), or ranking photo cards (Rimmer, 2018). A central consideration in this study was to recognise that respecting children's views did not simply mean asking children and young people for their views and recording them, but rather that authentic participation required integrating children's voices into decision-making processes, ensuring transparency regarding how their perspectives influenced outcomes or, when implementation was not feasible, providing clear explanations for such limitations.

This distinction between consultation and genuine participation has been central to scholarly discourse on children's rights. Among the first to problematize the mere opportunity for children to express their views was the child rights researcher Roger Hart (1992, 2008), who drew attention to the extent to which adults and institutions allow or enable children to participate in their communities and formal organisations. In Hart's view, the opportunity to express an opinion, for example through consultation, could be seen as token participation, as there was no guarantee that it would have an impact when decision-making power was entirely in the hands of others (Tuovinen, 2024; see also Klemenčič & Hoidn, 2020). Although consultation processes could incorporate young people's perspectives and experiences into policy development, they fundamentally represented a form of soliciting input rather than authentic power-sharing, with adults retaining control over both the agenda and the procedural framework.

Despite renewed interest in student voice, its impact on music education policy and practice remains limited (Després & Dubé, 2020; Spruce, 2015). Studies reveal that children are typically consulted retrospectively rather than prospectively (Després & Dubé, 2020), such as through post-experience surveys or interviews (Mills & O'Neill, 2002). Retrospective feedback limits action scope when respondents cannot formulate questions or issues themselves, as discussion areas remain adult-predetermined. Selecting from predetermined survey responses can thus become censorial.

In this study, the decision to not seek children's perspectives solely through interviews thus aimed to consider that children's voice should not only be heard but also acted upon, and that listening to these voices also requires listening to their silences and the fullness of their voices. As the process involved actively working to change music school operational culture to support children's influence in learning decisions, it was important to consider ideas in action rather than merely discussing them. Adopting a practitioner inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) sought to establish a reciprocal relationship between theorization and praxis through the dialectical integration of inquiry, knowledge, and action.

In choosing methodological approaches for this study, a further consideration was the scholarly perspective advanced by childhood studies researchers (e.g., Lahikainen et al., 2008). Researchers in childhood studies contend that research involving children and young people necessitates interdisciplinary frameworks oriented towards a holistic, integrated understanding of the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of children's development. From this standpoint, understanding derived from a single discipline may not enable researchers to make meaningful interpretations for children's holistic well-being, potentially producing fragmented knowledge of limited value to educational stakeholders. This study therefore combines theoretical contributions from multiple disciplines, seeking deeper contextualization of research knowledge about children rather than extracting and generalizing information (Kulmala et al., 2023).

1.4. Developmental work research

As part of the evolving research approach, I will draw on developmental work research (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Engeström, 2015) and its framework of non-linear formative intervention (Engeström, 2011, 2016). While case-study methodology (Laine et al., 2007) initially provided an investigative framework, the collaborative dynamics that emerged through research engagement with children revealed the necessity for approaches that could address the complex,

systemic characteristics of the learning environment. Developmental work research, underpinned by cultural-historical activity theory (hereafter also referred to as activity theory), allowed me to situate music school practices within wider socio-political contexts (Engeström, 2001a) constructing a more nuanced understanding of how interactions between teachers and students are structured by historically formed societal processes and institutional aims. This framework employs formative intervention methodology, which simultaneously examines and transforms work practices through continuous cycles of analysis and change (Engeström, 2011, 2016). The process involves identifying contradictions in current practices and collectively designing new solutions through mapping activity systems, examining historical roots of problems, and exploring future potential. While developmental work research typically engages practitioners through collaborative processes with researchers, in this study I engaged directly with music school students in this developmental work. The formative process involved examining different perspectives on children's participation (Chapter 2) and analysing music school policy development (Chapter 4). I am aware of the limitations of these processes, both of which, for the purposes of this study, required delimitation of the whole in many ways. I will next introduce the central concepts within this theoretical framework.

1.4.1. A Cultural-Historical Activity Theoretical View on Music School Education

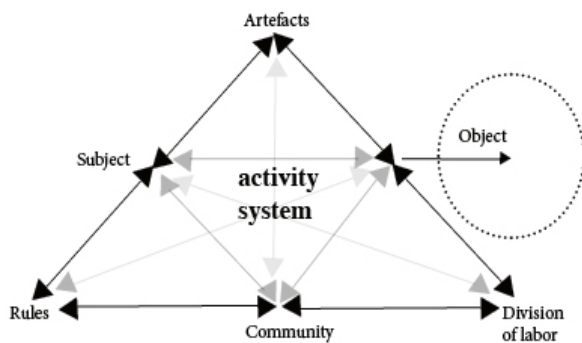
The central concept of cultural-historical activity theory, activity, is a socio-cultural concept related to how individuals interact and connect with the physical and social world, how they learn and change through this interaction, and how the world is transformed through individual and collective participation. As a theory of object-driven activity, the understanding behind the targeted, culturally mediated activity is based on the idea of directionality, which is not behaviour coloured by a momentary impulse, but a long-term activity aimed at a community-relevant purpose (Engeström, 2004a). This theoretical foundation considers that the components of a system are more comprehensively understood in the context of relationships with each other and with other systems (Engeström, 1987, 2011; Engeström & Sannino, 2021). Applying this systemic perspective to the present investigation has facilitated the construction of a view of music schools that extends beyond the micro-dynamics of classroom interaction, enabling an examination of music school activities as historically situated cultural practices within their developmental contexts.

A cultural-historical activity theory perspective on music school education, taken through the lens of activity, places the focus on what gives the music school

activity its direction, meaning and purpose: why the activity is carried out and what the subject(s) strive to transform or achieve. Unlike individual psychology perspectives that focus on individualistic and linear cognitive development, cultural-historical activity theory adopts an anti-reductionist, anti-Cartesian position on education and learning (Claxton, 2002). Instead of viewing learning as occurring solely within the individual, this theory emphasizes purposeful, socially mediated, and culturally influenced interaction between subjects (individuals or groups) and their world, highlighting the social and cultural context in which people act. This extended, ecological view of human development conceptualizes individuals and their environment as a unified analytic whole, emphasizing the interdependence of social and material dimensions.

Among sociomaterial theories, what has been described as the "Finnish school of activity theory" (Engeström & Sannino, 2021, p. 4), the elaboration of cultural-historical activity theory by Yrjö Engeström (1987), foregrounds the historical and socio-political analysis of human activity. Building on Lev Vygotsky's original concept of mediated action, and its further development by Aleksei Leont'ev (1978), Engeström (1987) expanded the theory to incorporate additional systemic components: community, rules (e.g., social rules and norms that regulate the activity), and the division of labour (Figure 1). By taking into account the social context and individuals and groups involved in or influencing the activity, as well as the distribution of roles and responsibilities in the activity, Engeström's expansion of the theory situated decision making not as isolated cognitive acts, but as processes embedded in object-oriented collective activity, highlighting the systemic conditions of decision making (see also Engeström, 2008).

Figure 1



General Model of an Activity System by Yrjö Engeström (1987)

By foregrounding the directionality and interest of human activity, Engeström's (1987) elaboration of cultural-historical activity theory acknowledges power, conflict and politics as constitutive elements of social reality. This has been noted to represent a significant advantage of the theory, as it provides an approach for analysing the political dynamics central to for example work organizations (Fenwick, 2010). By viewing organisations as sites of contradiction, the activity theory assumes both a material and ideological struggle between those exercising control and those experiencing their lives as objects of control (Fenwick et al., 2011). The multivoicedness arises from the "contradictions between the multiple motives embedded in and produced by the historically evolving communities and objects" (Engeström, 2011, p. 610). The division of labour creates different roles for participants with diverse backgrounds, further enhancing this multivoicedness. As the activity evolves, tensions and conflicts emerge in the construction of the object. These internal structural contradictions are not viewed as problems to be eliminated but as sources of energy driving the changes to and expansion of activity systems and their components, such as the development of new material and conceptual tools. Thus, contradictions represent historically accumulated structural tensions within and between activity systems that function as essential drivers of change and development.

Activity theory establishes a fundamental analytical distinction between actions (and operations), and the generalized, durable object of activity of the historically evolving activity system. Actions are understood as relatively discrete segments of behaviour oriented toward specific goals, such as teachers' individual or collaborative short-term initiatives directed toward particular goals (e.g., preparing students for a recital or mastering a particular technique).

Within this study, this generalized object of activity is understood to encompass the music schools' wider societal mandate as public educational institutions, as articulated through legislative frameworks and policy documentation. The generalized object of activity embodies the societal meaning connecting individual actions to broader institutional and cultural purposes, while the specific manifestation of the object reflects personal sense-making processes, that is, how the object is experienced and interpreted in relation to individual motives and situated concerns (Leont'ev, 1978). This distinction between the object of activity as the anchor that unifies actions and goals across time and people, while facilitating personal sense-making, illuminates how individual participants may experience and interpret the same institutional object differently while remaining oriented toward a shared societal purpose. These perspectives highlight that the objects of activity are not static but are dynamically constructed through social interactions, power relations, and historical contexts, operating as

open invitations to interpretation that facilitate both personal sense-making and broader societal transformation (Engeström & Sannino, 2021). The object of activity can thus be understood to function as the motivating force or problem-space driving subject engagement, not merely material goals but the meaning, needs, and intentions that subject(s) project onto it. The organizational embeddedness of work actions suggests that decision-making actions concerning particular students have consequences not only for those particular students but also for the general, durable object of the activity (Engeström, 2001a).

While actions have relatively clear points of beginning and termination, activity theory suggests that individual actors may remain only partially cognizant of connections between their specific actions and the complex activity system from which these actions emerge. Although activity systems generate numerous short-lived, goal-directed actions, goals do not predetermine actions. Rather, goals are understood to emerge dynamically within the action process, serving as resources that shape and guide the unfolding activity (Engeström, 2008).

From an activity theoretical perspective, activity is thus not an external context prescribing individual behaviour, but something individuals consciously generate. As a long-term phenomenon without clear beginnings or ends, involving multiple viewpoints, histories, and interests, an activity "weaves together its own dynamic context" (Engeström & Sannino, 2021, p. 5). An important aspect of analysis is the movement between the long historical time perspective of object-oriented activity systems and the relatively short time perspective of goal-oriented actions (Engeström, 2000a). In cultural-historical activity theory, development – understood as qualitative transformations in activity systems – is driven by the expansive reconceptualization of the object and motive of the entire activity (Engeström, 2011). Such transformations are initiated and implemented through daily work actions, often emerging as deviations from established routines through seemingly minor innovations. Central to this development is the dynamic interplay between the broader structural evolution of the activity system and micro-level actions that instantiate change.

While some such individual teacher actions and their effects on the broader system may easily remain invisible, such as the ways in which teachers' actions influence the broader evolution of the music school system, the social innovations described in the ArtsEqual research, such as the Floora project initiated by individual music teachers (Väkevä et al., 2017; Westerlund et al., 2021), demonstrate how music school teachers' actions can contribute to gradually transform the broader institutional understandings of what music school education aims to achieve in contemporary society. These examples exemplify how seemingly initially minor teacher-initiated actions to address systematic exclusion can contribute to the expansive reconceptualization of the object and

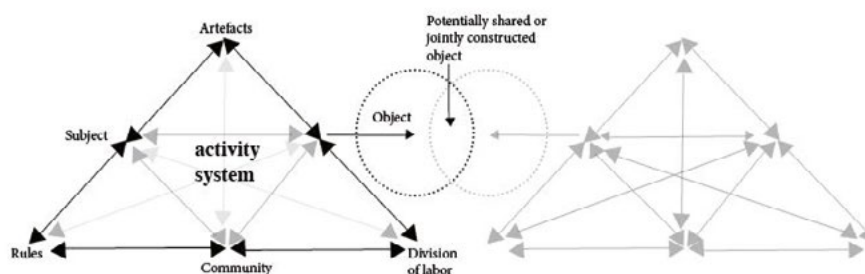
motive of the entire music education activity system. This phenomenon of individual agency catalysing systemic transformation extends beyond localized innovations to encompass broader policy development processes. Additional examples of such transformative dynamics can be identified within the formation of national curricula, where initiatives for individualizing Basic Arts Education originate from educators' personal experiences and individual advocacy efforts (Lavaste, 2009). This pattern illustrates how personal motivations, and localised pedagogical concerns can scale up to influence macro-level educational policy frameworks, demonstrating the interconnected nature of micro-level teacher agency and systemic institutional change.

1.4.2. Multivoicedness and Music School Development Through Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

Engeström's theoretical contributions represent a significant departure from cultural-historical activity theory's Russian founders (Engeström & Sannino, 2021). The explicit integration of division of labour, community, and social class distinguishes Engeström's elaboration from other sociomaterial approaches (e.g., actor-network theory, practice theory, assemblage theory), which typically decentralize human agency and place less emphasis on historically structured social roles and power relations (Fenwick, 2010). From this theoretical perspective, teachers' pedagogical decisions in music schools, such as repertoire selection, assessment approaches, or lesson structures, are not decisions divorced from social context but emerge from the collective activity system that includes institutional policies, community expectations, available resources, and established teaching traditions. Similarly, students' learning decisions and musical development occur within this broader activity system, influenced by the interplay between their personal goals, teacher guidance, peer interactions, school regulations, and cultural-historical practices of music education. The activity of music school education thus encompasses not only the immediate teacher-student interactions but the entire network of relationships, tools, rules, and community practices that collectively shape how musical learning unfolds within these institutional settings.

Third generation cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström & Sannino, 2021) conceptualizes activity systems as increasingly interconnected and interdependent, sharing partially overlapping and often fragmented object (Engeström, 2011; Engeström & Sannino, 2021) (Figure 2).

Figure 2



An Activity System Interacting with Another Activity System in Constructing the Object of Activity

By extending analytical interest to the level of the whole activity system interacting with other activity systems, Engeström (2001a, 2011) develops conceptual tools for understanding dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems (see also Engeström, 1995).¹⁶ In these networks, multi-voicedness is considered to multiply as activity systems collaboratively construct a shared understanding and a shared or jointly constructed object. A cultural-historical perspective on instrumental teaching and learning recognizes that activities have histories and cultural meanings – particular ways of doing, believing, and valuing that have evolved over time. As the object of activity has evolved culturally and historically, it carries with it collective meanings and motives in addition to artefacts (Engeström, 2000a). With multiple layers of history embedded in their artifacts, rules, and conventions, activity systems are viewed as multivoiced formations of multiple viewpoints, traditions and interests (Engeström, 2001a, 2001b, 2008).

This theoretical conceptualisation of music school education enables the recognition of music schools' systemic affiliations, shifting the focus of analysis from individual activities to systems of activities that work towards the co-development of an object (Engeström, 2001a). This perspective enhances the understanding of the dependencies and historically situated construction of music

¹⁶ Ritva Engeström (1995) has developed a theorization of voice within cultural-historical activity theory, building upon Mikhail Bakhtin's (1987) concepts of utterance, social language, and voice. Engeström's (1995) framework conceptualizes voice as communicative action, which acknowledges that voices draw on historically evolving social languages, but also considers that voices are not reducible to them: a voice always contains the creative moment of constructing meaning in a unique situation.

schools' explicitly/implicitly implied object of activity (Engeström, 2004a). Considering music schools as part of a network of nested and overlapping activity systems makes it possible to examine how both national policies and network relations with other activity systems (Engeström, 2001a, 2011; Engeström & Rückriem, 2005), such as vocational and higher music education institutions, shape their activities, alongside transnational policies such as adopted assessment frameworks and global discourses on education policy. Examples of such transnational policymaking include what has been described as a global megatrend towards evaluation (e.g., Pitkänen, 2023), the continuous evaluation and monitoring of education, with the aim of improving the performance and quality of education at all levels of education systems. Signals of a shift towards quality work can also be observed in the field of Basic Education in the Arts (FNAE, 2024; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023).

This systemic understanding necessitates further theoretical precision regarding the relationship between different levels of analysis. Anne Edwards (2010, 2015) addresses this need through her distinction between practices and activities, elucidating the perspectives that are involved when individuals engage with the demands and opportunities for action in activities that take place within institutional practices that are themselves embedded in broader local and national histories, as well as being shaped by societal expectations. Edwards (2011) conceptualizes practices as "knowledge-laden and emotionally freighted sites of purposeful and expert activity" (p. 33), framing them as a "complex interweaving of the concrete and the ideal, with histories and purposes and which are inhabited by those who act in and shape them" (Edwards et al., 2019, p. 5).

Applied to music school contexts, this framework establishes that music school practices are inhabited by teachers, students, and administrators who engage in processes such as individual lessons, ensemble rehearsals, recitals, and assessments that collectively constitute the music school as an institutional entity. Practices carry histories, values and purposes, making demands on those who engage with them, expecting specific ways of thinking and behaving (Edwards 2010). These practices, comprising the music school activity, constitute institutions such as music schools or conservatories, which are themselves located within broader policy environments that include national education systems, cultural ministries, arts funding bodies, and professional music organizations, each carrying distinct practices and cultural values regarding musical training, artistic excellence, accessibility, and the role of music in society.

This cultural-historical reading of music school practices recognises their nested nature (Edwards, 2010). A practice, such as teaching instrumental learning in music schools, is located in and informed by the practice of instrumental playing and performance traditions, and at the same time is located in music

school institutional practices, such as curriculum standards, examination systems and study evaluation criteria, which are in turn located in and informed by wider societal practices regarding cultural education, artistic excellence, cultural heritage preservation, and youth development in and through the arts. The practices within music schools, from repertoire selection and teaching methodologies to evaluation criteria and performance standards, are thus shaped not only by immediate institutional contexts but also by wider cultural and policy frameworks that define legitimate musical knowledge and appropriate pedagogical approaches.

Beyond these nested relationships between practices, the framework acknowledges the sociomaterial aspects of activities by recognizing the central role of artifacts in mediating human action and learning. The theoretical premise that all artifacts are produced under specific historical conditions to serve particular purposes (Fenwick et al., 2011) renders the history of human change, learning, and development inextricably linked to the historical trajectory of artifacts that mediate ongoing practices, objectives, and interests. In music school education, this approach recognizes that learning to play an instrument draws on shared cultural and historical artifacts: musical instruments and repertoire, conceptual tools (e.g., music theory, notation systems, pedagogical methods), accumulated professional practices (e.g., teaching traditions, assessment approaches, performance conventions) and explicit institutional resources, such as policy documents, legislative frameworks, and national curricula, that articulate broader educational aims. This relational conceptualization emphasizes the historicity embedded in music school practices, illuminating how accumulated temporal layers shape the present-day actions of both teachers and students within their historical, cultural and social contexts. By understanding the objects of activities as dynamic, the framework recognizes that regulatory frameworks and organizational structures governing formal educational institutions are not static "givens" but continuously emerge through historically situated processes of collective activity and human–artifact interaction.

1.4.3. Conceptualizing Professionals' Relational Work in Music Education

Within the activity theory framework, Engeström (2008) conceptualizes the object of activity's construction through the term co-configuration, emphasizing dynamic reciprocal relationships between service providers and users through mutual exchange and collaborative construction. This connects to understanding decision-making as reconstructing and redefining the object of activity through

situated actions (Engeström, 2001b). Building on this systemic understanding of collaborative object construction, Edwards (2007) extends activity theory's focus to examine how individual professionals navigate and contribute to these collective processes. By drawing upon the theorisations of cultural-historical activity theory, Edwards has developed the concept of relational agency to describe the professionals' work of aligning one's thoughts and actions with others "to extend the object on which one is working by bringing to bear the sense-making of others and drawing on the resources they offer in responding to that sense-making" (p. 4). According to Edwards (2012), this involves a shared interpretation of the object, "so that its complexity is revealed by recognising the motives and resources that others bring to bear as they too interpret it" (p. 26). In Edwards' (2017) view, agency depends on people recognising and working with differences about "what matters" to others as well as oneself within a particular practice (p. 4; see also Edwards, 2005, 2010, 2020).

Edwards (2015) conceptualizes professional agency as "being explicit about what matters to you as a professional, revealing your professional motives, i.e. commitments, and being able to align your motives with those of others" (p. 784). This relational agency is part of professional expertise, which builds upon professionals recognising and working with differences about what matters to each participant in order to create shared understanding and collaborative action. Edwards (2017) deliberately uses the terms "what matters" and "motive orientations" (p. 4; see also Hedegaard & Edwards, 2023) to distinguish from individualistic connotations of "motive" outside cultural-historical activity theory. Understanding "what matters" to different participants becomes crucial in co-constructing objects of activity, particularly as teachers and students may interpret activities differently based on their distinct perspectives and priorities (Edwards, 2016). This relational agency is mediated by common knowledge constructed through interaction at practice boundaries (Edwards, 2011).

In this study, this relational work involves not only engaging children and young people in the co-construction of music school practices and seeking to identify conditions that support student agency, but also the potential tensions and contradictions that exist in relation to co-constructing practices. Drawing on the approach of formative intervention (Engeström, 2016), this involved changing actual practices to make potential challenges visible; in other words, initiating change to learn from the system in order to discover what can be accomplished through action. This methodological approach aligns with cultural activity theory's forward-looking orientation, which rather than retrospectively asking why an action occurs, invites researchers to ask: "what dynamics and possibilities for change and development are involved in this action" (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005, p. 154).

1.5. Research Aims and Objectives

Within the above-described conceptual and methodological framework, the aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the policy-practice gap within Finnish music schools and of children's inclusion in music school education. The study aims to increase children's participation and decision making in this specific context, and to advance understanding of why children's participation in decision making may require additional effort and the reorganisation of professional practices. These broader aims align with the Finnish policy (e.g., the National Child Strategy). As a whole the study aims to identify the dynamics, opportunities, and barriers that emerge when attempting to bridge the policy-practice gap in music school education and to contribute to the wider understanding of children's inclusion in music education.

Drawing from these wider aims, the study has two objectives: firstly, to analyse the politics of children's inclusion within the music school system by reflecting the present situation against the historical development of the policy and practices in the music school system; and secondly, to conduct a formative intervention to invite children and young people to shape the policies and practices that affect their music school education. Politics in this context refers to activities "through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live" (Heywood, 2023, p. 4). From this perspective, central questions emerge regarding how people should live together, how power and resources should be distributed given that human needs and desires are infinite while the resources available to satisfy them are always limited; which values and ideas should be prioritized; how decisions should be made, and who should have a voice in these processes. These objectives provide a structured approach to fulfilling the purpose of the study, focusing respectively on practical pedagogical processes and systemic policy considerations.

1.6. Research Position

Rather than trying to assume a position of exteriority or distance, methodologically this study has been based on a view where I, as a researcher, am part of the world that I am investigating, rather than exterior and separate to it, making it important for me to consider within this constant becoming, and a continuously enacted and reconfigured world, what research does and what my role as a researcher entails. Elisabeth Adams St. Pierre's (2016) thoughts resonate with my positionality in this study when she suggests that there is no beginning to inquiry, since "we are always already entangled in inquiry" (p. 29). While it is

easy to identify the temporal starting points for the different phases of this study, it is more difficult to position myself at a fixed point in time from which to "observe". I concur with Patti Lather's (2013) proposition, in which she argues that post-qualitative researchers are in the midst of a "methodology-to-come" (p. 635), which takes different forms and shapes depending on where researchers are in their projects.

Accepting that the person engaging in an inquiry is always already part of the apparatus that measures, I therefore do not consider researchers as separate entities with agency and the capacity to represent a reality "out there" (Hultin, 2019). Recognizing that the process of doing research and "making cuts" (Barad, 2007, p. 145), is always partial, I have let go of the modernist quest for absolute knowledge or any claims to external, universal knowledge or categories or essences embedded in the "data" that would be available for me as a researcher to "pick up". Rather, I have valued the search for and celebration of meanings that are partial, tentative, incomplete, even contradictory, and that also allow the project to bear the traces of the research process undertaken (Barad, 2007). As I have experienced what it has meant to install myself as a researcher in a theoretical field, I have been drawn to the idea that "knowing is not a bounded or closed practice, but an ongoing performance of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 149).

Barbara Merrill and Linden West (2009) suggest, "we cannot, in a sense, write the stories of others without reflecting our own histories, social and cultural locations, and subjectivities and values" (p. 5). My institutional and experiential entanglements within Finnish music education are not merely background to be acknowledged but rather constitute part of the apparatus through which both this research and I as researcher are continuously configured. These entanglements manifest concretely through my trajectory through Finnish music education, in both the comprehensive school system and in the music school system and music-focused classes (*musiikkiluokka*). Prior to my doctoral studies, I have worked as a clarinet teacher in various music schools in Finland for over 20 years, and in addition to my teaching work, I have initiated and led development projects in arts education through a non-profit organisation that I founded in 2016. My own formal music education began at the age of nine with clarinet studies at the Päijät-Häme Conservatory, followed by undergraduate studies at the Tampere Conservatory, and postgraduate and master's studies in performance at the Royal Academy of Music, London. During my high school years in Finland, I had the opportunity to spend a year at a high school in California, USA, playing in an American high school wind band, a marching band and a local junior symphony orchestra, as well as taking private clarinet lessons and participating in county youth wind band projects. In addition to more formal clarinet studies both in Finland and abroad, I have practised piano alongside my interest in composition,

an interest that I have pursued alongside my formal studies through composition studies at the Tampere Conservatory and through online courses offered by the Berklee College of Music.

While my values have inevitably become part of the subsequent developmental process (Cole & Engeström, 2007), I am also drawn to the idea that what researchers bring to research is contextual, mobile, and interactionally determined (Major & Savin-Baden, 2012). Given the design of this study and the sheer length of the project, I feel the complex relational dynamics of this ongoing entanglement very strongly. For me, the research path does not present itself as self-evident. Rather, I see it as the result of all the encounters I have had during this process; not least with the children I have met during and before the project since I began my journey in instrumental teaching in the late 1990s, but also through the numerous encounters with other music educators and researchers with whom I have had the privilege of reflecting on my thinking, at the University of the Arts Helsinki and also in other institutions and research networks.

1.7. Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into ten chapters. After the introductory chapter, in which I present the background, aims, and setting of this study along with the initial theoretical and methodological positions for this research, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framings for this study's inquiry into inclusion and student agency and specifies the conceptual lenses for the empirical analysis. In Chapter 3 I give an overview of previous research on how children's perspectives have been sought in music education research and instrumental music education research, as well as in Finnish music school research and external evaluations of Finnish music schools. In Chapter 4, I review the policy framework of music schools in an attempt to construct a more nuanced understanding of students' agentic possibilities: how the interactions between music school teachers and students are structured by the wider social processes in music schools through the social goals of music schools. As mentioned previously, drawing on the approaches of development work research (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Engeström, 2015), this research is based on the idea that the problems as well as the potentials of music school activities can only be understood in relation to their own history (Engeström, 2001a). In the case of this study, this means that in order to gain an understanding of the potentials for student agency, it is necessary to identify the collective meanings and motives of the object of music school activity (Engeström, 2000a, 2000b) and the ways in which the social goals of music schools influence the potential scope for student agency. The chapter highlights

the music school system's origins, governance evolution, structural characteristics, challenges, and ongoing mission.

Chapter 5 provides a description of the research process. In Chapters 6 and 7 I present the findings of this study and focus on events that portrayed the potentials of student agency in the co-constructed processes in the two music schools: the attempts of the students to take part and participate in the course of actions, and the policies and practices that affected the students' possibilities and choices for action.

Chapter 8 synthesises the insights gained from the co-construction processes in relation to student agency to further analyse the dynamics and democratic possibilities inherent in collaboratively shaping music school education with students. In Chapter 9, I discuss the findings and methodological choices, further extending this analysis to formulate implications for children's inclusion within publicly funded and regulated music schools. I also address the limitations and future research needs. Chapter 10 presents the concluding thoughts.

2. Framing Inclusion: Theoretical and Policy Perspectives

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations underpinning this study's inquiry into inclusion and student agency and specifies the conceptual lenses for the empirical analysis. The theoretical reframing of the Finnish music schools' policy-practice gap within the wider inclusion framework developed as a necessary response to insights gained through the research process. This reframing required constructing a more comprehensive analytical lens for music school education, positioning these institutions as public entities with the potential to offer children and young people opportunities to contribute to the common good and connect to various sources of well-being and meaningful relationships, developing a holistic child-focused perspective that considers children's lives and childhood as comprehensive phenomena (Isola et al., 2017; Karlsson, 2020; Kiilakoski & Gretscher, 2012).

In this wider attempt, the theoretical framing of agency proves central as it allows a way of bridging the individual and policy perspectives within the context of music school education. Inclusion and agency constitute related and overlapping concepts that bring different perspectives to the examination of the relationship between the individual and society. While inclusion highlights the dimensions of attachment and relatedness – living in connection with and in relation to other people and having the opportunity to belong to an entity where one can connect to different sources of well-being and interactional relationships (Isola et al., 2017; Kiilakoski & Gretscher, 2012) – the concept of agency shifts the focus to individual and/or collective action, establishing an account of human action that implies a capacity for willed action: the ability of individuals to control and direct the course of their lives and to influence the conditions that shape a given context for action. This interconnection manifests in the understanding of agency – taking part and having an influence – as a gateway to inclusion (Karlsson, 2020). The social and political dimensions of inclusion (Kiilakoski et

al., 2012; see also Thomas, 2007), form a relationship between agency and inclusion: the possibility to have an influence on one's own life through either individual or collective effort is seen as an important dimension of inclusion, which can increase the experience of inclusion and meaningfulness in one's life. The relationship between agency and inclusion in this study therefore emphasises the diverse dimensions of involvement, of participation and influence in decision-making in one's own life and in social processes such as groups, public services, the community, or society more widely. Moreover, as with inclusion, the achievement of agency also depends on the availability of economic, cultural, and social resources (Fraser, 2008).

The examination in this chapter proceeds through several interconnected dimensions: exploring divergent perspectives on children's participation, the construction of children's participatory status within policy frameworks, and the relationship between childhood conceptualizations and democratic participation conditions. This examination establishes the theoretical foundations and policy understanding necessary for investigating the factors contributing to the gap between policy commitments to children's participation and the practical realization of their participatory rights in public service provision.

2.1. Conceptual Foundations of Inclusion in Finnish Child Policy

This study positions civic participation at the centre of government funded and administered music education, recognizing that civic participation constitutes the core Nordic welfare policies. The inclusion of children in Finnish society began receiving increasing attention from Finnish public officials, into the 2020s (e.g., Finnish Government, 2019, 2021a; Ministry of Justice, 2020). While promoting the participation of children and young people has been one of the central themes of Finnish youth policy already since the mid-1990s, several strategic steps have been taken to strengthen the participation of children and young people in public decision-making processes in Finnish society. As already described in the introduction, among these steps was the creation of a cross-sectoral administrative instrument, the National Child Strategy (Finnish Government, 2021a), which introduced a new element into public policy: the requirement that children's perspectives be taken into account at all levels of public administration and in all

forms of public service.¹⁷ The National Child Strategy is based exclusively on the promotion of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, with the aim of raising the status of children in societal decision-making (Iivonen & Pollari, 2022; Stenvall, 2020, 2021). By adopting the term inclusion (osallisuus in Finnish), this study establishes coherence with Finnish child policy discourse, where osallisuus is denoted as inclusion in policy discourse (e.g., Ministry of Justice, 2020). While the concept of inclusion¹⁸ (osallisuus) lacks a singular definition, it has been considered intricately connected to Finnish society in various dimensions, presenting translation challenges, although participation occasionally approximates its conceptual scope (Kiilakoski & Gretschesl, 2012). While the terms participation and engagement can highlight different dimensions of inclusion, inclusion also encompasses involvement, action, and influence in decision-making (Leemann & Hämäläinen, 2016). Conceptualisation of inclusion also emphasizes the dimensions of attachment and relatedness: living in connection with and in relation to other people (Kiilakoski et al., 2012).

This study employs the framework in which inclusion is manifested in three dimensions (Isola et al., 2017): 1) as decision-making power in one's own life, 2) as influence in social processes, for example in groups, services, living environments, or society more broadly, and 3) as situated processes, where an individual can invest in the common good, participate in creating and experiencing meaning, and engage in reciprocal social relations. While access to material and non-material resources is recognised within this framework of inclusion, as well as decision-making power in one's own life and in decisions about collective social action, the understanding of inclusion is not conceived solely in terms of the distribution of resources or decision-making power. Rather, inclusion encompasses the dimension of attachment: the individual's belonging to one or more entities or relationships in which different valuations and values are shaped and in which well-being is produced and shared. Within this framework, inclusion is manifested through the ability to make choices about one's life and to

¹⁷ These strategies are in line with contemporary policy-making in the wider European context, where, for example, the Council of Europe has developed a number of strategies to promote children's rights within the framework of the transversal programme 'Building a Europe for and with Children', which was launched in 2006. During the work on 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).

¹⁸ In this study, the use of the English term "inclusion" does not refer to the Finnish concept of *inkluisio*, which derives from distinct discursive traditions centred upon the educational integration of students classified as having "special needs" within mainstream educational institutions; a conceptual framework employed not only within Finland but also across various national contexts both within and beyond Europe (e.g., Wolff et al., 2021).

connect to resources that contribute to the individual's participation in creating and experiencing meaning, as well as through the ability to engage in reciprocal social relationships; in other words, to have opportunities to belong to an entity where one can connect to different sources of well-being and interactional relationships that enhance the meaning of life.

This study places a central emphasis on an individual's own experience of inclusion, which is not only based on the distribution of material resources, but is seen as participation beyond “access”: an experience that arises when a person is involved in a community or communities, and a deeply experiential state in which a sense of participation is seen to be created through participation and influence (Finnish Government, 2019). Resources, such as access to recreational activities or other social benefits, do not automatically result in, but only potentiate an individual's experience of, inclusion.¹⁹ This study therefore takes students' individual experience seriously and seeks to identify methods to capture the manifestations of inclusion.

As discussed in the introduction, inclusion is identified as a key element in children's well-being in Finnish child policy (Ministry of Justice, 2020). Policy enactments to strengthen the participation of children and young people's in public decision-making processes pursue solutions to multi-level social problems, such as the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages and political power distribution (Kiilakoski & Gretscherl, 2012; Peltola & Moisio, 2017). Systematically developing inclusion structures aims to prevent inequality and marginalisation due to institutional and societal structures. By strengthening the participation of children and young people, inclusion is also seen as defending well-functioning democratic systems (Ministry of Justice, 2022). In Finland, concerns about young people's civic engagement persist: comparative studies demonstrate that Finnish children and young people have weaker willingness to participate than their European peers (Suoninen et al., 2010). Although the state of democracy in Finland is considered good in international comparison, challenges include eroding participation, increasing inequality, declining voter turnout, and differences in perceived trust between population groups (Ministry of Justice, 2022). In an evaluation of various attributes of democracy, Finland

¹⁹ This conceptualisation of inclusion draws upon the thinking of the Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt (1976), whose focus on the study of well-being was considered pioneering, as previous studies, in their attempt to be objective, had examined well-being by looking at individuals' health, housing, or work situations. Allardt extended the study of well-being beyond physical needs to include the values, attitudes, and feelings of individuals and groups, questioning whether the study of well-being was meaningful if it did not take into account people's own views and needs.

received the lowest international rankings in the indices of participatory democracy (24th place) and deliberative democracy (17th place) (p. 17). Despite improvements, significant numbers of young people feel their opinions lack influence in school and that they lack opportunities to learn social influence skills (Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi, 2018). In the 2021 School Health Survey, only 11% of students in years 8 and 9 felt that they had good opportunities to influence school matters (Helenius et al., 2022). Supporting children's opportunities to influence their immediate environment and broader society is viewed as fostering democratic participation (Finnish Government, 2019).

2.2. Participatory Turn in Public Policies

Civil society participation in the definition and design of public policies reflects broader initiatives for participatory policymaking, described as a "participatory turn" in public policy (Bherer et al., 2016, p. 225), representing an attempt to facilitate individuals or groups in policy design through consultative or participatory means. Collaborative approaches to public policy involving different kinds of citizen input have been conceptualized through various terms, including co-construction (Vaillancourt, 2009, 2013), co-production, and co-creation, the latter two of which are sometimes used interchangeably (Brandsen & Honing, 2018). Co-production typically relates to the later stages of the production cycle, where citizens and service users work alongside professionals to implement existing policies and programs (Brandsen & Honing, 2018; Vaillancourt, 2009, 2013), while co-creation and co-construction refer to deeper stakeholder participation in policy design itself, involving citizens at the initiator or co-design level (Vaillancourt, 2013; Voorberg et al., 2015). These collaborative approaches to the co-construction of public policy (Pestoff, 2006; Vaillancourt, 2009, 2013) constitute a departure from traditional welfare models characterized by top-down service design toward participatory governance models involving citizen participation in policy development. This increasing civic engagement – deliberation by the people rather than for the people – has been interpreted as a radical transformation of democracy (Bherer et al., 2016), the iterations of which can be seen in the various cross-sectoral collaborations in public governance (Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024). This transformation has fostered the development of participatory processes through deliberative democracy and extra-parliamentary participation, grounded in the principle of involving citizens directly in public sector decision-making, thereby fundamentally reshaping the public sector into an arena for collaborative co-creation. Within the framework of New Public Governance, these collaborative approaches have become central to

contemporary governance models (Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024; Torfing et al., 2019, 2021).

The revival of the discourse on participation, which encompasses the consideration of citizens' perspectives and the integration of public deliberation into public decision-making (OECD, 2020), has been viewed as part of the goal of strengthening the democratic character of European societies, as the policies and practices that foster the relationship between government and citizens are widely recognised as key contributors to strengthening democratic governance (OECD, 2017, 2021). These contemporary efforts to incorporate public deliberation into decision-making processes reflect broader concerns about strengthening democratic governance in the face of growing global autocratisation (Boese et al., 2022; OECD, 2020). The concept of open government, which enables citizens to monitor and participate in public decision-making, has emerged as a response to democratic deficits and offers pathways toward active citizenship. The engagement of young people in societal affairs has become particularly significant for democratic resilience (OECD, 2024a).

As policy makers explore mechanisms through which children can be involved in decision-making processes, there is growing acknowledgement that child participation in decision-making on matters that affect them is not only essential from a child rights perspective, but is also associated with several positive outcomes from the individual to societal level (Gottschalk & Borhan, 2023; see also European Commission, 2021). However, despite this growing recognition, the conceptualization and implementation of child participation has remained subject to diverse interpretations and varying underlying rationales, making it essential to understand these different perspectives when examining how policies can be meaningfully co-constructed with children.

2.3. Theoretical Constructions of Children's Participatory Status in Education

The implementation of children's participatory rights within educational settings is fundamentally shaped by theoretical constructions of childhood, competing institutional demands, and varying conceptualizations of children's democratic capacity. While policy frameworks increasingly recognize children's right to participate in matters affecting them, translating these principles into educational practice remains complex and contested. This complexity stems from the intersection of multiple factors: divergent rationales for including children's voices in decision-making processes, competing institutional missions that shape how participation is understood and implemented, deeply embedded conceptions

of childhood that influence children's social status and recognition, and theoretical frameworks that determine the conditions under which children are deemed suitable for democratic participation. Understanding these theoretical constructions is essential for examining how children's participatory status is negotiated within music education contexts, where institutions must balance different societal mandates while navigating broader societal assumptions about children's capabilities and appropriate roles in educational governance.

2.3.1. Divergent Rationales for Child Participation

The purposes of children's participation have been variously conceptualized within policy and educational contexts (Thomas, 2007). Stakeholder engagement is widely recognized as fundamental to developing sound public policy (Lemke & Harris-Wai, 2015). Within educational settings, student input is similarly valued for enhancing decision-making processes and increasing student engagement (Klemenčič, 2018). Research demonstrates that responsive approaches to student voice generate both academic benefits and foster students' development as civic actors, with the promotion of student civic engagement facilitating leadership skill development and deepening understanding of change processes (Kahne et al., 2022).

Scholarship on student voice reveals considerable variance in the underlying rationales for children's participation across different historical periods and contexts. Although student voice movements were active in the 1960s, particularly in higher education, with the rhetoric of "voice" mobilised by the civil rights movements in Europe and elsewhere in the world to express the right to participate more fully in public life, the focus on the role of students in school decision-making largely disappeared after the mid-1970s (Mitra, 2004). The re-emergence of student voice in the 1990s was characterized by a shift from rights-based frameworks to efficiency-oriented approaches focused on enhancing student learning outcomes. This diversity in underlying rationales is evident in contemporary music education policy scholarship, where music education policy scholarship documents student involvement through efficiency-based rather than social justice rationales, with student voice operationalized to promote performative and managerial objectives (Spruce, 2015).

Children's participation represents the fulfillment of children's fundamental human rights, establishing a legal imperative that extends beyond utilitarian justifications based on derived benefits (Lundy, 2007; Pajulammi, 2014). The core principle in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding children's right to participate in matters concerning them has informed the development of participatory frameworks that have gained prominence over

the past decade, as evidenced in the Finnish context previously discussed (Finnish Government, 2021a; see also European Commission, 2021). Despite the nearly universal ratification of the UNCRC²⁰, however, implementing children's right to participate remains ambiguous in practice, due in part to insufficient clear guidance on implementation (Alderson, 1999; Lansdown, 1999).

To address this conceptual ambiguity, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) has provided a definitional framework in General Comment No. 12, characterizing children's participation as "an ongoing process, which includes information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes" (p. 5). Hart (1992, 2008) and Laura Lundy (2007) are among key scholars who have developed foundational frameworks for analysing the quality and authenticity of children's participation.

Hart (1992, 2008) identified varying degrees of participatory engagement, from problematic forms like "decoration" and "tokenism" – where "articulate, charming children" (Hart, 1992, p. 10) were displayed at panel discussions or conferences without preparation or peer consultation – to genuine collaborative partnerships. Hart's analysis demonstrates that the opportunity to express opinions, for example through consultation, constituted symbolic participation, as it could not guarantee having an impact if decision-making power was entirely in the hands of others. Seeking children's voices for the sake of listening had no value if they were not responded to and given due weight in decision-making. It was therefore equally important for children to see whether their voices could have a transformative impact, and to understand the reasons why they were not able to do so.

Echoing Hart's critique of merely symbolic participation, Lundy (2007) established that child participation could not be defined purely in terms of children having a voice. In her view, partaking in social life also required the existence of meaningful space, the presence of an audience to listen to what children had to say, and mechanisms to influence decision-making. Reflecting Hart (1992, 2008) and Lundy's (2007) insights within this study's context, assessing children's participation necessitates an examination of the varying degrees to which children are permitted, empowered, and supported to exercise initiative, develop their own projects, and engage in collaborative decision-making regarding implementation

²⁰ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified human rights treaty. The United States remains the only United Nations member state not to have ratified the Convention, despite its signature indicating commitment to eventual ratification.

within music school policy processes. Research on barriers to meaningful implementation of children's rights in education has identified primary adult concerns regarding compliance with UNCRC Article 12: skepticism about children's capacity for meaningful decision-making contributions, fear that increased child agency undermines adult authority and destabilizes school environments, and apprehension that developing co-constructed policies diverts excessive resources from core educational activities (Lundy, 2007; Quennerstedt, 2011). These concerns can lead adults to exclude children from decision-making processes to maintain established consensual procedures.

The establishment of children as a social group with the right to participate in society and make decisions that affect their lives involves many considerations, some of which, such as the extent to which children should have a voice at all, continue to be the subject of divergent opinions. Some of this apprehension may stem from the ongoing tension between child protection and participation in society that characterizes contemporary work with children (Mitchell, 2022). The view that children should be allowed to have a carefree childhood and be protected from undue involvement and responsibility in civic matters and responsibilities highlights the children's rights' dimensions of child protection and children's best interests. Alternative perspectives maintain that politics – understood as the questions about "togetherness-in-plurality" (Biesta, 2013, p. 118) – are part of children's everyday reality that they must navigate (see also Taylor, 2013). As discussed in Biesta's (2013) conceptualization in the introduction, political existence cannot be separated from educational settings, as children's and young people's lives, both within and beyond schools, are inherently permeated by these fundamental questions of collective existence. From this perspective, democracy and participation are viewed as essential values, with schools positioned as central institutions for fostering democratic engagement. These participatory perspectives are supported by children's rights scholars who argue that young people develop critical thinking skills and competence to exercise judgment in complex issues exclusively through opportunities to question, express views, and engage in meaningful dialogue where their perspectives are valued and taken seriously (Lansdown, 2001).

Advocates of children's participation acknowledge that supplementary mechanisms are necessary to facilitate children's substantive engagement, rooted in the recognition that full citizenship status fundamentally shapes social status and opportunities in society. Although contemporary scholarship recognizes children as active agents in constructing their social realities rather than passive recipients (Prout & James, 2015), their participation capacity remains constrained by their status as not-yet-fully-integrated societal

members with (not yet) equal rights. Given children's exclusion from formal electoral processes and other foundational democratic rights, such as voting, the actualization of their participatory entitlements necessitates alternative institutional arrangements beyond conventional representative governance structures to enable their influence on public policy. This institutional gap requires the development of non-representative democratic mechanisms capable of supporting meaningful civic participation among youth populations – a challenge this study addresses through collaborative construction of participatory frameworks with child participants themselves.

Authentic promotion of children's well-being has been noted to require greater emphasis on the political dimension of children's participation, through which children can exercise meaningful authorship over their own lives. In practice, the area that has remained provocative and where progress has been most difficult to achieve concerns issues of autonomy and self-determination in children's rights. As noted by child rights scholars, children's rights constitute an integral component of universal human rights, encompassing civil, political, and social dimensions that should not be subject to diminished scope regarding self-determination and political influence when applied to children (Quennerstedt, 2010). This tension between comprehensive rights recognition and limited implementation has also been reflected in Finnish children's policy contexts. Prior scholarship reveals that Finnish children's policy discourse on well-being typically operates within two primary dimensions: health, safety, and material well-being, and the promotion of functioning family and friendship relationships, with the dimension of self-fulfilment (being) receiving less attention (Kiilakoski et al., 2012). Such policy limitations underscore the broader theoretical argument advanced by scholarship on children's rights. This perspective contends that approaching children's rights from the human rights framework would strengthen both children's civil rights, including freedom of expression and information, and their political rights to participate in the formation of public will and influence the exercise of power (Quennerstedt, 2010).

In addition to the comprehensive recognition of children's rights, scholarship examining international conventions has underscored the necessity of contextualizing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child within diverse national and operational frameworks, reflecting a shift from a top-down approaches towards bottom-up approaches of children's rights (Reynaert et al., 2015). In Finland, among the identified challenges in adopting children's rights thinking in public policy construction have been that legislative changes and programmes under different ministries remain distributed at the upper level, lacking coordination mechanisms for implementing children's rights across national, regional, and municipal levels (Committee on the Rights of the Child,

2011). The operationalization of the Convention continues to be fragmented across ministerial jurisdictions without comprehensive coordination mechanisms (Office of the Ombudsman for Children, 2022). The co-construction of policies by involving key stakeholders has thus far been in its early stages in Finland. In the preparatory work for the National Children's Strategy, a report by the Finnish Government (2019) concluded that children and their local networks are primarily recipients of services provided from the perspective of the administration and the service system. Top-down decision-making has also been identified in arts education, where arts professionals, based on their professional expertise and status, make decisions about the content of arts and arts education services on behalf of the participants (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021). While the UNCRC takes precedence over national law, several reports indicate that the Convention is not adequately recognized as a binding legal agreement across all levels of public administration and services (Iivonen & Pollari, 2022; Office of the Ombudsman for Children, 2018). This implementation gap stems from inadequate understanding, as public officials in Finland have not fully grasped the Convention's content and obligations (Pajulammi, 2014). Although the Convention requires nation states to give its provisions legal effect within domestic systems, critics argue that children's rights have not received the importance that ratification demanded since 1991. Consequently, municipalities often lack the expertise, resources, or structures necessary for Convention-based strategic work (Määttä, 2010; Rimpelä, 2015; Rimpelä & Rimpelä, 2015), contributing to situations where equality goals are interpreted as matters of goodwill rather than legal obligations (Kyllönen, 2017).²¹

The difficulties inherent in adopting children's rights thinking in education have been noted to be significantly accentuated by education's embeddedness within competing demands and agendas, including its instrumental role in economic development and future national well-being, as well as its function in promoting social harmony and integration (Quennerstedt, 2011). Prior scholarship on adopting children's rights thinking in educational activities

²¹ Recent research further indicates that Finnish legislation governing self-improvement services, including education beyond Basic Education and leisure activities, contains few provisions creating enforceable individual rights, with realization depending largely on social security legislation (Järvinen, 2023). This legislative ambiguity enables organizations to interpret legal purposes independently, potentially undermining consistent equality principles (Kyllönen, 2017; Pyykkönen, 2016). The importance of clear legal frameworks is demonstrated by the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014), which transformed equality from voluntary organizational practice into mandatory obligation with governmental oversight, extending requirements beyond public authorities to all organizations (Pyykkönen, 2016).

suggests that some educational traditions and historically constituted cultures fundamentally conflict with children's rights principles (Quennerstedt, 2011; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). Institutional resistance to stakeholder participation has been noted to be reinforced by perceptions of students as illegitimate actors in educational governance, with their participation viewed as problematic due to perceived short-term perspectives that prioritize immediate self-interests over long-term institutional goals (Klemenčič, 2021). Understanding these tensions is crucial when examining children's status as potential partners in educational policy making, as it highlights how children's participatory status in public institutions is constructed through the negotiation of multiple, often competing policy objectives.

2.3.2. Constructing Children's Participative Status in Policy

The idea of providing equal educational opportunities regardless of gender, social class and geographic origin is one of the central ideas in the Nordic welfare model and the welfare policies, including music school policies (Heimonen, 2002), through which cultural activities were brought to a wider part of society in the welfare state development project from the late 1960s (Kangas, 2017; Pirnes & Tiihonen, 2010). The Finnish model of education, based on the Nordic idea of equality, posited education, including music education, as a potential remedy for social and regional inequalities (Heimonen, 2002). In Finland, substantial societal expectations are placed upon education and its anticipated benefits for both individual advancement and collective social outcomes. Within the context of this study, national legislation and policy frameworks have articulated the societal missions of music education while simultaneously generating multiple competing demands that arts education must address (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021; Väkevä et al., 2022). These competing demands manifest particularly clearly in the dual mandate of the music school system, which must simultaneously provide accessible music education to all while also delivering specialized preprofessional training pathways for future musicians. Consequently, music schools must navigate competing demands and expectations imposed upon children when institutions are required to fulfill multiple, often contradictory, societal functions. These competing policy objectives fundamentally shape how children's participatory status is constructed within the Finnish music school system.

These fundamental tensions regarding educational purposes and institutional missions have been addressed by educational theorist Gert Biesta, who has brought these fundamental questions concerning the tasks and purposes of education and schooling to the centre of discussion, particularly in relation to democracy and education's democratic possibilities - questions that are also

central to this investigation. Biesta's educational theory provides a critical framework for understanding challenges in implementing children's participatory rights within contemporary educational contexts. Through his critique of neoliberalism's²² impact on education, Biesta (2006a, 2010b, 2013, 2019a; Biesta & Säfström, 2023) demonstrates how neoliberal governance has transformed educational discourse from democratic engagement to technocratic accountability focused on meeting "customer" needs rather than fostering democratic contestation over the common good (see also Adriany, 2018; Hall & Pulsford, 2019; Moss, 2019). At the centre of Biesta's critique is how contemporary educational discourse has replaced questions of good education with efficiency concerns while neglecting fundamental questions about educational purpose. As educational discourse becomes dominated by the language of learning (Biesta, 2010b), discussions focus narrowly on children learning and teachers facilitating, leaving processes empty of meaning when learning is understood merely as investment in economic development (Biesta, 2006a, 2006b). This managerial orientation mirrors institutional reluctance toward children's participatory rights, where educational purposes reduced to organizational efficiency overshadow substantive participation by children.

Building on his critique of technocratic approaches, Biesta (2017b) reconceptualizes teaching as activating students' possibilities to exist as subjects, emphasizing the political dimension of children's participation as existential, aimed at enhancing students' capacity to enact their own subjecthood in relation to questions of human existence in and with the world (Biesta, 2010b, 2015). While acknowledging education's qualification and socialization domains, Biesta (2017c) identifies a crucial third domain: subjectification, concerning "the ways in which students can (be)come subjects in their own right and not just remain objects of the desires and directions of others" (p. 185). Biesta's (2019a) post-humanist theory of education is based on his notion of "coming into the world" (p. 76), which has an interest in human subjectivity but without a template; that is, without a predefined idea of what it means to be and to exist as a human being.²³ This rejection of predetermined educational templates and scripts

²² While neoliberalism has been described as a "slippery concept" (Springer et al., 2016, p. 1) resistant to singular definition, it is broadly conceptualized as "the extension of competitive markets into all spheres of life, including the economy, politics and society," facilitated by a "redefinition of the role of the state and individual responsibility" (p. 2).

²³ Biesta (2010b) traces the idea of subjectification as an educational interest back to the Enlightenment and the work of Immanuel Kant, whose thoughts became an important reference point for the development of modern education, drawing attention to the idea that education is not simply about inculcation or training but involves an orientation towards freedom, independence, and autonomy. This Kantian emphasis on autonomy resonates with

encompasses broader critiques of how human nature is conceptualized within institutional frameworks. By distinguishing education as communication rather than mere socialization into existing practices (Biesta & Lawy, 2006), Biesta offers a lens for examining arguments for genuine co-construction of policies with children, extending beyond procedural participation to encompass fundamental questions about educational purpose and human development. In relation to music school education, this theoretical perspective calls for critical interrogation of the diverse domains through which music school education functions and their potential to foster genuine student agency and self-determination for students to emerge as subjects in their own right rather than remaining objects of institutional directives and adult expectations.

As discussed in the introduction, Biesta's (2010a) vision for democratic politics is informed by Jacques Rancière (1991, 1999), who radically redefines democracy not as a form of government but as an anarchic principle of equality. By starting from the assumption that "all students can speak" (Biesta, 2010a, p. 540; Rancière, 1991), the assumption of equality (Biesta, 2017a) needs to be positioned at education's beginning rather than its end. In presupposing equality of intelligence, Rancière (1991) challenges the taken-for-granted idea of the assumed distance and necessity of explanation between those who know and those who are in need of knowledge, which Rancière defines as the "explicative order" (p.4). From the point of view of Rancière, equality is thus neither given nor claimed, but a practical hypothesis to start with that fosters thought, experiment and invention, not something to be achieved but something to be acted upon. This practice of equality is not to be seen as resting on a foundational truth, but rather as a possibility that constantly demands verification – in other words, to be made true: to act as if it were true in order to see what follows from it (Biesta, 2017a, p. 64). Rancière's (2006) understanding of democracy represents the ongoing political action by which "those who have no part" claim equality and challenge hierarchical distributions of power. For Rancière, politics emerges in moments of disruption when excluded groups claim visibility and demonstrate their equal capacity to participate in political life. This democratic action constitutes what Rancière calls "an-archic"²⁴ governance – one based on nothing

contemporary arguments for children's participatory rights, yet Biesta identifies a crucial limitation: the Kantian framework was problematic because it was based on a particular truth about the nature and destiny of human beings, essentially predetermining what individuals should become rather than supporting their emergence as subjects.

²⁴ Rancière (2006) derives his concept of "anarchic" government (p. 41) from Plato's analysis in the *Laws* of the seven titles to rule, where the "seventh title" – the drawing of lots or selection by chance – represents the absence of any legitimate basis for authority. This democratic procedure reveals the fundamental scandal that among all claims to govern (birth, age, wealth,

other than the absence of every title to govern, which threatens all forms of established authority by treating equality as democracy's foundational presupposition rather than its goal. Rancière's view of democracy refers to a type of action rather than a state of society, making politics an intermittent action that needs to be perpetually renewed.

In positioning subjectification as distinct from education's traditional qualification and socialization domains, Biesta's (2019a) assertion that education should provide space and time for encountering and working through one's desires rather than fitting students into "existing ways of thinking, doing and being" (p. 3) directly challenges technocratic orientations that reduce music school purposes to narrow pedagogical goals and technical training rather than positioning education as space for genuine encounter and self-determination. Building on these relational alternatives, Biesta's (2019b) conceptualization of individual desire transcends ego-centred freedom by questioning whether what one desires is worth desiring for living well on a planet with limited capacity. This relational understanding positions education as a collective endeavour where working through students' desires becomes a question of subjectivity within community rather than individual pursuit. Education thus becomes fundamentally relational, where students' desires intersect with broader questions of shared existence through what Biesta (2019a) terms "pedagogy for publicness": a pedagogy that enacts interest in the public quality of human togetherness (p. 131). While Biesta's (2021) pedagogical questions are fundamentally existential, they focus not merely on individual human existence but on human beings' existence in and with the world, supporting arguments that children's participatory rights are essential for both individual development and democratic society's collective well-being.

In redirecting attention to these essential educational questions, Biesta (2021) further articulates a critical stance against both individualistic educational paradigms and essentialist frameworks that prescribe human development and behavior. Resisting predetermined conceptions of human nature, Biesta's critique extends beyond educational contexts to challenge broader anthropocentric assumptions. The problematic project of defining an essential human nature has also been taken up by others who claim that the framing of humans in a particular way remains locked in perpetual cycles of repetition (e.g., Knox, 2016; Pedersen, 2010), which also poses a threat to other species (Snaza, 2013). In the wake of the Anthropocene, numerous alternative discourses on human-centred worldviews have emerged to offer more relational alternatives (e.g., Ceder, 2019; Moss, 2019;

knowledge), there exists one "title" that is actually the absence of title, exposing that political authority ultimately rests on no natural or justified foundation.

Murris & Haynes, 2018; Murris et al., 2020; Olsson, 2009), seeking to expose the problems of education understood as a practice of humanisation with "human" as its telos (Snaza, 2013) and the world as created for human use (see also Biesta, 2021). Within this investigation, these theoretical perspectives provide analytical tools for critically examining how learning is approached within music school education, particularly regarding individualistic and individual-centred orientations. Such analysis extends to questioning how "student-centred" pedagogical approaches may inadvertently reinforce individualistic and isolated conceptualizations of learning, thereby potentially undermining the relational and collective dimensions of educational experience that are essential for genuine democratic participation and inclusion.

2.3.3. Social Recognition as the Foundation of Children's Participatory Status

These critiques of essentialist and predetermined conceptualizations of human nature extend directly to how children are conceived and positioned within educational and policy frameworks. The theoretical concerns regarding fixed notions of human becoming are particularly relevant when examining how children's participatory status is constructed through dominant discourses and institutional practices. Contemporary childhood studies scholarship has established that dominant discourses surrounding children and childhood have been historically intertwined with broader social processes, including institutional practices, to serve specific political and organizational imperatives (Josefsson et al., 2023). Such representational practices can also create "misrepresentation" (p. 15) where children are depicted in ways that serve adult agendas rather than children's actual experiences and perspectives (e.g., portraying children as either passive victims or threats to society).

Given these concerns about representation, this investigation recognizes the participatory status of children as closely linked to conceptions of the child and childhood (Alanen, 1992; James et al., 2015; Qvortrup, 1994). Approaching children's issues from a human rights perspective has been part of the changing perception of the child, a transformation supported by the implementation process of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). This repositioning of the child reconceptualized children as persons essentially indistinguishable from other human beings, which child researchers argue was necessary for children to be recognised as social subjects possessing full human status (Quennerstedt, 2010; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014) and as rights holders (Alderson, 1999). This reinvention of the child

appeared simultaneously across different disciplines and transformed views on children and childhood (Sommer et al., 2010).

While acknowledging children's developing autonomy was necessary for securing dignity and human rights, this recognition did not imply detached individuality or separateness from other human beings (Lee, 2005). Rather than presenting an illusion of isolated individuals, this conceptual framework emphasized children's capacity to express their own ideas and make choices while preserving their relational connections and need for care (Lee, 2005; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). In this study context, this theoretical positioning enables analysis of how children's participation in music school policy construction can simultaneously honor their individual agency and maintain the relational dimensions essential to collaborative educational environments.

These concerns about how children are represented and who has the authority to speak on their behalf or whether their own self-representation is crucial point to deeper questions about the social conditions that enable or constrain children's meaningful participation in educational settings. Recognizing children's democratic rights thus proves insufficient without addressing the underlying social conditions that enable meaningful participation in democratic processes. To analyse these dynamics more comprehensively, this investigation draws upon Nancy Fraser's (2001) theoretical framework as an analytical lens for examining the interconnections between children's participatory status and their social recognition, particularly regarding how status-related issues influence the social conditions prerequisite for children's participation in educational processes. While Fraser's theoretical contributions do not explicitly address children's educational participation, they have received increasing attention within critical educational studies (e.g., Bozalek et al., 2020; Vincent, 2019). Fraser's analytical framework reveals that children face a structural challenge in gaining recognition as rights holders, as they lack inherent social status and cannot attain the forms of social recognition enabling full participatory partnership without explicit acknowledgment of their participatory rights. Fraser's theoretical position resonates with post-structural theorizations asserting that individuals' status as subjects in social discourse depends on mutual recognition acts by which subjects grant each other viable subjecthood (Davies, 2006). Exclusion from agency can manifest through pre-existing social categories that precede the processes of positioning.

Fraser's (2008) theoretical conceptualization positions social status as merely one dimension within a comprehensive examination of social justice, which she argues necessitates social arrangements enabling participation in social life on an equal footing. Through her emphasis on social relations, Fraser illuminates the

limitations inherent in distributive approaches to justice, contending that an overly restrictive focus on resource accessibility and the distribution of material goods and services proves insufficient for addressing access to non-material resources including respect, recognition, rights, opportunities, and power. Within Fraser's tripartite framework of social justice, individuals may be denied the freedom to participate as equals when deprived of the economic and social resources, social status, and political voice necessary for active and equitable engagement in social interaction. Within the context of music education, Fraser's framework draws attention to how children may be excluded not just due to economic barriers, but because their musical cultures, backgrounds, or voices that are not recognized as legitimate within institutional frameworks. Fraser's position maintains that ameliorating social injustice requires dismantling institutionalized barriers that preclude equal participatory engagement. Within educational contexts, such institutional barriers encompass economic structures that constrain access to quality educational resources, potentially extending to subsequent outcomes including employment opportunities and earning capacity, alongside the maldistribution of rights, resources, and opportunities that impede students' capacity for equitable participation with peers.

In addressing impediments to what Fraser (2005) conceptualizes as participatory parity, the participation of individuals as full partners in social interaction, Fraser proposes that three dimensions of social justice must function synergistically to effectively promote individuals' capacity for equitable societal participation. These dimensions comprise the distribution of wealth, recognition of status, and representation of voice. The representation dimension of social justice, encompassing individuals' and social groups' capacity to articulate and communicate their experiential perspectives, constitutes a fundamental aspect of social justice, as voice and participatory capacity serve as prerequisites for realizing distributive and recognition dimensions. Representation may be characterized as the dimension of social justice that simultaneously enables and constrains individuals' claims to material and social resources. This concept encompasses not merely possessing voice and decision-making capacity but also maintaining agency over one's life trajectory. The representational concern centres on how unequal social positioning generates justice barriers by excluding individuals from various decision-making levels, thereby constraining their capacity for civic engagement. Such exclusions may manifest through institutional hierarchies of cultural value that deny equality and problematic governance structures alongside decision-making processes that inhibit democratic participation.

Central to Fraser's framework is her critique of identity politics models of recognition, which she argues tend to reify identities and assume conformity to

given group cultures. Fraser (2001) contends that positing simplified group identities as objects of recognition "denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations" (p. 24). To address this limitation, Fraser develops a non-identitarian account of recognition that treats recognition as a matter of social status rather than group identity. Her status model approach requires addressing misrecognition: the social subordination that prevents individuals from participating as equals in social life (Fraser, 2000). This model is not committed to any single remedy a priori but allows for various approaches depending on what subordinated parties need to participate as peers. Fraser (2008) contends that in most situations, redressing misrecognition involves challenging and replacing interaction-regulating values that prevent equal participation with those that promote it, thereby transforming norms that subordinate certain groups' social status. Within educational contexts such as music education, this means examining how individuals are recognized through attributes like ability, gender, or ethnicity, and whether these perceived characteristics are valued or devalued as normative, inferior, distinctive, or deficit.

Fraser (2008) argues that addressing misrecognition requires understanding how it becomes institutionalized across different spheres. She identifies juridified misrecognition requiring legal change, policy-embedded misrecognition necessitating policy reform, and associational misrecognition demanding changes in social associations. Remedies may take several forms: reducing excessive ascribed distinctiveness, recognizing previously under-acknowledged distinctiveness, or exposing how dominant groups' characteristics have been misrepresented as universal standards.

Extending this framework to children and music school education, addressing issues of recognition demands critical examination of the processes by which institutional arrangements and public officials conceptualize children's capacities, whether through deficit discourses that systematically devalue their potential contributions or through empowering frameworks that acknowledge and affirm their competencies. Research identifies teachers' deficit-oriented perceptions, characterized by low expectations, as persistent pedagogical challenges that constrain students' learning opportunities (Rainio & Hofmann, 2021). Empirical studies have demonstrated how educators' preconceived assumptions about student capabilities limit pedagogical innovation and restrict recognition of emergent competencies. As institutional gatekeepers, educators occupy pivotal positions in either facilitating or constraining children's opportunities to exercise agency within educational activities (Sairanen et al., 2022; Weckström et al., 2017), with professional attitudes fundamentally shaping children's capacity to function as collaborative partners in decision-making processes (Mitchell, 2022).

These contemporary manifestations of misrecognition in educational settings reflect deeper historical and theoretical constructions that have systematically shaped how children are positioned within democratic processes and policy frameworks. These theoretical insights raise critical questions about how recognition processes function within music education institutions and how these processes influence children's participatory capacity within these specialized educational contexts.

2.3.4. Prerequisites for Children's Entry into Democratic Processes

Research on educational policy demonstrates that throughout history, diverse and changing understandings of childhood have influenced the ways in which children have been discursively conceptualised and treated as subjects of policy, exemplified by utilitarian discourses that valued children primarily for their future potential rather than their present being (Power, 2022). Contemporary neoliberal and managerial thinking continue this pattern by transforming public education through institutional purposes and practices that reconstruct childhood discourse, producing learner subjectivities characterised by self-regulation and self-improvement (Bradbury, 2019). These neoliberal transformations of educational discourse present challenges for music education institutions seeking authentic student participation, as market-driven conceptualizations of learning and futurity-oriented valuations of children may fundamentally constrain the relational, collaborative approaches necessary for meaningful co-construction of educational policy and practice. Alongside the neoliberal frameworks, this study is informed by the recognition that educational barriers to children's participation are deeply rooted in broader societal assumptions about childhood and children's capabilities, which have been shaped by historical and theoretical frameworks that position children as inherently less competent than adults. Childhood scholars identify that problems related to children's status arise from ageist thinking that categorises and discriminates against children, considering them incapable of participating in matters concerning their lives due to age (James et al., 2015). Biesta (2010a) suggests examining the conditions of entry into democratic processes: the arguments used to exclude certain social groups from democratic participation. In Biesta's view, prerequisites such as rationality or reasonableness justify viewing children as unfit for democracy because they allegedly lack these basic qualities for participation.

This deficit-based understanding of children's capabilities reflects theoretical constructions of competence that have positioned childhood as a preparatory stage rather than a state of existing capability. Sociologists of childhood have demonstrated how the objectification of children and future-oriented

developmental thinking linked competence to adult "operational intelligence": something acquired through maturity rather than already possessed by children (Corsaro, 2005). Developmental psychology has maintained this conventional wisdom about childhood, informing both contemporary analytical thinking and everyday understandings of what constitutes a child and childhood (James et al., 2015). The institutionalization of stage theories in policy frameworks provided analytical tools for categorizing children according to relative competence, "normality", and "deviance". These developmental theories and models extended beyond child development to shape learning theories, pedagogical strategies, and broader understandings of intellectual and moral development through clearly identifiable, chronologically and hierarchically ordered stages. Patrick Ryan (2008) illustrates this with Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development model, which progresses from the "primitive and self-centred child" to the "autonomous, righteous, and subjectively reflective adult". Such developmental frameworks have been central to constructing the ideal of the intellectually, morally, and emotionally independent human subject, thereby reinforcing assumptions about children's inherent deficiencies relative to adult capabilities.

Since the 1990s, a growing body of scholarship has challenged these theoretical orthodoxies that shaped childhood understanding. Critical childhood scholars argued that developmental frameworks undermined children's rights by conceptualizing children as inherently voiceless and lacking the cognitive, emotional, and experiential competence necessary for decision-making about their own lives (James et al., 2015). This critique specifically targeted the dominant view of children as "not-yet" fully formed beings – a perspective shared by developmental psychology and traditional socialization theory. Childhood sociologists countered this deficit model by asserting that children are "human beings" rather than "human becomings" (Qvortrup, 1994, p. 4), possessing all capacities necessary for the exercise of rights. They argued that conceptualizing children through future potential rather than present reality – what they termed children's "lack of ontology" – positioned childhood as "pre-social" rather than fully social. This theoretical positioning had profound political implications: by excluding children from full social recognition, these frameworks denied them the preconditions for political participation, complete social status, and citizenship (Wyness et al., 2004). The new sociology of childhood thus revealed how seemingly neutral developmental theories functioned to justify children's systematic exclusion from democratic processes and decision-making structures. The emergence of sociology of childhood, also referred to as the new social studies of childhood, represented a fundamental shift in understanding children and childhood. This scholarly movement, which developed as a reaction to dominant deficit-oriented views, not only drew attention to the social invisibility

and marginalization of children but also reconceptualized childhood itself as a social construction (Corsaro, 2005; James et al., 2015). By demonstrating that children in different cultures did not follow universal developmental patterns, these scholars revealed how childhood meanings are fundamentally shaped by diverse social, cultural, political, institutional, and economic contexts that vary across time and place. This evidence supported their argument that "child" and "childhood" should be understood as political and socio-cultural constructions rather than natural phenomena (Ryan, 2008).

Regarding children's participation, these critical perspectives proved crucial in exposing how essentialized conceptualizations of "the child" – measured against normative developmental standards through age-based, sequential stages presented as natural and inevitable – created restrictive expectations about appropriate forms of participation. By challenging the assumed universality of childhood conceptualizations, scholars highlighted the historical specificity of these constructions and revealed how childhood discourses had embodied particular ideas about who children are and can be, as well as how they should and could live their lives, thereby naturalizing specific ways of thinking and establishing discursive parameters for understanding, managing, and administering children and young people (Smith, 2015; Wyn, 2015). This study draws upon these critical insights to examine the ways in which participatory expectations may be constructed within music school contexts. Recognizing childhood, youth, and adulthood as fluid, contextually defined categories that are defined and given meaning by their situated social, cultural, political, institutional, governmental, and economic contexts opens possibilities for reimagining children's participatory capacity and democratic potential.

2.4. Ecological Agency in Music Education

This section presents the theoretical framing of the concept of agency constructed as a way of bridging and diffracting (Barad, 2007, 2011; Mazzei, 2014) individual and policy perspectives in the context of music school education. The concept of agency, the ability of individuals to act and contribute to their environment, is recognized as one of the key concepts in childhood studies (Esser et al., 2016). While children's agency is a much-debated concept with different theoretical frameworks, agency is also seen as a boundary concept between historically divergent disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and education (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017; see also Prout, 2005). By drawing attention to political processes and policy agendas that have not previously focused on children as a distinct group that can contribute to shaping their social worlds, the concept of agency

connects childhood studies to other theoretical debates in the social sciences, particularly around questions of the action-structure dichotomies (James & James, 2008).

As comprehensive reviews of the debate on the concept of agency in childhood studies exist (Esser et al., 2016), including discussions of the potential of the concept and its limitations (p. 5) as well as critical reviews of the challenges of empirical studies on children's agency (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017), this discussion will not reiterate this literature. Rather than aiming to arrive at a permanent and singular concept of agency, this section illustrates how a lens has been constructed to examine the potentials for students' agency within the context of music school education, and how readings of the different conceptualisations of agency serve as a way to bridge and diffract (Barad, 2007, 2011; Mazzei, 2014) individual and policy perspectives. While children's agency has mainly been discussed from a sociological perspective, this present investigation employs a multidisciplinary reading of the concept of agency that draws on different theoretical traditions, including cultural-historical activity theory (Edwards, 2017, 2023; Engeström et al., 2022), sociology (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and childhood studies (e.g., Prout, 2005). To extend these theorisations to the context of education, this framework further draws on the theorisation of Manja Klemenčič (2015, 2017, 2021), who, drawing on social cognition theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001) and sociological theories of human agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), has theoretically advanced the understanding of student agency in the context of higher education. For an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement, this analysis draws upon the work of Biesta and Michael Tedder (2007) and their ecological theory of agency.

Building on these theoretical starting points, the following sections outline the relational and contextual approach to agency that underpins this study's analytical framework.

2.4.1. A Relational and Contextual Approach to Agency

This investigation adopts a relational and contextualised ecological view of agency that positions children's agency as situated, embedded in social, cultural, economic, and material contexts, thus making agency not a property of the individual but rather something grounded in situational relationships. While the capacity to act is seen as a general human property, in Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological theory of agency, agency is conceptualized as an achievement within ecological conditions through an individual's engagement in particular temporal-relational contexts of action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In this framework, actors operate through an environment rather than simply in an environment, with

the achievement of agency always resulting from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors in unique situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

This relational understanding of agency aligns with this study's framework of inclusion, which emphasizes that meaningful agency and inclusion require both material and non-material resources, supportive structures, and participatory opportunities developed through connections to immediate social groups and broader civic engagement (Isola et al., 2017). Within this framework, individual intention and capacity for purposeful agency develop through the dynamic interactions between external opportunities and internal capabilities.

This context-dependent, relational, and distributed conception views agency not as an essential property of the actor, but rather as something that emerges within specific contexts and through relationships, continuously taking shape and evolving during the action itself (Barad, 2007). Traditional individual attributes such as autonomy and intentionality are reconceptualized as relational qualities developing through interactions with others (Cooren, 2020; McLaughlin, 2020). Children's participatory capacity is therefore understood within frameworks of social interdependence rather than individual autonomy, shaped by cultural, social, and economic contexts (Abebe, 2019; Esser, 2016).

Given that agency is relational and contextual and develops through relationships and is shaped by specific circumstances, rather than existing as a fixed personal quality, evaluating someone's capacity for agency requires examining the particular context in which they are situated. The educational context can be seen as a unique space where individual agency develops through engagement with diverse social relationships and institutional structures. However, as Engeström et al. (2022) point out, given that theories of agency are often borrowed from psychology and sociology, truly educational theories of agency are rare; in other words, theories that not only classify and measure dimensions of agency, but also enable us to understand how its formation can be pedagogically facilitated. Building on this relational foundation, cultural-historical activity theory provides a more specific framework for understanding how agency emerges through historically situated practices.

2.4.2. Agency as Emergent and Historically Situated

From cultural-historical activity theory perspectives, agentic actions cannot be dissociated from the historical and history-making activities in which they are embedded, making agency contingent on socially developed and socially available tools (Hopwood, 2023). Although agency is often depicted as a conceptually slippery and analytically challenging construct, activity theorists

claim that it is the ahistorical, individualistic, disembodied, and immaterial epistemological frameworks through which it is understood that generate such elusiveness (Hopwood & Sannino, 2023). Instead, agency becomes comprehensible through examining relational dynamics between people and environments at the convergence of individual and social realms (Hopwood, 2023). Within this framework, individuals are viewed as agentic beings who interpret and respond to demands in practices with actions shaped by their agentic orientations (Edwards, 2020).

This understanding leads to a more specific conceptualization of the characteristics of agency. Cultural-historical activity theory emphasizes that agency involves intentional, motivated actions with impact (Edwards, 2023). From the activity theoretical standpoint, agency is not directionless (Hopwood, 2023), or something that emerges without individual will and contributions (Engeström et al., 2022). For children, this suggests their actions are shaped by experiences across settings and by how current environments support and respond to their intentions. Motives represent an essential motif of agency as a matter of responsibility to self and others (Edwards, 2020). Since motives extend beyond individuals and actions have social consequences (Engeström & Sannino, 2021; Hopwood & Sannino, 2023), children's agency in music education must be understood within broader social contexts and responsibilities.

2.4.3. Students' Agentic Possibilities and Agentic Orientations

Manja Klemenčič's (2015, 2017, 2021) theorization of student agency offers an integrated, yet non-deterministic, framework incorporating agentic possibilities (power, resources) and agentic orientations (will, efficacy beliefs). While Klemenčič's theorisation is contextualised within the context of higher education, this framework offers analytical utility for music school contexts where agency is similarly resourced, constrained, and limited by contextual factors. By considering that student agency is built on agentic possibilities and agentic orientations, Klemenčič (2021) suggests that in order to strengthen student agency and actorhood it is necessary to strengthen students' agentic possibilities, that is, students' effective opportunities and positive freedoms to do and be what they have reason to value as students. In drawing attention to the kinds of resources necessary for the enactment of agency, Klemenčič considers that organisations have structures, rules, and procedures that provide students with more or less agentic possibilities for active participation in learning processes or in shaping learning environments. Institutions also house ideas, beliefs, and values that influence students' beliefs and behaviours, including their sense of agency and efficacy as participants in learning processes and institutional governance.

Student agency is therefore not automatic, even when students have the opportunity to enact agency. Students' will to enact agency is an essential precondition for it. Thus, in addition to students' agentic possibilities, Klemenčič also draws attention to students' agentic orientations, which are students' internal responses to external conditions. In addition to students' will or motivation to perform acts of agency, these agentic orientations include, for example, students' predispositions (e.g., habits of mind, see also Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and students' efficacy beliefs (see also Bandura, 1986, 2001); these encompass students' assessment of and belief in their abilities to perform the behaviours necessary to bring about a desired outcome, for example, some degree of control over their own functioning as learners and their learning environments that affect their lives as students.

According to Klemenčič (2021), students' agentic orientations are developed in the context of multiple demands, such as school and family responsibilities and personal relationships. Building on this, students are likely to be 'agentic', that is, they are likely to seek to exert some influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives, and their immediate and wider social environments. In Klemenčič's theorising, similar to that of Biesta and Tedder (2007), Klemenčič draws on the work of Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998), who add a temporal dimension to the analysis of agency, presenting a view of agency as a:

temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect) but also oriented to the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and to the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment) (p. 963).

The concepts of agentic possibility and orientation are thus not only as intrinsically relational and social, situated in socio-economic-political contexts of action, but also as temporally embedded, meaning that they are shaped by considerations of past habits of mind and action, current judgments of action alternatives, and projections of the future (Klemenčič, 2015). Agency, when viewed as a dynamic interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, thus suggests that individuals' ability to learn from their past habits guides their future projections and directs their present actions to achieve their aspirations or goals. Furthermore, individuals have different agentic orientations linked to changing temporal orientations towards the past, present, and future, as well as their evolving sense of agency, and conceptions of agentic possibility within specific contexts.

An individual's agency is motivated in some way to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past. This is encapsulated in the projective element of agency, which involves the imaginative generation by agents of possible future courses of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to agents' hopes, fears, and desires for the future. However, as emphasised by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), it is important to avoid the impression that only a transformative orientation is "agentic", or that "agency" should be equated with "new" and "non-agency" with "old" (see also Varpanen et al., 2022). These views are shared by Florian Esser (2016), who claims that while children's agency is often explored from their marginalised social position towards structures established by adults by setting children in opposition to adult society, agency is rather relational and socially produced, never developing in opposition to social relations, but always within them (p. 49).

3. Children's Perspectives in Music Education Research

The iterative process of reviewing and mapping the literature on the issues related to this study has gone through many stages. I have returned to the review process throughout the different stages of this project. Initially, I drew on the understanding of Adrian Holliday (2016), who suggests that assessing current thinking, questioning established knowledge, and sorting out positions, ideologies, and discourses of knowledge provide a foundation for the topic and lead to the researcher being able to establish their position in the form of a conceptual framework. Adopting the approaches of integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore, 2007), which allowed the use of a wide range of publications with multiple search strategies, the review of previous literature was extended to include the national reports and evaluations of the Finnish music school system, as I experienced that these documents could also potentially provide information on children's perspectives. Thus, the two main bodies of literature for this review were both the research literature as well as the policy documents, reports, and national evaluations of the Basic Arts Education system. It is acknowledged that this mapping remains partial, and has limitations given the vast amount of music education research available for review. The section is divided into six subsections, in which I review how children's perspectives have been sought in music education research (Subsections 1–4) and instrumental music education research (Subsection 5), as well as in Finnish music school research and external evaluations of Finnish music schools (Subsection 6).

3.1. Expanding the Psychological Paradigm of Child Development in Music Education

Prior to the latter half of the twentieth century, developmental paradigms rooted in physiological, psychological, and cognitive frameworks constituted the predominant theoretical model for childhood studies. Children remained largely peripheral to academic inquiry until the late 1990s, with research predominantly focusing on adults' perspectives and interpretations of childhood experiences (James & Prout, 1990). From the mid-1990s, however, educational research began to place greater emphasis on listening to children and research methods that sought to access children's perspectives, including children's experiences of education (Kellett, 2010). This growing interest across disciplines in exploring children's own experiences and understandings of various issues in their lives was stimulated by developments in the sociology of childhood, which drew attention to children as social agents and co-constructors of their social worlds. The changing conceptualisations of children as social actors, as capable and responsive individuals, and the views put forward by the emergence of the "new social studies of childhood" (James & Prout, 1990), together with the discourse on children's rights, legitimised children's participation in matters affecting their own lives and the value and importance of research that captured children's views and perspectives. While there have been claims that some of the arguments made by child sociologists were misleading, such as the claim that the theoretical assumptions of developmental psychologists did not take into account children's capacity for social action (e.g., Sommer et al., 2010), the problems with developmental psychologists' attempts to discover universal regularities in child development have continued to provoke critical discussion among child studies scholars (Murriss et al., 2020; Taylor, 2013). Sociologists of childhood, for example, have criticised developmental psychology for focusing on children's cognitive development and for tending to see children as objects rather than subjects (James & Prout, 1990).

The dominance of developmental psychology as a framework for understanding children and childhood is also evident in music education research, where a significant proportion of research has been conducted within a developmental psychology framework (e.g., Hallam et al., 2009). In mapping the research literature for this review, it was evident that music psychology continued to have a strong foothold within music education research into the 2020s. The most recent contributions in music psychology include perspectives related to the function of music in society, including the potential for lifelong effects of musical engagement and the wider cognitive and well-being benefits of music engagement (e.g., Creech et al., 2021).

According to North American music educator Lori Custodero (2024), music education research has often focused on the examination of skill development. At the same time, this research has neglected to consider what music means to children. The application of universal truths about the processes of learning to sing or play an instrument has supported educational practices that tend to "fix" the child (p. 2). At the turn of the millennium, a growing number of music educators began to point out that research into the interpretation of children's insights in the context of their musical behaviour was extremely limited. Among others, Panos Kanellopoulos (1999) pointed out that there was a significant gap in the knowledge of children's conceptions of their various musical practices, with only few researchers having paid particular attention to what children said about these practices, with the aim of interpreting children's points of view. Kanellopoulos identified Helmut Moog's (1976) doctoral research as one of the few studies that aimed to explore the experiences of the pre-school child. Kanellopoulos' observation was echoed by Pamela Burnard (1999), who claimed that children's understanding of their musical experiences was one of the least studied and misunderstood areas of music psychology.

Responding to this gap in research about children's perspectives of the arts, and to the corresponding absence of children's voices in policy development, Margaret Barrett and Heather Smigiel (2003, 2007; see also Barrett et al., 2012) conducted a large-scale study at the beginning of the 2000s that intervened in Australian arts policy development to ensure children's perspectives were included, challenging the practice of developing policy without consulting those it directly affects. The 2-year study investigated the meaning, value, and participation in the arts of 570 Australian children aged between 5 and 18 years in school and youth arts settings. In addition to highlighting the importance of listening to the voices of those impacted by music education policy, the study also developed research methods and techniques sensitive to children's ways of communicating and constructing meaning.

Suggesting that music educators needed to recognise the authority of children in negotiating the boundaries of their musical worlds (Barrett, 2003), the growing discussion in the early 2000s not only pointed to the need for music education to adopt the perspective of the learner's experience (Westerlund, 2002, 2008), but also drew attention to whether the needs, preferences and experiences that students brought with them should have a greater presence in the music classroom (Barrett, 2005; Folkestad, 2006; Green, 2001, 2008). Among others, Patricia Shehan Campbell (1998, 2010) argued for the inclusion of music that was meaningful to children in consultation with children themselves, followed by Eve Harwood and Kathryn Marsh (2012), who suggested that the provision of music-making contexts in which children exercise control over musical processes and

products was crucial. In their view, children should be given control over some of the repertoire and content to be learned. According to Campbell and Trevor Wiggins (2012), it was only since the twenty-first century that there had been a significant increase in interest in the study of children's musical cultures in anthropology and ethnomusicology. As Campbell and Wiggins argued, a sustained tradition of child-focused research had yet to be established in these disciplines, where the representation of children's experiences from the perspective of children themselves was still a new approach (see also Emberly, 2012). Drawing on the work of childhood sociologists Allison James and Adrian James (2008), Campbell and Wiggins (2012) noted that anthropologists had historically refrained from studying children's worlds, based on the view that children were incompetent and unimportant because they were in the gradual process of becoming competent adults.

The absence of children's perspectives was also noted within the context of creative practices, for example by Barrett (2006), who pointed out the paucity of knowledge regarding the role of musical composition and creative experiences in children's lives, an observation also previously made by Burnard (1999), who asserted that while there had been considerable research into adults' understandings of improvisation and composition, no research had been directly conducted into children's thinking about or experiences of improvising and composing. In addition to Kanellopoulos (1999), Barrett (2003), and Burnard (2002), who have sought to understand children's thinking about their experiences of improvising and composing, children's spontaneous music making has been studied by Campbell (1998, 2010) and Custodero, Claudia Calì and Adriana Diaz-Donoso (2016).

Some research, such as the work of Kathryn Marsh (2008), has focused on investigating children's musical play in the spaces between formalised school activities, such as playgrounds and waiting rooms, to understand how children transmit playground repertoires and learning practices associated with popular and vernacular music making (see also Harwood & Marsh, 2012). In addition, Chee-Hoo Lum and Marsh (2012) have explored the changes in children's musical worlds brought about by globalisation, migration, and the media. With regard to instrumental playing, there are notable gaps in the existing research literature: a significant proportion of research on children's creative activity has focused on their singing rather than their instrumental activities (Barrett & Tafuri, 2012). For instance, Burnard's (2002) study investigated children's musical actions with percussion instruments in the classroom environment, as opposed to the instruments that the children themselves were playing at the time the study was conducted.

3.2. From Universal Models to Sociocultural Contextualizing of Children's Musical Learning

In early childhood music education research, Amanda Niland and Patricia A. St. John (2016) have noted a shift in the 1990s towards a gradual but significant broadening of understanding of young children's musical lives, from a focus on children's musical development as primarily the responsibility of trained music educators to a more holistic, socially and culturally situated conceptualisation of young children's musicality and musical learning. Sensitivity to socio-cultural contexts enabled researchers to focus on childhood in both its global and culturally specific entities, for example by drawing attention to the characteristics and commonalities of children's music making and musical play in different parts of the world (e.g., Lew & Campbell, 2005), the role of music in different societies, and how children acquire musical knowledge in these diverse settings (Campbell, 2006).

While much music education research has been conducted to understand the uniformity of musical learning in order to formulate cross-cultural conceptions of children's musical development, researchers have also challenged the idea of the universality of learning processes, such as the idea that creativity develops in age-related stages (Burnard, 2006). For instance, in early childhood music education research, Susan Young (2016) noted a move away from attempts “to identify and define normative models of musical development that can be applied universally to all children, to a view that recognises that children develop in individually nuanced ways” (p. 12). This view, with its recognition that children's musical actions and experiences are embedded in, influenced by, and contingent upon the socio-cultural environment, motivated, in Young's view, an expansion of research into a variety of contexts of children's music making, to explore not only the resources available to them but also how the values, expectations, and aspirations of the adults and culture surrounding them frame their lived experiences. At the same time as questions were being raised about what could be considered legitimate music learning and who the stakeholders in the process were, researchers began to look beyond the classroom walls to gain insights into how children learn music outside of school, broadening the focus from the preponderance of research examining the child in an adult-created environment, to outside the classroom, into/towards more contextualised explorations of children's musical lives and undirected peer group practices.

Through her analysis of how children incorporate and modify elements from adult musical practices and popular media within their own created songs, Barrett (2003) has drawn attention to a view of children as active agents in the construction of their musical worlds, which is also supported by childhood

sociologists' notions of children's culture as an emergent property of their active engagement with their worlds (James et al., 2015). According to Barrett (2003, 2006), children's manifestations of musical enculturation through technology and live participation are evident in their musical expression: children sing and vocalise the songs and melodies to which they have been personally exposed in creative ways (see also Glover, 2000). Findings from Barrett's (2009, 2011, 2012) research suggest that children draw on a wide range of resources in their early song making and that the music they manifest is part of the sonic fabric of their home and peer cultures. William A. Corsaro (2000) advanced a comparable argument, proposing that children are active agents who internalise the structures of (adult) worlds and reproduce them in novel ways. Children's immersion in their sonic environment thus shapes their musical expressions (Barrett, 2006; Campbell & Lum, 2007), in addition to learning from peers and relying on mediated performance models, mainly from popular music (e.g., Harwood & Marsh, 2012).

According to Marsh and Young (2012), a feature of musical play that cuts across different cultural and social groups is its multimodal element, with children's musical play often combining kinaesthetic, auditory, and visual elements. An additional cross-cultural element pertains to the communicative and social interactional function of musical play. In the study by Barrett and Johannella Tafuri (2012), young children showed strong musical preferences in both listening and performing. Moreover, the practice of creative music-making through invented songs and music-making seemed to be a ubiquitous part of early childhood cultures. This perspective was further supported by the findings of Custodero, Cali and Diaz-Donos (2016), who emphasised the widespread presence of self-initiated music-making in childhood. The pervasiveness of music in the lives of children and young people has been identified in a number of studies (e.g., Campbell et al., 2007, Capponi-Savolainen, 2025; Tuovila, 2003). For instance, Campbell (2011) suggests that children begin their musical explorations within the nuclear culture of their families (see also Trevarthen & Malloch, 2012). While children are born into the musical worlds of their home, family, and neighbourhood, these musical influences grow to include extended family, family friends, and multiple subcultures and interculturalities (Campbell, 2002).

3.3. Growing interest in Examining the Role and Purpose of Music Making in Children's Lives

In addition to broadening the lens to consider the social and cultural contexts of music making, studies of children within music education research have investigated the purposes of children's engagement in music making and the meaning and value of music in children's lives. Much of this research outside the classroom has focused on children's creative music making, with studies of, for example, children's interests and purposes in engaging in invented song and music making (e.g., Barrett, 2006; Barrett & Tafuri, 2012), children's views of their own musical creations (Kanellopoulos, 1999), and children's conceptions of group improvisation (Burnard, 2002). This scholarship has established an understanding that young children's creative music-making serves a range of purposes for children, from establishing reciprocity in the infant-caregiver relationship or providing a means for taunting and teasing in the playground (Bjørkvold, 1989), to establishing social bonds and communicating emotional states (Campbell, 1998), and testing out different ways of being in the world and engaging in identity work (Barrett, 2011).

Researchers in the field of music education have proposed that young children's song-making is unique and serves different functions to adult song-making (e.g., Custodero et al., 2016; Young, 2016). Children's singing has not been identified as having a single, universal meaning (Capponi-Savolainen, 2025). An important feature of children's and families' use of music has been noted to be the way in which parents and children use song making as a means of regulating behaviour and communicating with each other (Barrett, 2009, 2011, 2012). Parents make up songs to encourage their children to complete tasks such as putting away toys or brushing their teeth, and children also make up songs as a means of shaping their own and others' behaviour (Barrett, 2006).

In their ethnographic research, Marsh (2008) and Campbell (2010) brought children's voices and the meanings of musical experiences in their everyday lives to the fore. Marsh's (2008) fieldwork in urban and rural school playgrounds around the world has provided unique insights into children's musical playground activities across a wide range of social and cultural contexts. Campbell's (2010) groundbreaking ethnographic study reflected on how children aged 4–11 years made music intentionally and purposefully as a means of making sense of and communicating their understandings of their world. Campbell observed how music met children's needs for entertainment and enjoyment, aesthetic pleasure, emotional release, expression of thought (see also Bjørkvold, 1989), as well as providing a means to accompany and structure movement and imaginative play,

socialisation and integration of societal norms and expectations, validation of religious rituals, and maintenance of cultural continuity and stability – with Campbell's observations drawing on the work of Alan P. Merriam (1964). By providing a rich description of how and for what purposes young children engage in music making, Campbell's (2010) study also shed light on how children's engagement with vernacular music through mediated sources (e.g., television, radio, internet) provided them with a source of repertoire to learn through repeated listening, viewing, and imitation of the sources. This musical engagement was also a means of establishing contact and social ties (see also Bjørkvold, 1989) and cultural connections with local, global, and virtual communities, and a means of forming an identity (or multiple identities). The topic of musical identities, that is, music as a means of communicating identity, has previously been extensively explored by Raymond A.R. MacDonald et al. (2017), who explored the topic of music as a powerful channel through which people develop their personal and social identities, in other words, define themselves as belonging to a particular group and distinguish their group from other groups (see also North et al., 2000).

Custodero (2006, 2011, 2024) has explored the multiple meanings of the functions of music in human life, suggesting a variety of entry points to musical experiences. According to Custodero (2011), young children's engagement in making music, their spontaneous movements and vocalisations, and their sensitivity to their sonic environment, imitating/participating in and transforming the sounds and musical materials they encounter, suggest a convergence of self and music. Furthermore, according to Custodero, this convergence of self is meaningful when it finds "resonance in the community" (p. 372), a view previously supported by Glover (2000), who suggested that children found purposes for composing that reflected both their inner sense of the possibilities of music and the ways in which music was expressively and functionally woven into community life. According to Barrett (2009), children's invented song-making provides narrative structures within which children explore, perform, and enact multiple ways of being. The role of song-making is also important in the development of children's sense of self, as well as in the development of their understanding of their relationship to the world in which they live (Barrett & Tafuri, 2012). Relational views on children's singing have also been advanced by Analia Capponi-Savolainen (2025), whose doctoral study contributed to a more complex, spatial, and ecological understanding of children's singing in the context of school.

Among the studies that have investigated the purposes of children's involvement in music making, a number of studies have also sought to understand the meaning and impact of music education in the lives of adolescents. For

example, a questionnaire study by Adrian C. North et al. (2000) investigated why young people listen to and perform music. When presented with a list of twelve potential motivations for musical engagement through listening or performance²⁵, the adolescents in North and colleagues' study stated that music allowed them to project an image to the outside world while satisfying their emotional needs. Other reasons included the enjoyment of music and the way in which music allowed young people to be creative, to relieve boredom or tension, and to get through difficult times.

3.4. Bridging Approaches from Informal to Formal Learning

In the early 2000s, drawing on various strands of scholarship from the 1990s, educational researchers began to reconsider the place of informal, out-of-school learning experiences in the curriculum, suggesting the importance of pedagogy that would enable the use of out-of-school, non-formal, and informal learning and their respective bodies of knowledge, attitudes, values, customs, and social practices as shared resources in the formal classroom (Kumpulainen et al., 2010). The aim of this development in education was to increase students' ownership and agency in education, as well as their motivation and participation in school; these aims were also articulated by music educators who began to develop pedagogical strategies informed by musical engagement and activities in out-of-school settings. What was referred to as informal learning pedagogy referred to pedagogical approaches that built on strategies found in practices outside formal settings (Folkestad, 2006; Green, 2001, 2008; Karlsen & Väkevä, 2012). These approaches sought to provide students with a sense of recognition and to acknowledge students' musical interests and experiences in order to address their lack of engagement with (school) music and to compensate for limitations in the content or methodology of the formal curriculum.

The attempts to build bridges between different learning contexts meant more than considering children's perspectives; they were also attempts to draw implications for how children's music making in out-of-school contexts could inform music practices in the formal classroom (e.g., Custodero et al., 2016; Folkestad, 2006; Harwood & Marsh, 2012; Marsh, 2012). This research stream suggests that the discussion of what was considered important in music learning

²⁵ The list included the following potential motivations for musical engagement: to enjoy the music, to be creative, to relieve boredom, to help get through difficult times, to be trendy, to relieve tension, to create an image of oneself, to express emotions, to please parents/teachers/friends, and to reduce loneliness.

and teaching in the classroom could be framed by considering forms of music learning outside the classroom (e.g., Marsh, 2012). As several authors, including Glover (2000), have pointed out that, if the music that children made outside of school is ignored, it becomes a separate musical life (see also Tuovila, 2003).

One of the approaches that sought to create an interface between informal and formal learning contexts, and which eventually inspired the approach also adopted in this study's student projects, was the approach developed by Lucy Green (2002, 2008), who explored how music education in the United Kingdom could draw on the informal learning practices of popular musicians. In that model, Green (2008) proposed five principles as the core of instructional design: 1) learning begins with the pieces the learners choose for themselves, 2) skills develop through copying recordings by ear, 3) learning takes place alone and in friendship groups, through self-directed, peer-directed, and group learning, 4) skills and knowledge can develop in a serendipitous way, and 5) learning integrates listening, performing, improvising, and composing throughout the process. Green suggested that during this process the teacher should step back from the more traditional teaching role, with musical learning expected to take place with moderate teacher involvement. By giving the children more opportunities to explore their preferred music in the context of their peer group, and by giving them a choice about how to approach their learning, for example to approach musical learning through listening and aural imitation rather than from notation, the approach was expected to generate high levels of motivation and engagement, and to enable the students to influence and control the content and pace of their own learning. In addition, the approach would allow students to gradually become aware of other musical genres outside their own experience.

While Green's model promoted learning through a variety of means, and was accurate in acknowledging that many musicians in the popular music field had acquired high levels of performance skill through means other than the formal classroom; yet, in terms of developing skills on a musical instrument, it has been criticised for failing to consider that this type of self-training requires a great deal of personal motivation on the part of the student (Webb & Seddon, 2012). The model has further been criticised for failing to consider the role that idolisation plays in the acquisition of skills by self-taught folk musicians (Gatien, 2009). Researchers have pointed out that self-teaching not only requires high levels of self-motivation and self-regulation but is also more appropriate for some instruments than others, suggesting that combinations of methods might be most effective depending on the specific instrument being taught (Hallam, 2012). There is also a need to acknowledge that teachers often provide role models to increase student motivation (Hallam, 2002; Price, 2005).

As Michael Webb and Frederick A. Seddon (2012) point out, although there are excellent demonstrations on the internet (e.g., YouTube) of how to play a range of instruments, and instruments can be learned by watching and taking advice from other players, by modelling practice on recordings and video clips, and by trial and error, the majority of learners require a teacher-facilitator who is able to respond to the learner's preferred learning style and provide support and advice on how to get started in order to make informed choices. Several studies have suggested a synthesis of formal, non-formal, and informal pedagogies in popular music learning (Karlsen & Väkevä, 2012; Ng, 2020; Westerlund, 2006b), with musicians preferring a structured approach to education before moving on to a more "freer" pedagogy (Hess, 2020). Studies have also focused on the integration of informal learning principles into one-to-one music lessons (McPhail, 2013), instrumental music education (Davis, 2012) and higher education (Feichas, 2010). Overall, while much of researchers' interest in music education has been directed towards the potential implications of informal learning associated with the genre of popular music for formal music education (Folkestad, 2006; Green, 2001; Karlsen & Väkevä, 2012), studies have also included investigations of improvisation as an informal music education process (Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010) and the integration of music that is meaningful to children - more generally music that is "popular" with children - into the school curriculum (Davis, 2013).

In many countries, research on informal learning in the context of popular music has also sought to explore the factors that might enable the success and effectiveness of popular music programmes in public schools (Ng, 2020). In countries such as Finland and Sweden, where popular music has been a functioning aspect of public school music education since the 1980s (Karlsen & Väkevä, 2012), a number of scholars have also highlighted the problems associated with an openly formulated, decentralised curriculum and the model's inability to keep up with the rapidly changing pop repertoire, in which, for example, the proportion of acoustic instruments is declining (e.g., Georgii-Hemming & Westvall, 2010). In Australia, Harwood and Marsh (2012) found many links between children's musical play and adult musicians' learning in informal contexts. While Green's research focused on the learning practices of self-taught adult folk musicians and applied them to music education, a number of researchers have also explored how children's music making in out-of-school contexts might have implications for curriculum design and teaching practice (e.g., Barrett & Veblen, 2012; Campbell & Wiggins, 2012; Lum & Marsh, 2012; Marsh, 2012).

In the view of Gary Spruce (2015), the main strategies used by teachers to engage students in the school music curriculum have tended to focus on

increasing the diversity of musical styles and traditions in the curriculum, particularly the greater inclusion of popular music. However, as Glover (2000) has pointed out, assumptions about students' background in popular music may be as misguided as the notion that they have no experience at all. The repertoire derived from children's home and community experiences and the cultural environment in which they grew up is likely to be complex in terms of the variety of musical styles and influences encountered, whether in the immediate home environment or through the media and beyond.

As suggested by a number of scholars (e.g., Barrett, 2011; Campbell & Wiggins, 2012), an integral part of the development of new pedagogies would be the recognition of the skills and knowledge that children bring to the classroom, recognising not only the ways in which children and young people learn and the kinds of musical experiences that children have in informal settings, but also the social dimensions of learning and the ways in which learning is constructed through a variety of media. However, as Custodero (2024) has argued, the application of findings from earlier music education research on the meaning of children's musical experiences, or the role of music as a catalyst for individual agency, has not been easily imagined in music education. In her view, music education research has tended to focus on deficits rather than on the dispositional strengths of children's musical behaviour.

The necessity to consider children's perspectives has been emphasised, particularly within the context of music education in public schools, where a decline in children's interest in school music education has been observed (e.g., Economidou Stavrou et al., 2020; Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021). This research on the need to consider students' perspectives in music curriculum development and implementation (see also Economidou Stavrou, 2024; Griffin, 2009) has suggested that exploring students' aspirations for their music education, as well as their preferences for different aspects of music teaching and learning, could play a key role in developing school music education to ensure students' interest, enthusiasm, and active participation. Students' views of their music lessons in secondary school have been explored by, for example, Economidou Stavrou et al. (2020), who collected data from nine European countries with 750 participating students with regards to their music education in schools. The findings of the study posited that students' aspirations for music included being involved in a variety of activities: playing instruments, singing, listening to music, composing, learning theory of music, dance, movement, and playing games. Playing musical instruments was a preference across the nine European countries. One of the most common wishes among students was to be able to learn to play several instruments and collaborative music making and performing with friends. Two characteristics of the music learning content which were expressed by the

students were contemporary music genres and a variety of musical repertoire. Overall, music education research studies in student voice have illustrated how students can have valuable ideas to contribute to the music curriculum dialogue (Economidou Stavrou et al., 2020; Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021).

In congruence with the broader paradigm of research in music education, instrumental music education research demonstrates the dominance of developmental psychology as a framework for understanding musical development, as much of the research in instrumental music education has been conducted from an individual cognitive perspective. Music psychology research in relation to instrumental music education has focused on issues such as performance, motivation to practice, the development of musical expertise, and the psychological and physiological aspects of instrumental playing (e.g., Hallam & Bautista, 2018; Hallam et al., 2009). Other areas of research have included investigations into topics such as the development of musicianship (e.g., Forrester & Borthwick-Hunter, 2015), musical prodigies (McPherson, 2016) and musical performance, musical giftedness, and talent development (McPherson, 2022).

Much of the research in music cognition and psychological development has examined the development of musical competence from a temporal perspective, outlining the developmental process in relation to the child's changing environment from the foetal stage through the later stages of infancy and childhood to that of the school-age child (e.g., Deliège & Sloboda, 1996; McPherson & Welch, 2018). The application of an information-processing cognitive approach to musical behaviour has also contributed to theoretical models with particular reference to childhood and musical development, including stage-theoretical conceptualisations of development as well as age-based models outlining the stages/phases/modes of musical development. Many previous studies related to children's instrumental learning share the goal of identifying commonalities or patterns in children's learning (Després & Dubé, 2020). Several music education researchers have explored the universal aspects of instrumental learning processes (e.g., Hallam & Bautista, 2018). Whilst the field of developmental psychology has historically focused on the development of individual skills and knowledge, rather than on the sensitivity to context and personal motivation that develops within the wider ecology, there have been recent calls for more ecological approaches to musical development (e.g., Hargreaves & Lamont, 2017).

Overall, the mapping of research for this review revealed that much of the research on instrumental learning has focused on investigating skill development (e.g., Lehmann et al., 2007; McPherson, 2005; Nielsen, 1999), practice (e.g. Jorgensen & Hallam, 2009; McPherson & Renwick, 2001), the role of practice in the development of performing musicians (Sloboda et al., 1996), the quantity and

quality of musical practice as predictors of performance quality (Williamon & Valentine, 2000), the development of memorisation strategies (Hallam, 1997a), and metacognition in musicians (Hallam, 2001a). Previous research also includes studies on music reading (Bautista et al., 2009; Sloboda, 1984), the influence of different learning programmes on learning outcomes (McPherson et al., 2012), the influence of the learning environment on why some students spend many hours practising musical instruments (O'Neill, 1999a), as well as investigations into what factors predict the level of expertise attained, quality of performance, and future musical aspirations of young instrumentalists (Hallam, 2013), how practice changes from novice to professional (Hallam, 1997b), and how much individual practice is required to become a professional (Hallam & Bautista, 2018).

In identifying the ways in which children's perspectives have been sought, it is observable that the emphasis on music psychology as a frame of reference has directed research to seek children's perspectives with a specific focus on the development of their individual skills and knowledge. In instrumental music education, for example, children's and young people's perspectives have been sought in relation to their practice and practice strategies (Hallam et al., 2012), their motivation to learn an instrument, how they see themselves in terms of their ability as a musician (O'Neill, 1999b), and their competence beliefs about how good they think they are or think they will be at instrumental music (Eccles et al., 2005). Studies have also investigated student pianists' self-efficacy beliefs prior to performance examinations (McPherson & McCormick, 1998), the ways in which children's expectancy and value beliefs influence their practice (McPherson, 2000), the role of children's self-perceptions in the development of performance skills (O'Neill & McPherson, 2002), and the motivational and social factors that influence children's decisions to continue or discontinue playing a musical instrument during the transition from primary to secondary school (O'Neill, 2005). Studies also include investigations of piano students' conceptions of learning and teaching (Bautista et al., 2012), piano students' conceptions of musical scores as external representations (Bautista et al., 2009), and students' conceptions of the process of learning a piece of music (Marín et al., 2014).

Research in instrumental music education also includes research on professionals and aspiring professionals and their motivation and training, professional musicians' practice orientations (Hallam, 1995), professional musicians' pathways to musicianship (Smilde, 2009), as well as research on the so-called "able", talented musicians (e.g., Sloboda & Howe, 1992), and the development of expertise in young musicians (Hallam, 2001b). Research on motivation has also been active into the 2010s and beyond (e.g., Comeau, 2019; Lee & Leung, 2020; O'Neill & McPherson, 2002; Woody, 2021), including in the

context of school music education (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010). Previous research in instrumental learning has also focused on psychological processes involved in acquiring musical knowledge as well as autonomy in musical learning (e.g., López-Íñiguez & Pozo, 2014a) and the ways in which students' conceptions of instrumental teaching correspond to their teachers' profiles (López-Íñiguez & Pozo, 2014b).

Research that has examined instrumental teaching and learning as constructed within particular institutional cultures, such as the conservatoire or a music school, remains at the margins of the research literature, while the few studies in Europe that have examined the institutional context of the conservatoire suggest that its hierarchical organisation has far-reaching implications for students (Kingsbury, 2010; Perkins, 2013; Väkevã et al., 2017, 2022). Helena Gaunt's (2008, 2010) studies in the UK have shed light on one-to-one teaching, which, according to Gaunt et al. (2021), has received relatively little attention in the research literature (see, however, Pozo et al., 2022). Interpersonal behaviour between teachers and students during one-to-one instrumental lessons has been explored, for example by Andrea Creech (2012), but most research on one-to-one tuition has focused on examining the context of higher education (e.g., Burwell et al., 2019; Carey et al., 2017). Within the large body of research literature on instrumental learning, the focus has mainly been on Western musical traditions and formal, rather than informal, extracurricular musical contexts of instrumental learning (e.g., McPherson, 2006). More recent research on the development of musicians in both informal and formal learning contexts has emerged in the 2010s (e.g., Rink et al., 2017).

Overall, research focusing specifically on young people's own accounts of their experiences of learning an instrument within a specific local context, such as a conservatoire or a music school, is limited. As argued by Young and Beatriz Ilari (2019), research on young children's musical activities remains marginal within the music education academic hierarchy. Existing research on students' own experiences of instrumental learning has been primarily conducted in higher music education contexts, where several researchers have focused on students' perceptions of conservatory learning (e.g., Gaunt, 2010) or students' reflections and ideas about music learning more broadly (Carey et al., 2017; López-Íñiguez & Burnard, 2022; Nielsen, 2012; Reid, 2001). In the context of school music education, there are some studies that have sought students' perspectives in instrumental music education, such as the study by Geoffrey M. Lowe (2012), who sought to find ways to improve retention rates in elective instrumental programmes by interviewing 12–13-year-old students about their experiences of learning a musical instrument. Studies of children's responses to orchestral models, such as variations of the El Sistema model and a formalised approach to

students' instrumental learning, include, for example, the study by Mark Rimmel (2018), who examined children's reflections on the value of their participation in El Sistema.

3.5. Identifying Children's Perspectives in Finnish Music School Research and Governmental Evaluations

In the Finnish music school context, several doctoral studies have focused on exploring the perspectives of music school students. Among the first were Erja Kosonen's (2001) doctoral dissertation, which focused on examining adolescent piano players' meanings and motives for playing an instrument, and Annu Tuovila's (2003) dissertation on music school students' experiences of studying music. The findings of Kosonen's (2001) study showed that the most important meanings and motives for playing for the participants in the study were rooted in music: experiences resulting from the music played and the different kinds of emotions and feelings of mastery that the student received from playing. The young players interviewed in Kosonen's study mostly wanted to play their own choice of classical and popular music, while they were not always able to play the music they were interested in during music lessons. Kosonen also showed that one part of music-making for the participating students was often left out of the formal music-making in the classroom, namely accompanying playing with singing, which the students often did at home. In terms of motivation, it was crucial whether the goals were personally relevant to guide the musical action, or whether they were merely the execution of modelled instructions according to externally imposed standards.

Tuovila's (2003) dissertation sought ways to develop the teaching in music schools in Finland so that children would find their music studies rewarding and could learn music on their own terms. Tuovila's study demonstrated that the music of formal lessons was only part of the music-making that the children in the study spontaneously initiated outside the classroom. While the children's informal music-making included elements of improvisation and composing their own material, the children in the study integrated the musical know-how of formal music lessons into this spontaneous, aural music-making, provided that the guidance received was rated as positively significant and useful for independent music-making. In the children's music making, listening, singing, playing, and dancing merged into holistic, improvised musical activities and musical games. Based on her research findings, Tuovila proposed that meaningful musical learning for children and young people would encompass collaborative learning experiences, incorporate multidisciplinary approaches, occur through interactions

with diverse groups of people, and include exploration of various instruments, musical genres, and ways of making music.

As part of his doctoral research, also conducted in the early 2000s, Kimmo Lehtonen (2004) interviewed a group of music therapy students with music school backgrounds who had dropped out of their studies at Finnish music schools. A recurring theme in the students' stories was their experience of an obligation to play and the demands of parents and teachers who did not take the students' own interests into account. Success in studies was seen by the students as an opportunity, but also as a threat, as it increased demands and caused sacrifice and loneliness in the students' experience. What Lehtonen described as the "screening apparatus" (p. 61) that held expectations for students led to the constant screening and prioritisation of certain students, which also affected students' relationships with their peers. According to Lehtonen, the expectations for the students were not school specific, but there were instrumental differences in the requirements.

Heidi Elmgren's (2020) doctoral research extended Lehtonen's findings regarding hierarchical structures within music education. She identified that music schools' performance-based exclusion from concerts, along with longer lessons and special attention for those considered better or more talented, were justified by a meritocratic logic that the best should be rewarded and given the most opportunities and incentives to progress. In practice, this resulted in the exclusion of certain students from learning opportunities, thereby preventing them from accessing the same educational experiences as their institutionally recognized peers. According to Elmgren, recognition barriers in music schools affected not only students who were overlooked or belittled, but also students recognised as talented and promising, where students as individuals were no longer foregrounded, but rather their musical potential. Elmgren (2019, 2021) further argued that meritocratic logic in music education created self-fulfilling prophecies that systematically reduced learning opportunities for certain students. Such policies, which evaluated children solely through their musical abilities and potential for academic success, led to student instrumentalization and excluded them from meaningful participation in decisions about their own educational experiences. Meritocratic selection further created hierarchies based on perceived aptitude differentials, necessitating competitive evaluations that risked generating self-fulfilling prophecies constraining individual development. Even high-achieving students faced problematic circumstances, with talent designation functioning as instrumentalization rather than empowerment. At worst, students considered talented may be expected to dedicate their lives to music simply because they are talented, transforming talent from a source of enjoyment into an external obligation that potentially diminishes intrinsic motivation and personal agency in musical development.

While these studies revealed the broader systemic issues within Finnish music school education, other research conducted within the context of Finnish music schools has examined the interpersonal dynamics occurring specifically within classroom settings. The doctoral study by Tapani Heikinheimo (2009) investigated the intensity of interaction in instrumental music teaching with students aged between 4 and 24 years. Heikinheimo's experimental study design involved the participation of both teachers and students. Anna Kuoppamäki (2015) investigated gendered boundary work in the basics of music classes in a music school. Other scholars have focused on more targeted pedagogical challenges: Johanna Hasu's (2017) study focused on students' learning difficulties in piano playing, and Soile Tikka's (2017) study on instrumental teachers' ways of supporting students' learning motivation. Katariina Virtanen's (2022) doctoral thesis investigated student engagement through the collaborative use of mobile devices in the subject of music perception (the subject being primarily music theory/solfège).

It is worth noting that overall, studies conducted within the music school context are limited. Research not specifically involving children and young people as participants includes doctoral dissertations on expert performers and musicians (Maijala, 2003), piano students' identity construction (Hirvonen, 2003), and pianists transitioning to instrumental teaching (Huhtanen, 2004). Studies focusing on instrumental teachers' perspectives include Ulla-Britta Broman-Kananen's (2005) exploration of teachers' experiences during the music school transition period and Cecilia Björk's (2016) examination of teachers' aspirations and challenges in developing professional practice. Institutional perspectives are represented in Marja Heimonen's (2002) study of state regulation of music schools and Jukka Kuha's (2017) historical investigation of Finnish music schools (1882–1969) and the establishment of institutional art schools in Finland and Europe. In the 2020s, doctoral studies began addressing broader equity questions in music schools. Tuulikki Laes (2017) examined ableism and democratic inclusion through activist music education, while Sanna Kivijärvi (2021) investigated educational equity and discrimination, particularly concerning students with disabilities.

Outside of doctoral studies, little research has been conducted on the operational culture of Finnish music schools or the pedagogical aspects of music school education. In his publication on music school pedagogy, Mikko Anttila (2004) took a critical stance towards the music school teaching tradition, focusing on the discrepancy between music school training and students' interest in music. Among his criticisms, Anttila identified problems with the music school's evaluation system and the subject of music theory, as well as the compulsory nature of certain studies, such as orchestra and choir activities, which he believed

reduced students' interest (see also Lehtonen, 2004). According to Anttila, the fact that music school studies consisted only of what was assessed in instrumental examinations left little time for chamber music, since the focus was on solo repertoire for examinations (see also Kosonen, 2001). Anttila also found it problematic that instrumental studies could only be individualised in the case of disability or illness (or a similar reason, see, FNAE, 2002). According to Anttila, music school education was monocultural, narrow, and one-sided, which also resulted from the tradition of teacher education, in which the competence of teachers was often reduced to only one music genre.

Addressing this gap in comprehensive research in arts education, the research project ArtsEqual (2015–2021) provided the first large-scale investigation of equality in Finnish arts and arts education services (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021; Väkevä et al., 2017, 2022; Westerlund, 2021). The research identified five major inequality mechanisms divided into internal and external categories. According to the research, within the arts system itself, three mechanisms perpetuate inequality: distancing, exclusion, and hierarchisation. Distancing occurs through an elitist meritocracy that focuses on identifying "talent" and directs resources primarily to those who already possess cultural capital and actively seek arts services, widening the gap between arts professionals and the general population. Exclusion manifests through "ableism", which defines a "normal" participant as having fine-tuned senses, ideal body type, and precise motor skills, systematically excluding people with disabilities, older adults, those with special needs, and anyone deviating from this narrow ideal. Hierarchisation places control of artistic content and quality definitions in the hands of arts professionals who make decisions on behalf of end users, with the current funding system emphasizing uniqueness and tradition while neglecting accessibility and democratic participation. The two external mechanisms that contribute to inequality are the economic gain mechanism and institutional separation. The economic gain mechanism evaluates arts increasingly by measurable economic and social benefits rather than as a fundamental right, leading to short-term project funding for marginalized groups rather than sustainable core operations. Institutional separation systematically excludes people in hospitals, care homes, and prisons from arts services due to sector isolation and narrow institutional missions that prioritize physical needs over cultural rights.

These mechanisms of distancing, exclusion, and hierarchisation are particularly evident in Basic Education in the arts, where exclusionary practices manifest through varying admission procedures, tuition fees, merit-based hierarchies within institutions, and pedagogical approaches that favour traditional Western music notation and gifted students (Juntunen, 2021). The research revealed that while arts education is officially open to all, practical barriers

prevent equitable access, with exclusion occurring not only through admission restrictions but also through pedagogical arrangements and institutional cultures that fail to recognize diverse needs and backgrounds. Understanding these inequality mechanisms requires attention to the perspectives of service users more broadly, including both current participants and those excluded from arts education services. However, research directly centring the experiences of service users has been limited.

Overall, in its attempt to identify student perspectives in Finnish music school research, this study concurs with previous observations that the experiences of music school students have been understudied (Elmgren, 2021). Among the materials reviewed for this study, the survey of students' experiences of their music school studies conducted by the Centre for Cultural Policy Research for the Finnish Association of Music Schools and the Conservatory Association of Finland (Kanerva et al., 2023) was one of the few surveys that directly included students' perspectives (see, however, Holopainen, 2010; Sandström, 2023; Vismanen & Räisänen, 2017). This survey, which examined music school study paths, was conducted in 2021–2022 and also included a survey of students' experiences of their music studies (Kanerva et al., 2023). A total of 747 music students responded to the survey on their experiences of studying music, of whom 431 were following the advanced syllabus, 111 were following the general curriculum, and 205 had dropped out of music school in 2021–2022. While the survey was aimed at students studying according to the specialised curriculum studies (*syventävät opinnot*, the English translation by the FNAE, 2017c), the age range of the respondents was from 6 to over 25 years old. When asked what the students liked about their studies, three of the most highlighted aspects in the students' responses (advanced syllabus) were: having a good and encouraging teacher (24%), making music together (25%), and developing and learning new things (19%). Other aspects included the opportunity to influence the choice of repertoire and the flexibility of the studies. The most disliked aspect of the studies was the music theory/solfège classes, something that has also come up in previous evaluations of music schools (e.g., Heino & Ojala, 2006). Other responses included the stressful nature of the studies, the time pressure experienced, and the excessive goal-orientation (Kanerva et al., 2023). The need to offer students options and alternative learning paths within the advanced syllabus was also identified in the national evaluation (Tiainen et al., 2012).

In 2024, two further student surveys on Basic Arts Education were conducted that highlighted students' experiences of their studies: one by the Ministry of Education and Culture as part of the work to reform the legislation on Basic Arts Education (Karjalainen, 2024), and the other by the Finnish Basic Art Education Association (Pärssinen & Seirala, 2024). Both surveys highlighted the positive

experiences of students with Basic Education in the Arts. When asked about the positive and most motivating aspects of participating in Basic Education in the Arts, more than half (52%) of the respondents in a survey of Basic Education in the Arts students identified social interaction as the most important thing about participating in Basic Education in the Arts (Karjalainen, 2024). Other external evaluations of the music schools reviewed for this study were primarily informed by the insights of music school rectors, with contributions also being received from other relevant authorities, including the national evaluations conducted by the Finnish National Agency for Education (Heino & Ojala, 1999, 2006; Koramo, 2009; Luoma, 2020), the evaluations conducted by municipalities (Ekman, 2023; Leskinen, 2020; Partanen et al., 2022; Salmenoja, 2018; Vismanen et al., 2016), and the national evaluation of Basic Education in the Arts by the Evaluation Council, where the material used for the evaluation included a survey of rectors and teachers as well as visits to arts institutions (Tiainen et al., 2012).

Among the research projects consulted for this review was the Toive (wish) research project (2008–2011), coordinated by the Sibelius Academy, which collected the perceptions and views of music industry professionals, including the rectors of music schools, conservatories, and polytechnics in order to predict changes in the music industry's operating environment and competence needs (for the publications of the Toive research project, e.g., Muukkonen et al., 2011; Pohjannoro & Pesonen, 2009; Pohjannoro, 2010a, 2010b; Tolvanen & Pesonen, 2010). While the Toive project provided little information about the perspectives of music school students, the rectors' responses indirectly highlighted several aspects related to the students' studies and the rectors' future perspectives. Areas of development included teachers' pedagogical competence and interaction skills, as well as their skills in free accompaniment, improvisation, and teaching versatility in general (Pohjannoro & Pesonen, 2009). Compared to the situation in the 1990s, rectors reported that instrumental group lessons had increased, but most of the group activities still took place before the study of the advanced syllabus (Muukkonen et al., 2011).

It is worth acknowledging that, overall, there are few national evaluations of the operational culture and pedagogy of the Basic Education in the Arts system. Although the vast majority of Finnish music schools have been operating since the 1960s, and even before, an evaluation of the operational culture of music school activities has only been conducted twice: as part of the Finnish National Agency for Education's evaluation of Basic Education in the Arts in 1999 (Heino & Ojala, 1999), and as part of the Evaluation Council's national evaluation of the Basic Education in the Arts system in 2012 (Tiainen et al., 2012). Prior to this, for example, the evaluation by Marika Koramo (2009), as part of similar evaluations by the Finnish National Agency for Education in 1999, 2006, and 2020, mainly

asked for basic quantitative information about the organisation of Basic Arts Education.

In the most recent evaluation (Luoma, 2020), the institutions identified three key challenges for the development of Basic Arts Education in the near future: funding, teaching facilities, and student recruitment. Notably, student recruitment had also been raised as a concern in local evaluations. This concern reflects broader trends in children's and young people's leisure time. Artistic hobbies are increasingly competing with other activities such as sports and social media use (Vismanen & Räisänen, 2017). A decline in instrumental playing has also been observed in national statistics: the popularity of instrumental playing has decreased in Finland in recent decades (Hanifi & Huomo, 2020). In the 2022 school survey, 26% of the children and young people who participated in the survey expressed an interest in playing an instrument (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

Among the reasons identified for music students dropping out of their studies have been their schedules and the more demanding requirements of other hobbies, which may result in students having to give up their music hobby (Vismanen & Räisänen, 2017). The national evaluations of Basic Arts Education identified various dropout reasons ranging from general factors to music-specific issues (Heino & Ojala, 2006). These included lack of interest and motivation, school, lack of time, and moving to another municipality. Within the music school context, additional factors were the dominant youth culture not supporting traditional studies; friends and puberty; financial reasons; compulsory study obligations and examinations; the content of the studies not corresponding to the students' expectations; the lack of prerequisites for continuous studies; the lack of prerequisites for completing the extensive curriculum; the lack of willingness to participate in the teaching of general subjects or the basics of music, and the general social atmosphere that orients young people towards hobbies other than music.

As part of a commission from the City of Vantaa in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, Leena Marsio (2013) has studied the forms of governance of music schools and highlights that feedback and customer satisfaction surveys and meetings with parents are among the forms of evaluation used by the Basic Arts Education organisations, although these often reach only a small number of participants. With a few exceptions, such as parents organising events and trips through parents' associations, the organisations participating in Marsio's study considered the level of parent involvement within the institutions to be low. Most often, education providers reported that parents contacted them when they felt they had something to complain about. As part of her research, Marsio also used a survey of parents, which was sent out to over 800 parents and received 238 responses. In

their responses, the parents hoped for more interaction between the educational institutions and the students' homes, for example, more communication about the lessons and their aims, the child's progress, and performances/exhibitions.

Since the beginning of 2003, attention has been paid to seeking students' perspectives as part of the self-evaluation of music schools, as music schools are obliged to evaluate their activities and their effectiveness and to participate in external evaluation of their activities (Amendment 37/2003 to the Act on Basic Education in the Arts 633/1998). However, according to the national evaluation in 2012, although there were some encouraging indications that self-evaluation of activities had been carried out regularly in some music schools, about a quarter of the respondents had not participated in any evaluation within a three-year period leading up to the national evaluation in 2012 (Tiainen et al., 2012). The evaluation concluded that this was a large number, given that the music schools' evaluation obligation is based on legislation. Overall, the evaluation concluded that the field of Basic Arts Education had not yet properly adopted assessment as a practical tool for development; educational institutions collected evaluation information in the name of self-evaluation, but an evaluative and developmental approach based on the collected information was not yet common.

In 2012, the Virvatuli self-evaluation model was developed by the Finnish Basic Art Education Association to facilitate the statutory self-evaluation of Basic Art Education institutions, including music schools (Seirala, 2012). The aim of the Virvatuli model was to find the most important criteria from the perspective of the educational institutions as a basis for assessment (Marsio, 2014). In order to support the work of the organisations in self-evaluation, the criteria for quality evaluation were established based on the national curriculum and research literature (Koivisto-Nieminen & Holopainen, 2011). The Ministry of Education and Culture also emphasised that children's voices needed to be taken into account in the development of the assessment model (Holopainen, 2010). For the development of the assessment model, 217 Basic Arts Education students participated in the Virvatuli questionnaire survey, of which 39 participants were music school students. According to this survey, among the five most important factors in studying for the Basic Education in the Arts students were: 1) to have meaningful experiences and experiences of joy and success, 2) to have a good atmosphere in class and at school, 3) to receive skilled teaching, 4) to learn knowledge and skills, and 5) to receive feedback and encouragement from the teacher (Holopainen, 2010). The background work for the Virvatuli model also included consulting the findings of the 2009 Youth Barometer, which assessed the participation and experiences of 15–29 year olds with arts and culture (Myllyniemi, 2009), as well as the findings of the Finnish Youth Research

Society's research project (Myrsky-nuorisohanke 2008–2011), which investigated the arts experiences of 13–17 year olds (Kotilainen et al., 2011).

According to the evaluation report by the Association of the Basic Education in the Arts (Marsio, 2014), the experience of organisations with the Virvatuli model was mixed. By the end of 2013, only a third of the arts organisations had carried out the evaluation. Marsio's report identified some of the challenges: despite interest in the project, Virvatuli was sometimes overshadowed by other work. The institutions' responses indicated that the work of self-evaluation was seen as new for the teaching staff. In some cases, teachers were alienated from the idea of evaluating their own work. Involving hourly paid teachers in the evaluation work was seen as a challenge, as some teachers saw this type of work as meaningless. The response rate to the student and parent feedback surveys was low. Vismanen et al. (2016) found that by 2016 only 40% of Basic Education in the Arts institutions in the Helsinki metropolitan area had carried out the Virvatuli self-assessment. In total 72% of the participating institutions in the study used other self-assessment methods, such as student-teacher discussions, student-to-student discussions, study diaries, and other evaluation forms. Teacher self-evaluation also took the form of feedback and development discussions. Several educational organisations reported that they would be open to development work if they had the financial resources to do so.

3.6. Summary

In this literature review, I have used the approach of an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore, 2007), which made it possible to use a wide selection of publications with multiple search strategies to identify children's perspectives in music education and Finnish music school research. The two main bodies of literature for this review were the research literature as well as the policy documents, reports, and national evaluations of the Basic Arts Education system. Overall, the review confirmed previous reports that the existing knowledge base for Basic Education in the Arts is weak (e.g., Kangas & Kivistö, 2011; Seirala, 2012). In attempting to identify students' perspectives in the Finnish context, the review identified that the student survey conducted in 2021–2022 as part of Kanerva and colleagues' (2023) study of music school study paths, was the most comprehensive survey conducted in the Finnish music school context that also included music school students' (N=747) perspectives. The other two surveys had considerably smaller student participation: Kaisa Holopainen's (2010) survey included 39 music school students, while the City of Vantaa evaluation had only

8% participation from students and/or their parents in Basic Arts Education (Vismanen & Räisänen, 2017).

The observations presented in this review are consistent with the findings of previous evaluations, which indicate that the consultation of children and young people regarding their participation in public services is not particularly extensive. This can be attributed to several factors, including the absence of effective systems for obtaining children's perspectives. According to the evaluation of Basic Public Services in 2015, for example, 38% of the municipalities in Southern Finland that responded to the 2015 evaluation did not have a system for consulting children and young people (Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, 2015). The 2017 evaluation of the Basic Public Services revealed that although the situation had improved over the ten-year period, young people had not been able to influence the planning, implementation, and monitoring of various services in their municipalities, as required by law (Regional State Administrative Agency, 2017). In the preparatory work for the National Child Strategy, it was presented that many local public service providers lack effective systems for obtaining and responding to feedback from children (Ministry of Justice, 2020). In particular, there appeared to be a gap in the participation of young children, as existing representative structures have continued to be primarily geared towards adolescents, with almost no structures suitable for younger children (p. 14). While there are legally mandated children's and youth councils and parliaments through which children can address governments at school, local, regional, and national levels, student councils are not legally mandated in music schools, unlike in Basic Education, where student councils became mandatory in 2014. At the time of this study, the legislation on student councils (1267/2013) had not been extended to Basic Education in the Arts. Overall, however, the limited participation of children may not be considered surprising given the overall limited participation of stakeholders in, for example, consultation processes within cultural services. Despite the existence of statistics on the overall participation in the provision of arts and cultural services, there have been no substantive reviews of how cultural services are perceived by their stakeholders. Instead, these reviews have thus far been subordinated to statistical reviews of the accessibility of services.

In attempting to identify children's perspectives in music education research, this review concludes that by the 2020s there is only a small body of literature on student voices in music education research (see, however, Després & Dubé, 2020; Economidou Stavrou, 2024; Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021; Finney & Harrison, 2010; Spruce, 2015; Volbikienė & Bubnys, 2020). Rather than presenting holistic, socially and culturally situated conceptualisations of children's musicality and musical learning and their experiences of making music,

this review identified a significant focus within music education research on different aspects of children's skill development. This review concurs with the findings of previous research (e.g., Custodero, 2024) that these attempts to discover universal regularities in musical development have overshadowed attempts to identify what music means to children. Overall, research conducted in the context of music schools remains at the margins of music education research (see, however, Hahn et al., 2024; Hahn & Hofecker, 2019; Hofecker & Hahn, 2018). Given the large amount of music education research available for the review, it is acknowledged that this mapping remains partial and has limitations. These limitations include, for example, not including research literature on music schools beyond publications in English or Finnish, which would have expanded the available research literature on music schools as they are situated in the European music education context. In recent years, research on students' experiences in the context of Kulturskole has been carried out in the Nordic countries with, for example, research publications in Norwegian (e.g., Hauen et al., 2024).

4. Policy Driving Change: Mapping the Historical Layers of Public Policy in Finnish Music School Education

The layered nature of collective motives characterizes Finnish cultural policy, where new goals are deposited on existing policies, with previous periods' thinking continuing to influence current policy (Sokka et al., 2014). To advance understanding of music school students' agentic possibilities and how their perspectives could contribute to policy decisions, this analysis examines the history of music school activity through its developmental cycles (Engeström, 2007; Sannino & Engeström, 2017). Following the developmental research approach, this approach required tracing the music school object of activity in its temporal and socio-spatial trajectory to identify collective meanings and motives in its cultural-historical development (Engeström, 2000b). This policy review examines how students' learning trajectories have been constructed and what choices have been made available for student deliberation, identifying affordances and constraints for student agency within the broader policy framework. As children's participatory status is constructed through policy goals, examining their ability to influence decisions affecting their studies required investigating expectations and dependencies formed around children within music school education, given music schools' multiple societal tasks, including pre-professional education provision. The term "task" references education's specific imperatives and responsibilities beyond individual or institutional preferences (Biesta, 2019b; Väkevä et al., 2017).

To uncover the multi-layered nature of policy and trace historically accumulated contradictions, this analysis examines the music school governance system and the various policies, procedures, and documents associated with the governance system that support music school governance. I acknowledge the difficulty of identifying contradictions that are rarely clearly distinguishable (Sannino & Engeström, 2017). Available policy documents included the national core curricula, the national evaluations of the Basic Education in the Arts and the

music school system, individual activity reports from music schools, reports from government working groups, government proposals, statistics, and relevant dissertations. The review of the development of music schools is examined in parallel with the development of Basic Education in Finland, in so far as developments in the overall education system in Finland can be seen to have influenced the development of the music school system. The curriculum is examined as the official, government-planned document, recognizing other perspectives exist including implemented and experienced curricula (Kelly, 2009) and hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968).

For the purposes of this study, conducting this review required delimitating the whole in many ways. I am therefore aware of the challenges and the risk of making shortcuts in this process. One of the challenges of this review was the limited availability of research on music schools and Basic Art Education more broadly (Kangas & Kivistö, 2011; Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, 2014; Salmenoja, 2018; Seirala, 2012). National evaluations of operational culture and pedagogy have only been conducted twice (Heino & Ojala, 1999; Tiainen et al., 2012), with monitoring previously focused on quantitative implementation (Seirala, 2012).²⁶

4.1. Finnish Music Schools Drawing Upon the European Conservatory Tradition: Establishing the Premises for Preparative Professional Education

Public music schools in Europe have developed from different traditions (European Music School Union, 2010). Developments in the field of musical performance, including the unprecedented increase in concert and opera activities in the eighteenth century, necessitated the training of music professionals, leading to the emergence of a large European music school institution in the late

²⁶ From 1993 to 2002, the Association of Finnish Municipalities (Kuntaliitto) mainly monitored the quantitative implementation and development of Basic Arts Education (Seirala, 2012). An evaluation of the regional accessibility of Basic Art Education was carried out by the Regional State Administrative Agency in 2012 as part of the evaluation of basic services (Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, 2014). The knowledge base for the Basic Education in the Arts was strengthened in 2019–2023, when the Basic Education in the Arts was linked to several different processes of data collection, such as the Teachers and Principals in Finland data collection (Education Statistics Finland) and the Kulttuurin TEAviisari data collection conducted by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. In addition to these databases, separate reports on Basic Education in the Arts have been prepared on the funding structures of Basic Education in the Arts (Suominen, 2019) and on the progress towards the recognition of learning achieved in Basic Education in the Arts (Valajärvi, 2021).

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Kuha, 2017). These institutions were established during a period of economic expansion within prosperous industrial societies, functioning as centres of musical education designed to address the contemporary requirements of musicians in orchestras and theatres, as well as the needs of the church (Wright, 2005). The tradition of music schools preparing students for professional music careers is shared by a number of European countries and education systems (e.g., De Cicco, 2019; Sempere, 2019). In Italy, for example, the legal transformation of music schools from private to public meant that they became responsible for training future professionals (De Cicco, 2019). Finnish music schools are committed to providing long-term, high-quality musical education and align with objectives of their European counterparts (Björk, 2016).

In Finland, the premises of instrumental/vocal learning in music schools as preparative vocational training were defined in the 1960s, when funding was justified by the need to begin proper training for a future music professional in early childhood, similar to the justifications for the funding of music schools in other countries, such as the specialist music schools in England (Heimonen, 2002). Following the Second World War, Finland established music schools nationwide with the aim of elevating the overall standard of music education, ensuring educational continuity and consistency, and enhancing both the scope and quality of instruction through the training of high-quality music educators and professional musicians, particularly performers specializing in Western classical music (Björk, 2016). In addition to justifying state support in terms of the need for pre-professional training, the importance of establishing a network of music schools was emphasised in order to ensure that regional factors did not hinder the recruitment of talent (Heimonen, 2002). According to Heimonen (2002), by comparing different music education systems in the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Sweden, the Finnish Music Education Board concluded that the Hungarian system, with its systematic and carefully planned training, was ideal. The Finnish national network of music schools was established to form a coherent system together with upper secondary vocational education and polytechnics, as well as university level studies at the Sibelius Academy (Ministry of Education, 2002).

Some of the characteristics of the music schools and their development into a nationwide, standardised network system can be attributed to the Finnish educational ideals of accessibility and educational continuity, which became important in the post-war reconstruction of Finnish society. The Finnish model of education, based on the Nordic idea of equality, saw education, including music education, as a potential remedy for social and regional inequality (Heimonen, 2002). One of the central ideas of the Nordic welfare model was to provide equal educational opportunities regardless of gender, social class, and geographical

origin. The Finnish education system is therefore built on the premise of providing equal educational opportunities to all citizens (Vitikka et al., 2016). This educational continuity maintains that individuals, regardless of their family background, can always continue their studies at a higher level of education, with no dead ends, no matter what choices they make in between.

In the post-war public discussions and deliberations about expanding the music school network from its focus on the capital area, it was pointed out that the Helsinki area was privileged compared to rural areas in terms of receiving quality musical education (Kuha, 2017; Ritaluoto, 1996). Some of the concerns were related to the level of musical understanding in society (Kuha, 2017, p. 526). This thinking could be understood in relation to the principle of civilisation (the Finnish term *kansansivistysaate*), which emphasised the importance of educating large parts of the population to appreciate the art of European civilisation (Anttila & RensuJeff, 2009). The position of music schools was discussed at a congress on arts education in 1974, and it was agreed that it was not worthwhile providing financial support for overlapping activities (Heimonen, 2002). Even before the first law (147/68) on state support for music schools, folk high schools and workers' institutes had received state support. Since folk high schools and workers' institutes were mainly concerned with the recreational activities of adults, the justification was that they should provide targeted and vocational training for children and young people, with a special focus on classical music (Heimonen, 2002).

In addition to the recruitment of future music professionals, state support for the establishment of a nationwide network of music schools was also justified by the need to support students' opportunities to study music under the guidance of expert teachers. While the establishment of music schools throughout the country was part of an educational policy based on the principle of social and economic equality according to which children should be able to study music regardless of their background, since 1998 the legislation (633/1998) has allowed educational providers to carry out student selection in a similar way to public schools offering specialist education (e.g., music, sport). Although open departments without entrance examinations became possible in 1995, they were introduced with higher tuition fees (Heimonen 2002).

According to Heimonen (2002), the state intervention in the self-governed activities of Finnish music schools began mainly after the music schools were granted state financial support by the Act and Decree on State Grants for music schools (147/1968, 206/1968). Prior to this, the activities had been self-regulated, as the content and aims of the activities were defined by the music schools themselves. In Heimonen's view, Basic Education and Basic Arts Education in Finland have been subject to more detailed legislation than any other area of

education in other countries. The process of setting uniform national standards and objectives for instrumental music education began in the 1970s, when the number of Finnish music schools increased considerably. The justification and criteria for the distribution of public funds were carried out by state authorities and music schools, with the Finnish Association of Music Schools (Suomen musiikkioppilaitosten liitto, SML), the umbrella organisation for music schools, participating in the development of the criteria. Heimonen describes the funding as an instrument of state control, whereby the Board of Schools (currently the Finnish National Agency for Education) sent instructions on curricula and examinations to the music schools that had been granted state status. The music schools were to serve the needs of pre-professional music education and the general development of musical life as regional music centres. These guidelines were based on a proposal from the Finnish Association of Music Schools. Based upon this regulation, the funding of music schools was based on studies targeting vocational training.

4.2. Artistic Pursuits Governed by Public Administration

In examining the development of music school policy, it is worth acknowledging its development within the wider frame of cultural policy in Finland. Overall, the Finnish cultural policy model has been characterised by legal regulation and institutionalism (Saukkonen, 2014). Throughout the twentieth century, cultural policy has evolved from its nineteenth-century premises to promote the arts and to make them available to a wider part of society in the welfare state development project from the late 1960s onwards (Pirnes & Tiihonen, 2010). The social significance of the arts has been reflected in different ways in different eras, including emphases and hegemonic discourses that justify the pursuit of cultural policies at any given time, with overlaps from previous discourses (Kangas et al., 2018). From the early 19th century to the 1960s, art was particularly important for the emergence of the Finnish nation-state, the construction of Finland's image and Finnish national identity. Art was one of the state's instruments in its efforts to build up the population into a nation bound by a sense of togetherness (p. 11). In the following decades, in addition to the role of arts and culture as an instrument of nation-building, their importance as central services of the welfare society increased. Growing economic prosperity raised questions about the quality of life or the satisfaction of higher needs (Kangas, 1988). As society prospered, the public sector took on tasks that had been developed through the activities and initiatives of various organisations, which had increased the well-

being of citizens and enriched people's lives in many ways (Kangas et al., 2018). The right to enjoy the arts was to be made as equally accessible as possible to all.

As part of this development of the Nordic welfare state, one of the most important goals of Finnish cultural policy since the 1970s has been the availability and accessibility of cultural services to guarantee citizens the most equal provision of cultural services possible, regardless of social, economic, and regional differences (Kangas, 2017). The removal of barriers to accessing cultural activities emerged as a task of cultural policy, alongside the preservation of cultural heritage (Ahponen, 1994). The main goals of cultural policy in the 1970s were the democratisation of culture and cultural democracy. While the democratisation of culture meant the decentralisation of cultural activities and bringing cultural services within the reach of those who were not otherwise covered, cultural democracy emphasised people's activism, initiative, and their own perceptions of their needs and culture, and sought to activate people in defining and developing cultural activities (Kangas, 1988). Esa Pirnes and Arto Tiihonen (2010) portray this era as a change from an *sich*-thinking²⁷, that emphasised the autonomy of art, to a cultural policy that emphasised the arts as a way of life, opening up perspectives on the wider community experience of the arts as a meaningful way of life, as well as on the construction of identity politics, participation, and inclusion. This conception of cultural democracy at the regional level is represented in a practical way by the Act on the Cultural Activities of Municipalities and the so-called statutory state contribution for general cultural activities, which is paid based on population.

According to Heimonen (2002), the initial organisation of the cultural field at the local level was a precondition for the creation of a national system of arts education and cultural direction in the 1970s. Music schools were established where there was a local hobby presence and interest in developing music education (Heino & Ojala, 1999; Hirvonen, 2003). The first music schools in Finland were established and run on the initiative of private individuals or associations who were enthusiastic about music and music education (Heimonen, 2002). The emergence of music schools was thus linked to the emergence of local musical activities: some of the educational institutions were established in connection with an orchestra association, music club, or other similar organisation that was already active in the locality. Kuha (2017), who has examined the

²⁷"An *sich*" is a term from German philosophy meaning "in itself" or "in itself and for itself" referring to the true nature of objects as they exist independently of human observation or experience of them. In the arts context, its application as "art for art's sake" refers to the idea that art has intrinsic value independent of external purposes.

establishment of music schools in relation to the needs of local orchestras, describes how the projects to establish orchestral schools were also linked to the need to train local orchestral musicians in order to ensure the continuity of the local orchestra (p. 415). In addition to theatres and museums, a rather comprehensive network of orchestras was established in Finland at the beginning of the 20th century (Saukkonen, 2014). The impetus for the creation of these orchestras, theatres, museums, or music festivals usually came from regional actors and cultural activists, after which a local need for an institution was identified and the municipality or some other organisation tried to get involved in the project, in addition to eventually applying for and possibly receiving state support.

Despite the centrality of public administration in the Finnish cultural policy, Terhi Heino and Maija-Liisa Ojala (1999) have pointed out that the emergence of a network of music schools was not the result of systematic national planning. When the overall situation of the arts was examined in the 1990s, a similar observation was made: the system of arts education had developed without comprehensive guidance (Government proposal 211/1991, 1991). The development of music schools had been active: while in the post-war reconstruction period there were just over ten music schools in Finland (Ritaluoto, 1996), a few decades later there were 89 state-funded music schools (Heino & Ojala, 1999). The sharp increase in the number of music schools led to a severe shortage of instrumental teachers, which led to the recruitment of music teachers mainly from Russia and Hungary (Heimonen, 2002). As late as the 1980s, music schools reported the lack of teachers as an obstacle to the expansion of music school education (Seppälä, 2008). It is worth remembering that as late as 1970 almost 74% of the Finnish working age population had no post-primary education (Kalenius, 2014). In 1972, the Ministry of Education granted music schools permission to train music school teachers (Kuha, 2017, p. 624). A few years earlier, in 1968, a Decree on State Support for Music Schools (206/1968) had come into force in connection with the Act (147/68). The Decree defined the task of music schools as serving the need for pre-professional music education and the general development of musical life as regional music centres.

4.3. A Turn Towards Co-Governance in the 1990s Through Co-Operation Between National and Local Authorities

Finnish education governance has historically evolved from centralised governance to a mix of national and local decision-making authority, where the reorganisation of the relationship between central and local government has

included the adoption of diversified governance instruments (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2023). The development of Finnish music school policy has followed the development of Basic Education policy in Finland, with Finnish music schools adopting a similar governance structure to public schools in the 1990s: a National Core Curriculum that provides a general framework as a basis for local curriculum development. Finnish governance consists of a two-tier national administration in which the Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for education policy, the preparation of legislation, and state funding, and the Finnish National Agency for Education sets the National Core Curricula and qualification requirements and is responsible for the national development of the Finnish education system. The co-construction of public policy through collaborative governance is further supported using the tripartite concept in policymaking, which involves cooperation between the government and other societal interest groups, such as trade unions and employers' organisations, in the construction of education policy (Aho et al., 2006). In the Finnish education system, the National Core Curriculum plays a central role as an administrative steering document (Vitikka et al., 2016). The National Core Curriculum defines the national goals and key content of studies, as well as the general goals of education, and describes the mission, values, and structure of education, the concept of learning, and goals for developing the learning environment, school culture, and working methods. This gives the Core Curriculum a dual role within the Finnish governance system: on the one hand, it is an administrative governance document, and on the other a tool for teachers to develop their own pedagogical practice (p. 86).

As described in the previous section, the music activities that started locally became activities that were regulated by the central government (Heimonen, 2002; Hirvonen, 2003). The emphasis of the different steering instruments has varied throughout the history of Finnish educational governance. Legislation has shifted from the governance of separate educational institutions to education-specific governance. Prior to 1999 all forms of education had their own legislation, which led to the sectoralisation and fragmentation of legislation. In the legislative reform, eight laws replaced a total of 26 laws. In 1998 the previous 1992 Law on Basic Art Education and the 1995 Music School Act were merged into one new law, the Act (633/1998) on Basic Education in the Arts, after which the music schools have been part of the Basic Education in the Arts system, governed by the Act (633/1998) and Decree (813/1998) on Basic Education in the Arts. Excluding the latest music school curricular reform in 2017, music school legislation has followed with subsequent curriculum (Table 1).

Table 1*Music School Legislation and Curricula*

1968 Act on State Grants for Music Schools (147/1968), Decree (206/1968)
1970 a group letter to music schools: directions for curriculum and intermediate examinations (Board of Schools, 1970)
1977 Decree on State Grants for Music Schools (486/77)
1978 General letter. Model curriculum for music schools (Board of Schools, 1978)
1987 Act on Music Schools (402/1987), Decree (692/1987)
1988 Instruction. Curricula for general music schools and pre-professional music schools (Board of Schools, 1988)
1992 Act on Basic Education in the Arts (424/1992)
1995 Act on Music Schools (516/1995)
1995 National Core Curricula (FNAE, 1995)
1998 Act on Basic Education in the Arts (633/1998), Decree (813/1998)
2002 National Core Curricula (advanced syllabus) (FNAE, 2002)
2005 National Core Curricula (general syllabus) (FNAE, 2005)
2017 National Core Curricula (advanced and general syllabus) (FNAE, 2017a, 2017b)
2024 the reform of the Basic Education in the Arts legislation began

As argued by Aimo Ritaluoto (1996), Finnish public school regulations have over time increasingly influenced legislation, administration, and other issues related to music education and its organisation. The strengthening of local decision-making in Finland took place as part of the general process of decentralisation of central government that began in the 1980s and became a turning point from governing to governance in the 1990s (Kettunen et al., 2012; Nyholm et al., 2016). A major change in educational governance, both for music schools and for Basic Education, was the replacement of centralised national curricula with national core curricula. In this model, the local education provider is expected to develop and approve its own curriculum based on the National Core Curriculum regulations. In public schools, the curriculum renewal was seen as setting higher standards for all students and ending the practice of streaming, which had been common in public schools before 1985, a remnant from the time of two parallel education systems (Vitikka et al., 2016).

The processes of deregulation and decentralisation that began in the 1980s changed local policies and practices and gave more administrative power and responsibility to school principals and municipal decision-makers. According to Heimonen (2002), the transition gave music schools more freedom to determine the content of the education they offered (p. 201). Overall, the reform in the 1990s sought to make regulation more appropriate. The Government's proposal for the reform of legislation for the whole field of education (Government proposal 86/1997, 1997) stated that "Regulation must henceforth focus on matters that require national uniformity. Instead of ex ante control of the educational process, legislation should focus more on ensuring and evaluating the quality of education" (p. 7). Based on the new regulations, education administrators were allowed to decide more independently on their activities in accordance with national goals.

The transition in school governance in Finland between the 1970s and the 1990s has been characterized as a shift from a culture of control to a culture of trust (Miettinen, 2013). Through the decentralization of governance, the curriculum was no longer handed down to local authorities, allowing teachers to become involved in the development of their schools by being included in the local planning of curricula. Overall, the development in educational governance has been the opposite to many countries (e.g., the United States), and has included a shift from detailed testing and centralized supervision to regional systems in which highly trained teachers plan the curriculum based on national standards. The 1994 revision of the Basic Education curriculum gave local authorities a high degree of autonomy. Previously, all textbooks were inspected and school inspectors visited schools regularly, but these practices were abolished to give local authorities more autonomy. Similarly, the decentralisation of governance aimed to develop the music school system by increasing its autonomy. In its 1994 reform proposal (258/1994, 1994), the government stated:

The system includes nodes that limit the development of the performance of the institutions, the diversification of teaching and the development of educational institutions as cultural institutions in their area. ... The current procedure, in which the central agency approves the curricula, does not provide sufficient room for manoeuvre in the organization of teaching. When music schools do not have the same opportunities for experimental activities as other educational institutions, the music schools' own contribution to development will also be less than would be desirable. (p. 5, translation by the author)

The change into the system of a National Core Curriculum upon which local curricula were drawn was intended to support music schools' local development. Prior to the 1990s, the Board of Schools had issued a national curriculum for music schools, which allowed for less consultation with local education providers. As part of this centralised governance, the 1970, 1978, and 1988 music school curricula had to be submitted to the Board of Schools for approval. These curricula, drawn up in cooperation with the Finnish Association of Music Schools, included details such as the maximum number of students in group lessons (Board of Schools, 1970, p. 3) and the minimum duration of instrumental lessons in music schools receiving state funding (Board of Schools, 1978). The 1978 group letter of the Board of Schools to music schools included directions for the curriculum for different instruments/vocal, lesson time instructions and the division of studies (Table 2).

Table 2

The 1978 Group Letter from the Board of Schools to Music Schools on Curriculum

Piano

Study year	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Main instrument, preferably divided into two 30-minute lessons per week	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
Music theory-solfège Studies can be started before the age of 10				60	60	90			
General music course									90
Choir/accompaniment - chamber music				x	x	x	x	x	x
Examination			1/3			2/3			3/3
Age	7			10			13		16

Woodwinds, double bass, harp, guitar, accordion, vocal

Study year	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
Main instrument preferably divided into two 30-minute lessons per week	60	60	60	60	60	60
Piano Group tuition, after 1/3 examination, a 30-minute individual lesson					45	45
Music theory-solfège	60	60	90			
General music course						90
Choir/accompaniment-chamber music	x	x	x	x	x	x
Examination		1/3		2/3		3/3
Age	10		12		14	16

The 1988 National Music School Curriculum continued to define the required number of board members in examinations as well as the amount of rehearsed repertoire required to be able take part in the intermediate examinations (Board of Schools, 1988). The curriculum further instructed that the basic level studies at the music schools should be concluded in most of the instruments by the age of 16 and the advanced studies in four years. The 1988 curriculum also instructed that studies should be started as early as possible, as soon as the student has "the psychological and physical prerequisites to start the studies" (Board of Schools, 1988, Section 3.1). As a general rule, students above the age of 26 were not admitted to the adult department (p. 5). Moreover, the annual examinations were described as a way to monitor the students' progress (p. 4). In order to progress to the next level, the student had to achieve at least a "satisfactory" grade in the examination (p. 5). The Board of Schools emphasised that examination boards should try to use the entire grading scale in their assessment, so that the grades "satisfactory" and "excellent" appeared sufficiently often in the approved examinations. The aim of studies after the three basic courses was defined as preparation for professional studies (p. 6).

Heimonen (2002) argues that until the 1990s the "deluge of norms" was typical in the field of Finnish education, including music education (p. 223). When the curriculum reform was planned at the end of the 1990s, the decision-making of music schools was considered to be more limited than other providers

of arts education, such as liberal adult education, as stated in the government proposal (86/1997, 1997) for the reform of the entire field of education:

In music teaching and other Basic Art Education, teaching is based on curricula that are drawn up based on national curriculum criteria. This teaching thus differs from liberal adult education in that the decision-making power of the training providers is more limited. (p. 19, translation by the author)

Although the 1995 curriculum (FNAE, 1995) no longer specified the duration of lessons, it still stated that the weekly duration of lessons should be consistent with the achievement of the study objectives (p. 10). As part of the change to a National Core Curriculum, external evaluations were introduced in connection with the reform of education legislation, including in music education. The 1995 curriculum (FNAE, 1995) emphasised the importance of external and internal evaluation of the educational institution's activities as a prerequisite for the continuous development of its own curriculum and activities (p. 16). This development work was seen as requiring the active participation of everyone, including teachers, students, and other stakeholders from across the institution's community (p. 16). In 2012, the first internal assessment model, Virvatuli, was introduced, and as part of the Virvatuli evaluation framework for Basic Education in the Arts, evaluation criteria were developed on the initiative of the institutions (Koivisto-Nieminen & Holopainen, 2011). In 2024, a guide to the quality work of Basic Education in the Arts institutions was compiled to support and inspire the evaluation of the institutions' own activities and quality management (FNAE, 2024). Since 2021, the Ministry of Education and Culture, in cooperation with the Finnish National Agency for Education, has also been working on the Reference Architecture for Basic Arts Education, the purpose of which is to describe the target state of Basic Arts Education for the future (Kanerva et al., 2023).

The changes in educational governance were not straightforward: a balance between local and centrally managed school administration continued to be sought in the 21st century. The 2004 National Core Curriculum for Basic Education was more centralized, as it introduced national criteria for student assessment for the first time (Vitikka et al., 2016). However, the goals set in the Finnish National Core Curriculum are not considered to be typical standards, as the national criteria are not strictly seen as learning standards, but rather as tools for teachers to use in their grading (Vainikainen et al., 2017). According to the 2002 Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2002), music schools were also required to inform students about the assessment criteria (p. 12). However, in 2012 the national evaluation of the Basic Arts Education system (Tiainen et al., 2012) reported a

lack of assessment criteria in music schools' local practice of student assessment. The evaluation highlighted that in the National Core Curriculum, where assessment was poorly prescribed, the description of assessment objectives was limited and the development of assessment criteria was left to the educational institutions. A clearer standardisation of assessment was considered important in order to support the identification of what has been learnt, and thus to protect students' rights (Tiainen et al., 2012).

These governance changes reflect the broader evolution of student assessment practices, which have undergone multiple transformations in both purpose and implementation over several decades. Student assessment was originally instrumentalised to serve purposes beyond students' learning processes, such as institutional monitoring and quality control. For example, national regulations defined minimum acceptable grades for study continuation (Board of Schools, 1988), while assessment policies ensured uniformity of degrees across music schools, partly addressing concerns about the large number of unqualified teachers in the 1970s. While public schools removed relative assessment from national standards in 1985, music schools maintained relative assessment until 1995, with frameworks encouraging schools to distribute grades across the full scale (Board of Schools, 1988). These institutional control mechanisms extended to the assessment process itself: until the curricular reform in 2002, students' own instrumental teachers were excluded from participating in summative assessment (Board of Schools, 1988), reflecting concerns about objectivity and standardization. Assessment terminology also evolved significantly over the decades, progressing from "examination review" (*tutkintojen arvostelu*) (Board of Schools, 1988, p. 4) through "student review" (*oppilasarvostelu*) (FNAE, 1995, p. 12) to "student evaluation" (*oppilasarviointi*) (FNAE, 2002, p. 12). These changes culminated in the 2017 curriculum reform, which fundamentally redefined assessment's purpose as being "to guide pupils' learning, support their progress in the studies and develop their capability for self-assessment" (FNAE 2017c, p. 38). Paralleling these assessment reforms, the music school system also expanded its scope: while prior to 1995 the final stage of study was designed specifically as preparation for professional studies (Board of Schools, 1988, p. 6), after 1995 this stage was extended to all music school students, regardless of their professional aspirations.

4.4. The Introduction of the National Core Curriculum as a Means of Enabling and Managing Educational Change

The changes in governance introduced in the 1990s through decentralization and deregulation have sought to support the development of local education systems (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2023). As discussed earlier, as part of the governance system the National Core Curriculum is considered to play an important role in the Finnish system of school development as a means to enable and manage educational change (Vitikka et al., 2016). The Finnish curriculum is not only seen as a normative document, but also as a document that aims to guide and direct teachers' pedagogical solutions (Krokfors, 2017). The aim of the music school curriculum reform in 2017 was the development of the Basic Art Education pedagogy, operational culture, and student assessment (Hartikainen et al., 2017; Luoma, 2020). Pedagogical development was also considered one of the main goals of the 2017 curriculum renewal in Basic Education (Vitikka et al., 2016). From a historical perspective, the Finnish curriculum can be traced back to two different didactic schools, the "Lehrplan", or the so-called Herbart-approach, which was the subject oriented, German didactics, focused on content as the centre of teaching and learning; and, the North American school of thought, exemplified by John Dewey and his concept of curriculum as focused on broader goals in organising children's learning experiences (Vitikka et al., 2016). In subject-based curricula the basis for the goals and content comes from the discipline, which places a strong emphasis on learning and mastering the subject-specific content (p. 88). Increasingly, Finnish education policy is seen as drifting away from the more comprehensive German and Nordic tradition of education/didactic curriculum towards the narrower, competence and skills-oriented Anglo-American education and curriculum shaped by neoliberal policies (Autio et al., 2019).

Given the decentralized model of educational governance, the Nordic versions of the Bildung/Didactic curriculum have emphasized a high level of teacher training and the independent pedagogical solutions that this enables (Autio et al., 2019). In Pasi Sahlberg's (2015) view, the flexibility of the Finnish curriculum gives Finnish teachers a high degree of autonomy to recontextualise curriculum components into locally designed programmes. Cooperation between national and local authorities is considered a unique feature of the Finnish governance system (Vitikka et al., 2016). The National Core Curriculum is the result of cooperation between a broad network of administrators, trade unions, education providers, and schools. The network collaboration between administrators, unions, local education providers, education professionals, parents, and other societal interest groups to build policy is established with the

aim of reaching consensus among the stakeholders. In addition, the network collaboration in the curriculum process has been established with the aim of increasing the ownership of the curriculum process by education providers, local authorities, and schools (p. 85).

During the most recent curriculum renewal process, in 2014, a new element of policymaking was introduced, as the draft of the new Core Curriculum for Basic Education was made open for public comment and feedback through a public online comment system (Vitikka et al., 2016). This was followed by a similar process for the renewal of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in the Arts in 2017. In the 2017 National Core Curriculum it was further emphasised that the curriculum should be developed in cooperation with the teachers of the educational institution and "as far as possible, with pupils, their guardians and other parties" (FNAE, 2017a, p. 8; as translated in FNAE, 2017c, pp. 19–20). This collaboration with different stakeholders was considered a successful completion of the curriculum process (p. 8). However, compared to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNAE, 2014), where it is considered important that "guardians are also able to participate in curriculum work, curriculum preparation and the planning of school activities, especially with regard to educational goals, working culture and cooperation between home and school" (p. 10), the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in the Arts (FNAE, 2017a) is narrower in describing the role of guardians in music school policy. Guardians are only referred to twice, in relation to personal study plans to be drawn up in collaboration with the student and the guardian (p. 16), and in relation to the student's completed study modules during the study year (p. 17).

According to Mira Kalalahti and Janne Varjo (2023), because of the decentralization and the increasingly lax regulation, the collection and analysis of evaluation data in education has become more important, although these self-evaluation practices in Basic Education were already perceived as a challenge in the 2000s (Harjunen et al., 2017). As discussed in the previous section, the external evaluation of music schools was introduced in connection with the 1998 reform of education legislation, similar to the renewed Basic Education Act, which required education providers to evaluate the education they provide and its impact, in addition to participating in external evaluations of their work.

When the first external evaluations of the music schools were carried out by the Finnish National Agency for Education (Heino & Ojala, 1999), these included a functional evaluation of teaching conducted by Kari Kurkela and Erik Tawaststjerna (1999). This evaluation was conducted after the reform to see what kind of experiments had been carried out after increasing the possibilities for local decision-making. However, as Kurkela and Tawaststjerna reported in their analysis, the local curricula did not contain any radical reforms (p. 104). In some

music schools the school's own curriculum was not known in practice, in others its existence was known but did not play a role in the everyday life of the institution. Only in some music schools was the institution's own curriculum well known and had an impact on practical work. Similar observations about the activities of music schools not changing significantly from previous ones have been made elsewhere (e.g., Lavaste, 2009).

The situation had not changed much in more than a decade after the 1999 evaluation, as the 2012 national evaluation also reported that the curriculum had only a minor importance in the work of music school teachers (Tiainen et al., 2012). While the curricula had functioned as a means of developing teaching and education, the report concluded that the guidelines for assessment defined by the curriculum criteria had not been implemented in music schools in the desired way. As stated in the evaluation report (Tiainen et al., 2012):

The instrument- and subject-specific level examination instructions prepared by the Finnish Association of Music Schools still seem to guide the activities of music schools much more strongly in practice than the National Core Curriculum. Only a few music schools have detached themselves from the traditional level system and developed their own solutions. In music, the pursuit of a nationally uniform system still persists, even though the National Core Curriculum does not require it. (p. 41, translation by the author)

After the introduction of the National Core Curriculum, evaluations of the system described that music schools had difficulties in integrating National Core Curriculum work into the development and daily life of the educational institution (Kurkela & Tawaststjerna, 1999; Tiainen et al., 2012). The instrument- and subject-specific level examination instructions, which were reported in the 2012 evaluation to guide the activities of the music schools, had been part of the first curricula for music schools since the 1970s, prior to the National Core Curriculum introduced in 2002 in connection with the reform of the Basic Education in the Arts legislation in 1998. Maintaining the national standards set for music school studies in these instructions for music school curricula was also the basis for state funding of music schools. The Finnish Association of Music Schools, the umbrella organisation for music schools, which was founded in 1956 to act as an interest group for Finnish music schools, has played an active role in the process of standardising music school curricula, a process that began at the same time as the funding criteria for music schools were established.

The standardization of the music school students' learning paths through a national curriculum began in the late 1960s, with the impetus for a national curriculum and detailed regulations coming from Act 147/1968 on State Grants

for Music Schools, which came into force in 1969. Following the legislation, the Board of Schools (*Kouluhallitus*, currently the Finnish National Agency for Education, *Opetushallitus*) issued a group letter to music schools in 1970 with instructions on curricula and degrees. This model curriculum had been prepared in cooperation with the Association of Finnish Music Schools, the umbrella organisation of the music schools, which prepared a model guideline (in Finnish, *malliohjesääntö*) containing provisions for the curriculum, departmental organization, and degrees to be granted by the institution based on the examination criteria of the Sibelius Academy (Kuha, 2017, pp. 599–600).

The work of the Finnish Association of Music Schools as an expert organization for the government began in 1957, when the Ministry of Education granted the Association the first state grant to inspect and collect more information on the activities of music schools with the aim of obtaining a rating for determining state grants (Kuha, 2017, p. 552; Ritaluoto, 1996, p. 30). To receive state grants, compliance with the course degree system was required, as the Board of Schools' directions required music schools to have an approved curriculum and to comply with the Association's course degree requirements (Ritaluoto, 1996). When the music schools were brought under the Act on State Grants for Music Schools in 1969, the state subsidy legislation also required the organization of supervision. In 1969, the post of chief inspector of music schools was established in the Board of Schools (p. 39). The chief inspector was responsible for supervising the activities of music schools and the use of state grants according to national criteria. In addition, a Board of Music Schools (*musiikkioppilaitoslautakunta*) was established by the Ministry of Education on the initiative of the Board of Schools to ensure that music schools continued to qualify for the state grants (Kuha, 2017, p. 61; Ritaluoto, 1996).

The Finnish Association of Music Schools played a central role in establishing music school policy through their work with the state authorities. In the process of formulating the criteria for state grants, the Finnish Association of Music Schools became responsible for drafting, updating, and distributing the grading scale recommendations for instrumental/vocal music education (Ritaluoto, 1996). In the development of the course grading system, including the assessment of teaching objectives and learning, the Finnish Association of Music Schools was seen as performing tasks that belonged to the state authorities (p. 38). The Association was set up as an expert body for the state authorities, and it continued to negotiate with the state authorities on music school regulations and curricula during the period of the establishment of the music school system (p. 39). In addition to influencing course degree requirements, the Finnish Association of Music Schools established repertoire requirements for examinations based on the Western classical music canon.

In its work on forming the music school curriculum, the Association drew on the degree structure and the requirements of the Sibelius Academy, which in turn had followed the degree structure used at the Helsinki Music School at the end of the 19th century. The first law on state grants for music schools became a list of award principles for state grants (Ritaluoto, 1996, p. 34; Kuha, 2017, pp. 610–611). It also established a classification system for music schools as a basis for awarding state grants and the division of the existing music schools' operations into level categories (Ritaluoto, 1996, p. 59), with higher state grants for music schools that provided vocational education²⁸. Since 1961, a hierarchical system for the classification of teachers was also used by the State Music Commission as part of the criteria for the distribution of state grants. The hierarchical status of teachers was defined by their qualifications (informal/formal) and their ability to train students to the proficiency of Sibelius Academy courses (Kuha, 2017, p. 562). Not all of the existing music schools were approved under the law, however the nine schools that were approved were considered to be regional institutions (p. 62).²⁹ Music schools that fell outside of the law's definitions had to apply for a discretionary state grant.

The examination requirements were strictly interpreted and adhered to in the music schools, since compliance with them was part of the criteria for state support prescribed in the law (Perälä, 1993). The performance of music schools in providing music education was also monitored. The government had previously reported on the inefficiency of education, as the number of graduates did not increase with the increase in the number of places (see Government proposal 258/1994, 1994). According to Kuha (2017), "student reviews" (*oppilasnäytteet*) were organised for music schools to present the results of their teaching work (pp. 431; 441). If a music school wanted to rise to the status of a conservatory, it had to have considerable evidence of its successful teaching activities (p. 543).

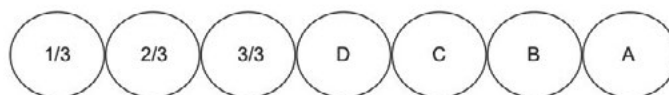
²⁸ This was operationalized when state support was made dependent on the level of instruction (basic education level, vocational education) (Ritaluoto 1996, p. 59).

²⁹ The law, which came into force at the beginning of 1969, initially covered nine music schools that were considered to be regional: the Helsinki Folk Conservatory, the Jyväskylä Conservatory, Kotkanseutu Music School, Kuopio Music School, Kuula Music School (Vaasa), Lahti Music School, Oulu City Music School, Tampere Music School and Turku Music School. Of these, seven schools were later granted the permission to provide vocational training. Distinct legislative provisions were formulated for the Sibelius Academy during its transition to state university status.

4.5. The Course Degree System and Intermediate Examinations: the Alignment and Standardization of Students' Learning Trajectories with Vocational Studies

Aligning music school studies with vocational studies required reviewing and constructing the student's profile through the skills needed to enter professional studies. The starting point for the degree system that served as the basis for the state funding of music schools was the Sibelius Academy's system of degree requirements, supplemented by preparatory courses for the studies that preceded the Academy degrees (Ritaluoto, 1996). In this three-level degree system, the student completed the pre-professional levels (1/3, 2/3, 3/3) and the advanced course I (later D-level) of instrumental/vocal studies in a music school, and further vocational studies, courses Iia and Iib (later C- and B-level), in vocational education, and course III (later A-level) in higher education (Figure 3).

Figure 3



The Course Degree System for Pre-professional and Professional Studies

As early as the 1950s, it had been proposed on various occasions, including by the rectors of the Sibelius Academy (Kuha, 2017, p. 534; Ritaluoto, 1996), that music schools in Finland should form a coherent network of schools with level-structured degrees, in which the lower levels would be completed at advanced music schools and the final levels (päättötutkinnot) at the Sibelius Academy. Within this system, music schools should obtain a curriculum that corresponded to the courses and requirements of the highest music institution, the Sibelius Academy (Kuha, 2017, p. 532). Negotiations between the Sibelius Academy and the music schools to create a joint degree system began in the 1960s. In 1962, the Board of Directors of the Sibelius Academy approved the principles for the joint degree system, one of which was the policy of censors. As mentioned above, the increase in the number of music schools in Finland in the 1970s had led to a shortage of qualified instrumental teachers. As a result, the censoring system established between the Sibelius Academy and the music schools began to function as a monitoring tool, both for quality control of unqualified staff and for

ensuring the commonality of degrees. What was described as a commensurable course degree system was expanded to music schools and conservatories in the 1970s (Heimonen, 2002; Perälä, 1993). The instrument- and subject-specific intermediate examination instructions developed by the Finnish Association of Music Schools included instructions on the repertoire and other content (e.g., the number of scales/etudes) to be rehearsed for each intermediate examination. A set repertoire was prepared each year, either for an annual examination or for an intermediate examination, in which the student's progress was assessed by a jury of teachers who evaluated the performances (e.g., Board of Schools, 1988).

The commensurable course degree system, which eventually became the national model for the entire Finnish music school system, was first introduced in Finland in the late 1890s at the Helsinki Music School (later the Helsinki Conservatory in 1924 and the Sibelius Academy in 1939) (Pajamo, 2007). Martin Wegelius, the founder and director of the Helsinki Music School, is considered the creator of the course system (p. 48), although the idea of the structure is also attributed to Ferruccio Busoni, who had taught piano at the Helsinki Music School from 1888–1890 (pp. 24, 28). The course structure in the 1890s included solo instrumental studies and studies in music history, theory, and solfège (pp. 23–24) (Table 3).

Table 3
Course Structure for Music School Studies at the Helsinki Music School in the 1890s

Soloist studies	Music history, theory and solfège
Three elementary courses	I music studies and analysis (a two-year-course)
1 elementary course	II figured bass (a one-year course)
2 elementary course	III music history (a two-year-course)
3 elementary course	IV solfège and music perception (a two-year course)
I	
II (graduation certificate)	
III diploma	

Although the course system was created in the early days of the Helsinki Music School, the actual course requirements were designed a decade later and expanded

for different instruments. Wegelius justified the need for requirements and repertoire lists by pointing to the need to improve the order of studies and to obtain a more accurate overview of students' development (Pajamo, 2007). Once the student had completed an approved degree in the course, she could move on to the next higher course. The degree requirements included a "what does the board want?" section, in other words, sections of the rehearsed repertoire selected by the board (p. 49). In some instruments this tradition continued in the intermediate exams, where the student would have rehearsed several etudes and the board would decide in the exam which one they wanted to hear.

Until 2017 the core content of studies at the basic level, as defined in the 2002 Core Curriculum, was "familiarisation with the basic technique and repertoire of the main instrument and the basics of making music together" (FNAE, 2002, p. 9). Regular performance was also considered to be part of the course, as well as possible minor studies and electives that could be designed to support the student's musical development.

The course requirements for each level of study continued to be updated by the Finnish Association of Music Schools up until the curricular reform in 2017. For example, the Course Requirements and Contents of Level Performance and Assessment Criteria for Clarinet in the Basic Level Studies 1 (the Finnish Association of Music Schools, 2005) included the general objectives and contents of Level 1 studies as well as the completion of the Level 1 studies (Table 4, translation by the author).

Table 4

The 2005 Course Requirements and Content of Level Performance and Assessment Criteria for Clarinet at Basic Level Studies 1 by the Finnish Association of Music Schools

Basic level 1

General aims

The student:

- finds a natural way of playing
- learns to read simple notes
- learns the basic elements of rehearsal, e.g. regularity, versatility and independence
- acquires phrasing skills and basic technical and artistic skills
- learns about the sound production of her instrument, breathing techniques, articulation and legato playing
- learns the basics of pitch
- can bring out the character and atmosphere of the song
- acquires skills for learning new compositions
- acquires skills in playing from memory
- acquires skills for understanding simple musical structures
- receives guidance on performance behaviour
- gains experience in performance situations
- acquires skills for making music together
- is encouraged to improvise and compose
- is interested in listening to music
- knows how to take good care of the instrument

Contents

- Major and minor scales and arpeggios. Scales are played according to the subject-specific practices agreed upon by the educational institution in such a way that they support the student's development and consider the specific characteristics of the instrument
- Etudes or etude-like songs that practice different areas of technique

- Easy accompaniment songs and solo compositions representing different styles and periods and varying in tempo and mood
- Finnish music
- Music of our time
- Prima vista playing
- Collaborative music making
- Creating, improvising, composing and transposing music as agreed between the student and the teacher

Completion (intermediate examination)

- Two short compositions in different styles, in different keys
- Two etudes or etude-like songs in different styles, which are in different keys
- Prepared scales and arpeggios to be chosen by the jury
- Easy prima vista task
- It is recommended that the program includes joint music making
- The student will also have the opportunity to improvise or perform her own composition
- It is recommended that level performance be assessed as completed or to be renewed

According to Heimonen (2002), the recommendations by the Finnish Association of Music Schools could be regarded as soft-law regulation exerting an influence on education: as non-binding principles and rules, they were not mandatory law and legally binding, but they had a great de facto influence on the music schools as well as on music and the arts. The term "soft law" refers to law that is de facto obeyed, although it is not mandatory (p. 166). Until the most recent curriculum reform in 2017, the course degree system (later the level performance system), based on the course degree system of the Helsinki Music School (now the Sibelius Academy) in the 1890s (Pajamo 2007), continued as the basic structure for instrumental/vocal education in music schools.

As mentioned earlier, the development of the music school system also included compliance as a criterion for state support. The censor system created in 1962, in which the Sibelius Academy's censors ensured the quality of degrees awarded in local music schools, was used as a means of supporting the joint

degree system. According to Ritaluoto (1996), the censor system was gradually abandoned in the 1980s as it became too burdensome for the Sibelius Academy. It was also assessed that the quality of teaching in the music schools had improved to such an extent that the censors were no longer needed to award degrees (p. 55). However, although the censor system was no longer officially in use at the Sibelius Academy, the music schools continued the censor practice by inviting jury members from other music schools or sending students to take the final examination at a music school that received the hourly-based state subsidy in order to ensure the quality of the degrees awarded or the validity of the final examination assessment. However, the censor practice was particularly important for those music schools that received discretionary state grants and did not have the official status of an institution³⁰(Ritaluoto, 1996).

Overall, it can be observed that the censor system was also implemented under the aspect of quality assurance, instrumentalised to serve goals that were not only related to the students' learning process, but also to the teachers' competences (see also Tikka, 2017). Thus, already in the initial stages of funding, it was considered important that teaching in music schools should be organised in such a way that a sufficient amount of knowledge and skills should be achieved for the degrees to be completed (Kuha, 2017, p. 831). The censor policy with intermediate examinations provided opportunities to also put the work of music school teachers under scrutiny (Lavaste, 2009). The potential challenges of the policy have also been brought forward; for example, if the assessment focused on the teacher's professional skills, there was a possibility that the student became an instrument of power struggles between teachers (Juntunen & Westerlund, 2013).

The music school censor policy was rather exceptional, considering that the Finnish public school system has very few standardised tests or tests that are controlled by anyone other than the students' own teachers (Vainikainen et al., 2017). As school evaluation is based on self-evaluation, where it is up to education providers to decide what they want to review in their internal evaluations (Kumpulainen & Lankinen, 2016), there are no school inspections or external inspections of teachers and no tradition of national school achievement tests or other standardisation tools such as school league tables or other strong top-down quality control mechanisms (Varjo et al., 2013). The school inspectorate was abolished in Finnish public schools in 1991. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is responsible for national assessments of learning

³⁰ The State Grant Decision (Valtionosuuspäätös) officially determined the status of a music school by means of the law in force until July 31, 1995; in other words, whether the music school was a “musiikkikoulu” or a “musiikkiopisto”.

outcomes (Kumpulainen & Lankinen, 2016), but external national assessments are sample based.

Compared to many other countries in the world, Finnish education and curriculum policy has continued to avoid standardization and teacher accountability (Autio et al., 2019). However, instead of allowing music school teachers to make autonomous decisions about assessment, the use of external assessors continues to be part of the assessment model in music schools. In music schools, summative assessment has traditionally been carried out by teacher assessor(s) other than the student's own teacher, most often by a panel of teachers assessing musical performance, similar to the dominant method of assessment in higher music education. The exclusion of students' own teachers from the assessment process (Board of Schools, 1988) continued until 2002, when this provision was removed from the curriculum (FNAE, 2002).

The multi-layered nature of music school policy and the impact of previous policies are reflected in local differences in how previous regulations are adapted to current practice. A number of music schools have continued the policy of setting a time limit for the completion of intermediate exams and granting the right to study an advanced course on the basis of the student's performance in the previous course.³¹ Prior to 1995, the national curriculum specified the lowest examination grades that entitled students to continue their studies (Board of Schools, 1970, p. 5; Board of Schools, 1988). The student's progress thus determined the continuation of the student's right to study. Some Basic Arts Education institutions have continued the possibility to revoke the student's right to study if it becomes evident that they do not have the prerequisites to complete their studies within a reasonable time³² or are not making progress in their studies³³. Furthermore, in some music schools the first year of study is a

³¹ See, e.g., Pop & Jazz Konservatorio. (2025). Musiikin taiteen perusopetus: Opetussuunnitelma [Basic Education in the Arts: Curriculum]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://popjazz.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/OPS-2025-Musiikin-taiteen-perusopetus.pdf>; Keski-Pohjanmaan Konservatorio (2025) Musiikin perustaso [Basic studies in music]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://kpkonsa.fi/opetus/musiikkiharrastus/musiikin-perustaso/>.

³² Sibelius-opisto. (2022). Tanssin opetussuunnitelma [Dance curriculum]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://sibeliusopisto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/tanssi-ops-30.8.2022.pdf>

³³ See, e.g., Keski-Pohjanmaan Konservatorio (2025) Musiikin perustaso [Basic studies in music]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://kpkonsa.fi/opetus/musiikkiharrastus/musiikin-perustaso/>. The conservatory states that “progress made throughout the entire study year is taken into consideration when deciding on continuation rights. If studies do not progress according to the curriculum despite development discussions and a possible study intensification letter, the right to study may be revoked.” See also Länsi-Helsingin musiikkiopisto. (2025). Oppilaiden järjestyssäännöt [Student conduct rules]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://www.lansihelsinginmusiikkiopisto.org/info/oppilaiden->

probationary year (*koevuosi*)³⁴, which determines whether the student is suitable to continue studying at the music school. This could for example mean that the music school provides guaranteed enrolment for the first study year, during which the student's aptitude for musical studies is evaluated together by the teacher, guardian, and student. Following the first year, students are directed along one of two pathways: acceptance as regular music school students (indicating suitability for completing instrumental studies under the extended curriculum) or enrolment in the open department on a fee-paying basis.³⁵ No research exists examining the prevalence of probationary year implementation across other Basic Arts Education institutions in Finland, for example in visual arts and dance, that operate under the same legislative frameworks and National Core Curricula, nor the degree of transparency in student screening processes within these institutions. Within some Basic Education in the Arts' dance institutions, students may apply for specialized education programs during their studies, wherein student competencies across various domains are evaluated, and participants are selected for group membership.³⁶

A large-scale external evaluation of the 2017 curricular reform has not yet been conducted. While the curriculum reform aimed to bring more flexibility, choice, and student-orientation to music studies, a student survey conducted in 2023 on the experiences of music students in their music studies revealed that among the issues that students hoped to be able to influence were more flexibility and choice in their studies (Kanerva et al., 2023). However, changes towards a more student-centred direction were seen as jeopardising the goal-oriented nature of music studies with regard to professional studies in the music field and higher education (e.g., Hakala, 2019). Until 2017, for certain subjects, such as music theory, the national core curricula stated that local curricula had to comply with the course level requirements of the Finnish Association of Music Schools (FNAE, 2002, p. 17). For other subjects, such as instrumental/vocal studies, the National Core Curricula left the use of the Association's requirements as an

jarjestyssaannot/. The student conduct rules state that "Continued unsatisfactory study performance results in loss of study rights."

³⁴ See, e.g., Porvoon musiikkiopisto. (2019). Laaja oppimäärä: Ainekohtainen opetussuunnitelma [Extended syllabus: Subject-specific curriculum]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from https://www.porvoo.fi/app/uploads/sites/9/2021/12/LAAJA_OPPIM__R__aineops_2019.pdf

³⁵ See, e.g., Wava-opisto (2025). Mitä koevuosi tarkoittaa? [What does the trial year mean?] Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://www.musikhuset.fi/fi/wava-opisto/musiikin-perusopetus/koevuosi/>

³⁶ See, e.g., Helsingin tanssiopisto. (2025). Koetanssit ryhmiin [Auditions for groups]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://www.helsingintanssiopisto.fi/koetanssit-ryhmiin/>

option, stating only: "The certificate must state the requirements according to which the final assignments have been made (e.g., the course requirements of the Finnish Association of Music Schools) " (FNAE, 2002, p. 14). In Heli Kaverinen's (2018) study of the curricula of music schools after the curriculum reform in 2017, 54 of the 55 music schools examined in the study continued to use the intermediate examinations based on the requirements of the Finnish Association of Music Schools, or by adapting these criteria. In some music schools that had abandoned the traditional forms of assessment with jury boards, the Finnish Association of Music Schools' requirements for intermediate examinations continued to be the basis for the division of the skill levels of instrument-specific learning content in music school studies. After the curriculum reform in 2017, the study structures developed in the 1960s continued to be framed in different stages in many music schools, with adjustments in the content areas (Table 5, translation by the author).

Table 5

Examples of Study Structures in Different Music Schools after the 2017 Curriculum Reform

Music Skill 1 (Musiikkitaito 1)	Basic Studies 1 (Perusopinnot 1)	Skill Level 1 (Taitotaso 1)
Music Skill 2 (Musiikkitaito 2)	Basic Studies 2 (Perusopinnot 2)	Skill Level 2 (Taitotaso 2)
Music Skill 3 (Musiikkitaito 3)	Basic Studies 3 (Perusopinnot 3)	Skill Level 3 (Taitotaso 3)
Music Skill 4 (Musiikkitaito 4)	Basic Studies 4 (Perusopinnot 4)	Advanced Studies (Syventävät opinnot) ³⁷
Advanced Music Studies (Musiikin syventävät opinnot) ³⁸	Basic Studies 5 (Perusopinnot 5)	
	Advanced Studies (Syventävät opinnot) ³⁹	

³⁷ Imatran musiikkiopisto. Musiikkiopiston opetussuunnitelma [Music school curriculum]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from https://www.imatra.fi/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Musiikkiopiston%20opetussuunnitelma%2C%20p%C3%A4ivitetty%20kes%C3%A4kuu%202021_0.pdf

³⁸ Espoon musiikkiopisto. (2025). Opetussuunnitelma [Curriculum]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://emo.fi/info/opetussuunnitelma/>

³⁹ Pirkanmaan musiikkiopisto. (2018). Opetussuunnitelma: Laaja oppimäärä [Curriculum: Extended syllabus]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://pmo.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/07/PMO-opetussuunnitelma-laaja-oppimäärä-1.8.2018.pdf>

Some music schools have divided the studies into smaller units, for example into eight levels.⁴⁰ It is noteworthy that at the time of conducting this study, the Basic Education in the Arts Act (633/1998) supports the idea of progression from one level to the next (§1). However, other arts institutions within the Basic Education in the Arts, which are governed by the same law, have not adapted the level structure and intermediate examinations in the same way as the music schools.

The subject of maintaining coherence with vocational studies has often come to the fore in discussions about changes in the development of the music school system. When different options for arts education were considered before the system of Basic Arts Education was established in the 1990s, one of the options considered was whether Basic Arts Education could be an interdisciplinary field. In addition to the administratively integrated model, the Ministerial Advisor of the Ministry of Education, Paula Tuomikoski (1993), elaborated on these considerations in the Handbook of Basic Arts Education:

Should multidisciplinary Basic Arts Education be developed? Is synaesthesia possible? Should the traditional divisions between the arts be abandoned? Isn't the child by nature multidisciplinary, and only the cultural and professional organisations think in sectors? Contemporary art breaks boundaries, should Basic Art Education do the same? (p. 13, translation by the author)

Tuomikoski (1993) argued that Basic Education in the Arts should emphasize the disciplinarity of different art forms and that art form-specific skills and competences should not be compromised (p. 13). While the need for music schools to cooperate with other forms of arts education was seen as increasing (Government proposal 258/1994, 1994), and experimental and developmental work (Parliament of Finland, Education Committee, 1994) suggested that music schools should include the integration of other arts with music when developing curricula (FNAE, 1995, p. 16), it was however maintained that "the key criteria for the activities should be defined in such a way as to ensure the necessary coherence in their vocational studies and the comparability of the results" (Government proposal 258/1994, 1994, pp. 6–7).

Until 2017, the study structure for music school studies sought national coherence and was formed around three main components: instrumental studies,

⁴⁰ Ylivieskan seudun musiikkiopisto. (2018). Opetussuunnitelma [Curriculum]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://www.ylivieska.fi/kasvatus-ja-opetus/ylivieskan-seudun-musiikkiopisto/opetus/opetussuunnitelma/>

the basics of music (music theory, solfège) and orchestra/ensemble playing (Board of Schools, 1978, 1988). In the early stages of the music school system, local music school authorities were given several alternatives around which to construct their local curricula, as listed in the first group letter to music schools issued by the Board of Schools (1970) (Table 6, translation by the author).

Table 6

Proposals for Local Curricula by the Board of Schools 1970

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) soloist studies: solo, piano, organ, harpsichord, harp, string instruments, wind instruments, lysis, guitar and other instruments included in the curriculum b) orchestral and choral conducting c) choral and ensemble singing, ensemble playing, chamber music, orchestral playing d) solfège (dictation and singing from notation), general music studies, instrument theory, analysis of form and style, music history, music aesthetics and music pedagogy e) chord studies, figured bass, instrumentation and composition f) opera studies g) studies in early childhood music education h) special studies in instrumental-, vocal- and theoretical teaching pedagogy i) speech and pronunciation j) music and movement k) language studies l) playing from score, accompaniment and improvisation m) folk music, jazz n) seminars and courses in the field of music in specific subjects |
|--|

In the 1995 curriculum reform, music schools were also allowed to offer instruction in "dance and other art forms related to music" (FNAE, 1995, p. 8), as well as improvisation, free accompaniment (vapaa säestys), and music technology (p. 8). The 2002 curriculum specified the number of lessons for the two main components of the study: instrumental studies and orchestra/ensemble playing

(385 lesson hours in basic level studies) and the basics of music, music theory, and solfège (280 lesson hours in basic level studies). After the curriculum reform in 2017, these lesson hour levels were abolished, and music schools were given the opportunity to locally determine the division and number of lessons and lesson hours for their studies. As the curriculum no longer required separate lesson hours for the basics of music, it also allowed local music schools to organise music theory/solfège according to their own preferences, including integrating it into other studies.

4.6. The Societal Mission of Finnish Music Schools from the 1970s to the 2000s

In this final section of the chapter, I will focus on the general aims and societal roles of music schools as explicitly defined in the policy documents, and the ways in which these have influenced the status and participation of children in music schools. As discussed in the previous section, the impetus for a national curriculum and detailed regulations for music schools was the Law 147/1968 on State Grants for Music Schools, which came into force in 1969 and formed the basis for music school studies by aligning them with professional studies. While the policy texts of the curricula have changed from the 1970s to the 2000s, the explicit mission of music schools to provide skills and knowledge for possible further studies has remained consistent from the 1970s to the present. This can be seen by comparing the mission statements of music schools, as shown by a comparison of the mission statements of music schools and Basic Education in the Arts in successive curricula (Board of Schools, 1978, 1988; FNAE, 1995, 2002, 2017a), although it can be observed that the mission has been elaborated and expanded from the 1970s to the 2000s (Table 7).

Table 7

The Mission Statements of Music Schools and Basic Education in the Arts in Successive Curricula from 1978 to 2017

1978	1988	1995	2002	2017
"The mission of the music school is to provide music instruction both for those intending to become professionals in the field of music and music hobbyists." (Board of Schools, 1978, p. 2, translation by the author)	"The mission of the music school is to provide basic music education for both those who wish to work in the music industry and those who enjoy music." (Board of Schools, 1988, p. 3, translation by the author)	"The music school is an art institution, whose mission is to organize the teaching of music and related art forms. The teaching must develop the ability to be creative and diverse in music pursuits and performances, as well as professional studies in the field" (FNBE, 1995, p. 6, translation by the author)	"The aim of teaching in accordance with the advanced syllabus of music in Basic Art Education is to create the conditions for the development of a good music relationship and the pursuit of music throughout lifetime, as well as to provide readiness for professional studies in the field of music. The aim of teaching is to support the student's intellectual growth and to strengthen her personality, as well as to develop creativity and social skills. The mission of teaching is to guide the student towards purposeful, determined and long-term work and constructive activities as an individual and as a member of a group. The mission is also to preserve and develop the national musical culture, to interact with other educational institutions and bodies providing music and art education, and to promote international cooperation. The requirements set by vocational training and working life in the music industry are taken into account in the organization of teaching." (FNAE, 2002, p. 6, advanced syllabus, translation by the author)	"The mission of Basic Education in the Arts is to provide students with opportunities to study the arts in a persistent and goal-oriented manner and according to their interests. The education helps students form a personal relationship with art, promoting a lifelong interest in them. The education develops competences that are characteristic of the art form studied and provides capacities for applying to the vocational and higher education provided in that art form. The mission of Basic Education in the Arts is to contribute to building a sustainable future by means of art. The education is based on a pluralistic and continuously renewing cultural heritage. The education in the chosen art form strengthens students' skills in personal expression, interpretation and judgment. The studies support the development of students' creative thinking and participation. Basic Education in the Arts strengthens the construction of students' identities and the development of their cultural literacy. Basic Education in the Arts creates preconditions for the development of art and arts education in Finland. The mission of Basic Education in the Arts is implemented by way of local, national and international cooperation with other educational institutions and parties providing arts education." (FNAE, 2017c, pp. 24–25)

In the most recent curriculum reform in 2017, the mission statement for music school education was defined similarly for both the advanced and general studies in the Basic Education in the Arts (FNAE, 2017a, advanced syllabus, p. 10; FNAE, 2017b, general syllabus, p. 10). The National Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2017c) identified several considerations for music schools to take into account when constructing their local curricula:

When the curriculum is drawn up, consideration is given to the individual needs and abilities of students, 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. (p. 8, translation from the English version of the curriculum by FNAE, 2017c)

Despite these multiple dependencies, the explicit general objective and mission of music schools to provide capabilities for potential further studies – the linear model of maintaining the professional system (Väkevä et al., 2017; Westerlund, 2021) – has remained consistent in the policy framework.

Under these premises, local decision-making remains dependent on the requirements of professional studies, which from the students' point of view direct them to focus on pre-defined areas of competence and a prescribed learning path, such as the study of a principal instrument/voice. It has therefore been considered necessary to align music school studies with a linear model to the level of entry requirements for professional studies through a focus on one instrument/voice, as entry to performance studies depends on the level of mastery of the instrument/voice. In Finland, as in other countries, the first stage of the entrance examination continues to select for excellence in performance (Casas-Mas & López-Íñiguez, 2022). At the beginning of the 2000s, the entrance exams for the performing arts degree at the Sibelius Academy were based on a 90% emphasis on testing skills on the main solo instrument (Sibelius Academy, 2003, p. 9). In the 2020s, the core of the performance studies at the University of the Arts, Sibelius Academy, has continued to be defined as "a high level of mastery of one's own instrument".⁴¹ Entrance examinations to universities of applied sciences also have a similar emphasis on the skill of the main instrument/vocal, similarly to

⁴¹ University of the Arts Helsinki. (2025). Wind instruments classical instruments master: Content and objective of the programme. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/study-programmes/wind-instruments-classical-instruments-master/#content-and-objective-of-the-programme>

Sibelius Academy, specifying a compulsory repertoire to be performed in the entrance exams. For students wishing to study to become a music teacher in a comprehensive or secondary school, the entrance examinations may also include an assessment of other areas, such as the versatility of their musical skills (singing, etc.).

Through its societal mission to provide pre-professional studies, the music school system has developed a significant role in student selection (Laes et al., 2018). This has included student streaming, the assessment of applicants' potential through entrance examinations to find the most talented and motivated individuals, and the monitoring of students' progress through annual and interim examinations, with national regulations on the minimum acceptable grades for continuing in their studies (e.g., Board of Schools, 1988). Success in studies has thus been seen as a prerequisite for continuation. While in some music schools, for example, the completion of the basic course has been sufficient to move on to the advanced course, at the time of Heino and Ojala's (1999) assessment more than a third of the music schools required a certain minimum grade, usually commendable, for 3/3 or 2/3 of the main course in order for the student to be able to continue (pp. 25–29).

National policies have also supported the targeting of additional resources to students with a vocational orientation (e.g., FNAE, 1995, p. 10). Earlier policies also included the distribution of resources based on progress in studies. This can be seen, for example, in the 1970 curriculum, which allowed students to receive different amounts of teaching according to their "progress and ability" (Board of Schools, 1970, p. 2). Those who, according to the curriculum, were considered ready to continue their studies could continue their studies in the conservatory department (currently the final stage of studies, *syventävät opinnot*):

The conservatory department is for students who have completed the highest examination of the basic courses and who are considered to have the prerequisites to continue their studies according to the study programme. As a general rule, the department will not admit a person over the age of 26 to the department (Board of Schools, 1970, p. 2, translation by the author)

The so-called Folk Conservatory (*kansankonservatorio*, translation by the author) was intended for students who could not study in the other departments (Board of Schools, 1970, p. 2); resources in these two departments may have differed. In the guideline, the amount of tuition offered to students at the Folk Conservatory was 30 or 45 minutes of tuition per week, and for students in the Conservatory

Department the amount of tuition was given "according to the student's progress and ability" (p. 2), with a minimum of 45 minutes of tuition.

Up until 2002, the National Core Curriculum instructed local music schools to direct the study of a second instrument mainly towards students who were oriented towards professional studies (FNAE, 1995, p. 10). Prior to 1995, the aim of studies after the three basic courses was defined as preparation for professional studies (Board of Schools, 1988, p. 6). While in the past resources were allocated on a discretionary basis, sometimes with the student's good progress being a condition for continuing the course, in some music schools resources are still allocated based on progress, for example in cases where second instrument/vocal studies are intended for "successful students who have completed the second level examination".⁴²

The societal mission of music schools to both prepare future professionals and provide music education for all has been characterised as a dilemma (Heimonen 2002) – one which continues to create tensions in current practice (Laes et al., 2018; Vismanen et al., 2016). While the Finnish music school education has been seen as being of an internationally high standard and is widely respected, having produced an outstanding number of music professionals, it has also been criticised for not taking into account other aspects that create conditions for a lifelong pursuit of art and music, as the profile of the music school learner has been reviewed and constructed through criteria for a professional career. Criticism of the rigidity of the system began as early as the 1980s, when it was questioned whether it could be considered good practice to adapt the structure of professional studies to the entire music school system (Heimonen 2002) and to train entire music school populations according to the goals of professional studies, focusing too much on completing degrees, over-training, and forcing all students into a common framework regardless of their personal goals (Anttila, 2004; Lehtonen, 2004).

As Väkevä et al. (2017) argue, if the main task of the music education system is defined as enabling musical professionalism, the ideal end product of the system becomes the training of a new group of professionals, reproducing the tradition and maintaining the system. With this aim of passing on forms of cultural activity that require musical professionalism, such as orchestras and opera houses, the task of music education is thus to select the right and sufficiently talented individuals from the population and to provide them with the optimal conditions

⁴² Keravan musiikkiopisto (2025). Oppilaan opas: Opetussuunnitelma [Student guide: Curriculum]. Retrieved June 12, 2025, from <https://www.keravanmusiikkiopisto.fi/oppilaan-opas/#Opetussuunnitelma>

to achieve a specialised career in music. According to Laes et al. (2018), the division of Basic Arts Education into advanced and general curricula in the early 2000s was a change that anticipated the demand for more versatile learning pathways recognised by the system. Between 1995 and 2002/2005 the National Core Curricula for music schools underwent several changes. In 2002, municipalities were given the possibility of offering music school education according to a general curriculum, which allowed students to study several instruments without having to follow a predetermined course programme or complete pre-planned course examinations to continue their studies (Björk, 2016). The National Core Curricula for both the advanced (FNAE, 2002) and general curricula (FNAE, 2005) also included the aim for music schools to establish students' "good relationship with music" (Björk, 2016, p. 2). According to Björk (2016), this concept was intentionally kept open to allow space for dialogue and preserve teacher autonomy. The incorporation of this objective as formal policy and a legally mandated pedagogical principle was regarded as a milestone in the development of music schools.

However, the intended flexibility between the general and advanced syllabus has proved difficult in practice, as transitions between the curricula have not been perceived as smooth (Vismanen et al., 2016). Despite the consensus among rectors that flexibility, even choice, is needed for the advanced curriculum (Pohjannoro, 2010b), the general syllabus continues to be poorly implemented by music schools, as only the advanced curriculum receives hourly-based state support (Luoma, 2020). Funding for music schools remains uneven, as in other arts there is no curriculum-specific restriction on the granting of state subsidies. While some music school principals have seen the general curriculum as an opportunity for greater differentiation in teaching, questions have been raised about who should be offered the general curriculum, in other words, how to inform students and parents that they will receive fewer hours of instruction with higher tuition fees (Pohjannoro, 2010a).

Some of the music school principals have considered the differential allocation of resources based on students' abilities as one way to overcome the challenges of the system. For example, in Ulla Pohjannoro's (2010a) report, some of the music school principals' suggestions included the possibility that everyone could start their studies in group instrumental/vocal lessons based on the general syllabus, with the possibility for the most talented to continue in the advanced syllabus with individual tuition. These proposals reflect previous national policies in which students who were considered successful in their studies had different opportunities to access resources (e.g., Board of Schools, 1988). The challenges of placing children on parallel learning pathways are linked to local authority judgements about how and at what point students should be placed on these

learning pathways. Since Finnish students make their first choice regarding academic or vocational studies for upper secondary education at the age of 16, it has not been typical to group students in a significantly different curriculum for some subjects or to use ability grouping. While streaming was a common practice in public schools before 1985, a remnant from the time of two parallel education systems (Vitikka et al., 2016), according to Erkki Aho et al. (2006), ability tracking was abolished in public schools because studies and feedback from the field indicated that streaming was a key factor in maintaining and deepening regional, social and gender inequalities.

Previous national evaluations have highlighted the need to develop the division into general and advanced curricula (Heino & Ojala, 2006; Tiainen et al., 2012). Overall, arts institutions have hoped for more flexibility in the structures of Basic Arts Education, so that the life situations and interests of children and young people can be better taken into account (Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, 2014). One suggestion from local authorities has been a single curriculum model, which would include a less strenuous study option and allow for more choice, while considering the different needs and age stages of individuals (Vismanen et al., 2016).

The challenges are not limited to the flexibility sought for those who pursue music as a hobby, but also for those who apply for professional studies. Heads of music schools have reported that the advanced syllabus is too limited for students applying for professional studies (Pohjannoro, 2010a; Pohjannoro & Pesonen, 2009), problems that are accelerated by the increased competition due to the increasing number of international applicants (Hirvonen, 2003; Sirén, 2014). In the 2010s there was discussion of a decline in the skill level of musicians, a concern expressed by conductors who believed that the musicians' level of expertise was insufficient (Pohjannoro, 2010a).

Several initiatives have been taken to improve the situation for those applying for professional studies and/or identified as gifted. In the 1990s, some music schools planned to create a special study programme for gifted students (Heimonen, 2002). While the national evaluations suggested more flexibility in study programmes rather than promoting the idea of segregating gifted students (Kurkela & Tawaststjerna, 1999), since 2009 junior music academies (*soitinakatemia*) have emerged, some of which have earlier predecessors from the 1980s (Mattila, 2021). A common idea of the junior academies was to provide extra tuition for particularly gifted students in addition to the music school semesters. In some academies, however, participation in the programme continues to require resources from families, which limits its accessibility (Mattila, 2021).

4.7. Summary

This review of music school policy reveals developmental patterns parallel to Finnish Basic Education, particularly the evolution from central to local governance and strengthened local decision-making (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2023). Replacing centralized national curricula with National Core Curricula shifted administrative power and responsibility to local schools and municipal decision-makers, serving as steering documents and instruments for educational change (Vitikka et al., 2016). Through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory, the Core Curriculum may be understood as a mediating tool that facilitates the transformation of organizational objectives into concrete outcomes, with their implementation constituting a reconstruction and redefinition of the object of activity (Hasu, 2000). This exemplifies "bottom-up remediation": individuals' capacity to invest their activities with new meanings through collective development of institutional tools (Blackler, 2009, p. 31). Such transformative processes are evident in the evolution of music schools' assessment practices, where original instrumentalization for institutional monitoring gradually shifted toward learning-oriented assessment. These transformations encompass what activity theory identifies as social-spatial expansions (Engeström, 2001a), including evolving stakeholder relationships. This participatory evolution is exemplified in the 2017 National Core Curriculum, mandating curriculum development in collaboration with teachers and "as far as possible, with pupils, their guardians and other parties" (FNAE, 2017a, p. 8).

In practice, curriculum implementation has proven challenging. Despite the introduction of the National Core Curriculum in 2002, national evaluations revealed that instructions from the Finnish Association of Music Schools continued to guide music school activities more effectively than official curricula (Tiainen et al., 2012). These association guidelines, which originated in the late 1960s as standardization tools, maintained influence even as "recommendations", perpetuating linear stage models of musical development. Studies reviewed in this research showed that the intermediate study model continues to structure music school studies (e.g., Kaverinen, 2018), reinforced by legislation that defines Basic Arts Education as "progressing from one level to the next" (Act on Basic Education in the Arts 633/1998, 1§). In the 2025 working group's proposal for drafting a government proposal to reform the Basic Arts Education legislation, this reference to level-to-level progression has been removed (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2025).

This review identifies a fundamental tension underlying music school governance: providing high-quality pre-professional arts education while ensuring accessible arts education for all (Vismanen et al., 2016). This

contradiction has manifested in collectively articulated conflicts of motives, creating ongoing challenges identified across multiple system evaluations (Heimonen, 2002; Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021; Pohjannoro, 2010a; Tiainen et al., 2012). Providing pre-professional studies within public institutions that are open to all remains challenging not only in music schools but across policy areas requiring institutions to fulfil conflicting societal roles (Pirnes & Tiihonen, 2010). While the 2017 National Core Curriculum increased local governance, enabling schools to transcend nationally standardized pathways aligned with vocational studies, implementation challenges persist. A 2021–2022 student survey revealed continued desire for greater study flexibility and choice (Kanerva et al., 2023). From a development work research perspective, these contradictory demands create a double bind between music schools' multiple motives embedded in and generated by the historically evolving objects (Engeström, 2016).

In conclusion, this review identified dependencies in local decision-making that affect children's status and participation in music school policy co-construction. Music schools' systemic affiliation to higher music education institutions and their dual mandate of providing pre-professional studies alongside accessible education have created participation tensions. In fulfilling societal mandates, the system developed a significant function in student selection (Laes et al., 2018) with exclusionary practices, historically distributing admission to those considered to have prerequisites for professionalism and/or successful study. The state-reinforced meritocratic configuration of music school policy accounts for the system's historical logic of selecting students most likely to succeed according to expert-defined criteria, offering education primarily to those with artistic talent (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021). Selection occurred at admission and during studies: prior to 1995, the national curriculum specified minimum examination grades for continuation (Board of Schools, 1970, 1988), with access predicated on assessed curricular suitability (Board of Schools, 1988, p. 3). This selection-based approach to maintaining arts standards was mirrored in 1970s music-focused classes (*musiikkiluokka*), where aptitude assessments were introduced to enhance performance and enable elevated musical objectives (Törmälä, 2013).

National policies that linked student advancement through predetermined study paths to institutional funding may have shifted priority from students as individuals to their musical potential (Elmgren, 2021). This configuration may have also contributed to differential treatment experiences and students' internalized belief that instrumental proficiency is prerequisite for musical participation (Elmgren, 2020, 2019). Music schools' success became indirectly dependent on student performance and progression according to predetermined

plans. Teachers capable of training students to Sibelius Academy proficiency levels received the highest qualification status (Kuha, 2017).

To fulfil their societal mandates, music schools have historically employed various mechanisms to identify students deemed capable of progression (Pohjannoro, 2010a). Under state administration guidance, age restrictions were also imposed on studies: as a general rule, the conservatory departments did not admit persons over the age of 26 (Board of Schools, 1970). These selective practices were supported by differential resource distribution (e.g., Board of Schools, 1970; FNAE, 1995), and assessment practices ranking students through relative evaluation until 1995 (Board of Schools, 1988). While the 2002 and 2017 National Core Curricula no longer emphasize resource allocation based on individual progress, remnants persist through probationary year practices. Previously, the 1995 Law on Music Schools legally mandated study rights denial if students lacked "conditions to complete studies within reasonable time" (516/1995, 12§). The coincidental and unstructured nature of selection processes continues to create uncertainties in children's access and in shaping available study pathways, with current admission processes maintaining this selective approach where students with particular abilities and characteristics are chosen over others, especially when demand exceeds available places.

5. Research Process: Methodology in the Fold

This practitioner inquiry resonates with the ideas of post-qualitative inquiries that reject the idea of pre-defined methodologies (e.g., Barad, 2007, 2011). Instead of using predetermined ways to approach the inquiry, I have engaged in a dynamic construction of methodological approaches to respond to the methodological demands of conducting research with children. By initially following the case study strategy (Laine et al., 2007), I have adopted the idea of using multiple methods to generate and analyse data to provide a more synergistic and comprehensive view of the issue under study (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Multiple approaches, along with diverse sources of data, are recommended for practice research to enhance its quality (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). While case study (Laine et al., 2007) initially provided me with an open framework to work with, I continued to draw on the framework of developmental work research along with the related framework of cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Engeström, 2015). Rather than seeming linear, I experienced the process as reversible and modifiable – as a rhizome (Clarke & Parsons, 2013), with new entries and exits that continued to produce new effects, new ideas for the assemblage, functioning as a rhizomatic configuration. Writing this report in a linear format makes the process seem more linear and stationary than it was. Although the long duration of this study has presented many challenges, of which the management and analysis of the empirical material was but one of many, the sustained engagement that I have sought allowed for the spaciousness around the research project (Bresler, 2015) that I felt was necessary for this study. This sustained engagement was thus not only concerned with *chronos*, measured time, as described by Liora Bresler (2015), but also with *kairos*, experienced time, which offers "a space to become intimate and connect without attachment to an outcome" (p. 4). In retrospect, the five student projects I undertook over the twelve months of the intervention allowed me, as a researcher, a space for

exploration "beyond initial positive and negative reactions" (p. 10). However, in my experience, this sustained engagement did not result in the data losing its vitality and movement, as it was always in a process of retelling and remembering (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

5.1. Research Questions

As stated in Section 1.5, the aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the policy-practice gap within the Finnish publicly funded and administered music schools, and of children's inclusion in music school education. The study aims to increase children's participation and decision-making in this specific context, and to advance understanding of why children's participation in decision-making may require additional effort and reorganisation of professional practices. By engaging children in co-constructed musical practices, this study seeks to identify conditions that support student agency and to explore how students' perspectives can meaningfully shape music education policy. The study conceptualizes policy as practice (Schmidt, 2020), recognizing that educational policies are not merely implemented but are actively interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed through everyday interactions between teachers and students. This means that children "engage in acts of meaning-making and interpretation as they participate in the practical manifestations of music education policy" (Barrett, 2017, p. 177). By co-constructed policy processes, the study thus refers to the dynamic, participatory mechanisms through which institutional practices emerge from collaborative dialogue and shared decision-making between teachers and students, rather than through top-down administrative mandates. Agency, understood not as an inherent individual attribute, but as a relational phenomenon and individuals' situated capacity to exercise intentional action within their sociocultural contexts (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Klemenčič, 2015, 2017, 2021), is used as an analytical lens for examining how students navigate, negotiate, and potentially transform educational environments. This relational understanding of agency recognizes that agentic capacity is contingent upon specific contextual affordances and constraints, necessitating a situated analysis of the conditions that enable or constrain purposeful action.

Aligned with these research imperatives, this investigation pursues a dual analytical framework: first, to examine the potential for student agency and mechanisms for enhancing student influence and participation in educational decision-making through empirical engagement in co-constructive processes with music school students; and second, to identify and critically analyse the systemic dynamics, institutional opportunities, and structural barriers that manifest when

endeavouring to reconcile the policy-practice divide in music education through collaborative methodologies that incorporate children's perspectives and voices. These complementary objectives establish a systematic analytical approach to addressing the study's central aim, focusing respectively on practical pedagogical processes and broader systemic policy considerations. The formative intervention (Engeström, 2011) examined in this study is understood as a space to explore the co-constructed opportunities oriented toward fostering democratic participation and shared governance within music educational contexts. The formative intervention is thus designed not merely to study current practices but to generate transformative potentials by creating spaces for participants to collectively envision and experiment with alternative institutional arrangements.

The formative intervention and its analysis have been guided by the following overarching research questions:

- 1. How do children and young people co-construct music school practices when their agency and decision-making is supported by their teacher?*
- 2. What institutional dynamics and democratic possibilities emerge within such co-constructed policy processes?*
- 3. How does the co-construction of music school practices with students contribute to broader understandings of participatory governance and inclusion in music education?*

The intervention will be analysed in what follows at both the micro-level interactions in student projects and the macro-level considerations about bridging the historically constituted policy-practice gap in Finnish music school education. This dual focus enables an examination of how localized co-construction processes connect to broader questions of participatory governance and democratic music school education. The reporting of the analysis follows a structured approach to respond to the formulated research questions. The first and second research questions are addressed through the analysis presented in Chapters 6 and 7, while Chapter 8 responds to the second and third research question by synthesizing insights gained from the co-construction processes as part of the formative intervention to further analyse the dynamics and democratic possibilities inherent in collaboratively shaping music school education with students.

5.2. The Formative Intervention

Formative interventions (Engeström, 2011, 2016) within developmental work research involve researchers and participants collaborating to transform an activity (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Engeström, 2015). Instead of researchers imposing an intervention with predetermined goals, methods, and expected outcomes, in formative interventions the content and direction of change emerge through the intervention process itself. As discussed in Section 1.4, while formative interventions in developmental work research typically engage practitioners through collaborative processes with researchers, in this study I engaged directly with music school students in this developmental work. In addition to engaging participants in this collective endeavour during the fieldwork phase, the formative intervention process involved examining different perspectives on children's participation (Chapter 2) and analysing music school policy development (Chapter 4). By combining participant engagement with such broader analytical work, developmental work research differs from other participatory approaches in its aim to develop a critical understanding of how existing practices and discourses have been culturally and historically shaped, thereby providing a foundation for transforming these at the systemic level. In this study, the formative intervention approach also enabled a more nuanced understanding of how teacher–student interactions are structured by historically formed societal processes and institutional aims.

The fieldwork phase of the formative intervention was conducted in two music schools over a period of twelve months in the mid-2010s. Both participating music schools were part of the publicly funded and administered Basic Education in the Arts system, as introduced in Chapter 1. To protect the anonymity of the schools as well as the participating children, I have omitted the details of the local curricula of the participating music schools. The local curricula in both music schools had been designed according to the criteria of the Advanced Curriculum for Basic Education in the Arts of the Finnish National Agency for Education.

The fieldwork of the formative intervention consisted of five student projects of different lengths, ranging from five-week projects to projects lasting almost an entire school year. A total of 25 students ($N=25$), aged 9 to 15 years, from two participating music schools were involved in the project. Of the 25 participating music school students, three were students in a regular class and 22 were students in a music-focused class. Since their establishment in the 1960s, these music-

focused classes⁴³ (*musiikkiluokat*) have typically functioned as separate streams in separate classes within regular municipal schools, while general schools may also organise music-emphasised instruction within general classes (Simola et al., 2015). In addition to adhering to the national curriculum for Basic Education, upon which municipalities and/or schools base their local curricula, music-focused classes do not have a separate national curriculum specifically for music instruction. Decisions on the provision of music education are therefore made locally by the comprehensive school/municipality. Whilst it is possible that students in the music-emphasised classes receive one or two additional music lessons per week, however, it is more typical that participation in music-focused classes does not provide students with additional resources but rather reduces their opportunities to engage in other elective subjects. Schools commonly select students for music-focused classes by means of aptitude tests, either at the beginning of comprehensive school, at the age of seven, or at the beginning of year three or year seven, in a similar way to other special classes such as sports or science.

5.3. Formation of Student Groups

Following the ethical approval from the Ethical Review Committee of the University of Arts Helsinki, Sibelius Academy, I contacted music schools to identify potential sites for conducting the study. This initial outreach included discussing the study with the principals of the music schools and providing them with background information on the study. After obtaining consent to conduct the study from the principals of two music schools, I approached the potential participants and their parents to introduce the study and to ask for their willingness to participate in the study (Appendix A). Permission to conduct the research was obtained from both the guardians (Appendix B) and the students, both for the pilot study (Appendix C) and the second phase of the study (Appendix D); at the time of conducting the study, all of the participants were under the age of 15. A written consent to conduct the research was also obtained from the participating music schools' principals (Appendix E).

Introducing the idea of the project to the students involved arranging meetings at the music schools to discuss the research project. In addition to background information on the study, participants and their parents were informed that

⁴³ Music-focused classes are a form of specialized instruction, also referred to as music-weighted education or weighted-curriculum education in music.

participation in the study was voluntary and that it was possible to withdraw from the study at any time. It was also discussed that the students' refusal to participate would be respected. Furthermore, if the students did not wish to take part in the study, they would still have the opportunity to take part in collaborative work, should they wish to do so. While the original plan was for me to be the only facilitating teacher in the project, during the project in Music School No. 1, two teachers, a school teacher and a music teacher, also took part in the project, from whom I also obtained research permission to take part in the study (Appendix F). The decision to invite students to participate in the study by forming student groups based on existing friendships was influenced by the work of Green (2002, 2008) and a number of studies and reports that emphasised the importance of peer learning for children and young people (e.g., Moore et al., 2003; Pitts, 2005; Sloboda, 2005). The Finnish National Core Curriculum framework for music schools also encourages collaborative work with others (FNAE, 2002, 2017a). However, in assessing the implications of this approach, it was necessary to consider both the potential benefits and drawbacks of organizing peer groups in this manner. Specifically, careful attention was required to ensure that the formation of friendship-based groups did not inadvertently impact peer relationships or create peer pressure to participate in the project.

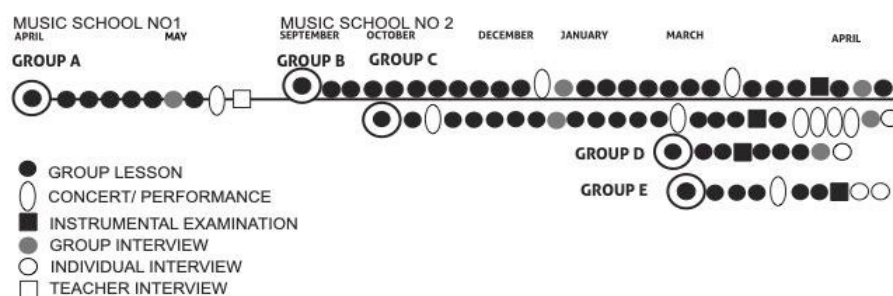
The structure of the student groups, formed around existing friendships, led to variability in group size and the range of instruments/voice represented. Coordinating meeting times for group sessions, in addition to the students' individual lessons and other commitments such as music theory, solfège, and orchestra, posed a logistical challenge in certain cases. Overall, most students were able to find a suitable time for the group lesson, but in one case the group was unable to find a common time due to the students' other hobbies. One of the groups was set up with the help of instrumental teachers because one of the participating students wanted to take part in the project but did not have any peers who played instruments/voice and could take part in the project. The five student groups formed for the study consisted of a total of twenty-five students, from two participating music schools (Table 8). The 25 participating students included three males and twenty-two females, based on the binary gender categorization.

Table 8

Student Groups with the Students' Instruments at the Music Schools

GROUP A N=12 (female) 9 th grade clarinet, violin, piano, kantele, cello, guitar, trumpet	GROUP B N=4 (female) 4 th grade clarinet violin viola saxophone	GROUP C N=4 (female) 3 rd grade clarinet cello saxophone harp	GROUP D N=3 (2 female, 1 male) 5 th grade flute cello viola	GROUP E N=2 (male) 8 th grade/ 9 th grade piano clarinet
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To effectively manage the empirical data, which involved handling a substantial amount of technical equipment, the study was structured in two phases. The initial phase comprised only one group of students and served as a pilot. This pilot phase was strategically implemented to facilitate the management of the data and to allow for adjustments in the study's design, such as the potential inclusion of video recordings of group lessons in the second phase. The overall timeline of the project, which encompassed group lessons, concerts held during the project, student level examinations, and group/individual interviews, is illustrated in Figure 4. Group discussions were conducted both midway through the school year and at the conclusion of the project, with some topics being revisited in both the mid-term and follow-up discussions. The duration of the projects varied depending on factors such as the students' availability to participate and the scheduling of their instrumental examinations, which influenced the project timetable.

Figure 4

The Timeline of the Formative Intervention and the Duration of the Different Projects

5.4. Empirical Material

Several methods of data generation were used to explore the co-construction process and the students' views and experiences. The empirical material generated during the student projects included material from discussions with the students, including separate interviews, as well as material generated by engaging in the actual co-construction of the practices and by observing the students' actions and co-constructed work. At the end of the first phase of the research project, I invited one of the students' instrumental teachers for an interview. This approach aligned with Tara Fenwick et al.'s (2011) conception of field observation and immersion in the research site, involving focused observation of particular events, real-time documentation, collection of artefacts, and interviews with participants. The materials generated included videotapes of the group lessons and concerts/performances, student interviews, researcher observations and notes in a researcher's journal and dictaphone, and other artefacts generated during the projects (Table 9).

Table 9

Research Data in Student Groups

GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D	GROUP E
7 group lessons	23 group lessons	16 group lessons	6 group lessons	6 duo lessons
1 concert performance	2 concert performances	6 concert performances	1 instrumental examination	1 concert performance
2 semi-structured group interviews	1 instrumental examination	1 instrumental examination	2 semi-structured group interviews	1 instrumental examination
1 teacher interview	2 semi-structured group interviews	2 semi-structured group interviews	1 semi-structured individual interview	2 semi-structured individual interviews

WhatsApp-group discussions	WhatsApp-group discussions	1 semi-structured individual interview	WhatsApp-group discussions	WhatsApp-group discussions
WhatsApp-student-teacher-discussions		WhatsApp-group discussions		

The empirical material generated during the formative intervention consists of:

- video-recorded group lessons (n=58)
- video-recorded concerts / performances (n=10)
- video-recorded, semi-structured group interviews (n=6) (45-60 minutes per interview) and individual interviews (n=4) (30–60 minutes per interview), fully transcribed (102 pages)
- a video-recorded, semi-structured teacher interview (n=1) (35 minutes) at the end of the first phase of the formative intervention; fully transcribed (3 pages)
- a researcher-teacher journal 8 pages (first phase), 18 pages (second phase)
- researcher dictations (n=88)
- the group discussions in a cross-platform messaging service (WhatsApp)
- the individual student-teacher discussions in a cross-platform messaging service (WhatsApp)
- other artefacts: notated compositions, researcher-teacher notations
- researcher-teacher's MP3's of the student compositions; a CD of one of the student group's works.

The methodological approaches employed in this study were influenced by the active involvement of the participating students in shaping the research process. The use of WhatsApp⁴⁴ was introduced by one of the participants in the first student groups. The student proposed that the app could facilitate the organization of rehearsal times and help the group stay connected with the progress of the project, such as by recording run-throughs of the arrangement, given that not all participants could attend every rehearsal. As the app seemed to be a convenient way of communicating with the students, and they preferred the platform to my initial plan of individual paper journals, we established both a group conversation

⁴⁴ WhatsApp is a freeware, cross-platform messaging service that allows its users to send text messages and voice messages in a large group.

forum and teacher-student groups within the platform, where the students could comment on their experiences of the developing project, reflect on our collaboration, and make suggestions for the way forward. By fostering continuous feedback from the students, I aimed to strengthen the co-constructive process and enhance collaborative engagement throughout the project. The use of the instant messaging service WhatsApp required the permission of the guardians for anyone under the age of 16 (Appendix G).

The decision whether to use a video camera to record the group lessons, concerts and interviews required careful consideration. Given the planned duration of the project, I considered recording the group lessons and interactions to be a valuable methodological choice. It enabled me to engage in my role as a teacher during the sessions without the need to simultaneously document observations or recall the unfolding dynamics in real time. In my opinion, relying solely on my memory and possibly inaccurate articulation in hasty notes taken during lessons about our work together would have limited the opportunity to explore the process more deeply. I felt that using the video camera also allowed me to reflect on my own teaching, something I had not done before the study using video recordings. At the same time, it was essential to consider the potential impact of video recording on the students and how I could maintain a relaxed atmosphere despite the cameras, which could easily create more anxiety for some of the students. I also needed to consider how both the students and I could engage in interaction without becoming overly self-conscious or inhibited by the continuous presence of the video cameras documenting our sessions. In retrospect, I consider that the decision to utilize video recordings proved beneficial, because they allowed me to re-examine the details of the group lessons that I could not bring to my attention while balancing the roles of researcher and teacher. In the first phase of the intervention, I also used the video material of the group lessons to discuss the project with the participants (Group A). During the second phase of the intervention, I also used the video material to reflect on the developing processes and to consider how to proceed.

To work with the large amount of video data from the group lessons, data management was supported using Atlas.ti, a software that enabled detailed annotations and observations to be integrated directly into the video material. The video recordings also helped me to remember the more casual conversations with the students that they initiated during the group lessons, which in retrospect I felt were important moments to discuss certain things with the students that they wanted to bring up. These more spontaneous group discussions were supplemented by semi-structured group interviews at the end of each group project. For the extended projects (Groups B and C), which spanned eight months, group discussions were also conducted midway through the term. In these groups,

I used the latter group interview to revisit and expand upon the topics previously addressed in the mid-project interview, in addition to exploring the issues that we had discussed in the group lessons.

Individual interviews were conducted in cases where the student was unable to attend the group interviews (Group C, D) or a suitable time for a joint meeting could not be arranged (Group E). Group A also participated in a follow-up interview, during which the students' responses were revisited and further discussed to clarify and elaborate on the key aspects of their earlier remarks. The interviews took place in the music school facilities and were conducted in a conversational style, functioning more as discussions than formal interviews. While I had prepared a set of topics for our conversation, the format remained open-ended, allowing for a broad range of topics to emerge during the discussions. Some of the topics addressed in the interviews were topics that the students had raised during more informal conversations throughout the project (a full list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix H). Overall, I considered that listening to the students' views, giving due weight to their perspectives, and responding to what they wanted to bring up was part of facilitating the dynamic process. As a researcher, therefore, I felt it was important not to remain fixed on the topics that I had planned to discuss, but also to remain open to any issues that the students wished to introduce.

Whilst I experienced that some of the participants in these sessions seemed eager to discuss their experiences and opinions, for many it was a new and somewhat unique situation, as it was perhaps not so common for adults to set aside time to discuss with children and ask them their opinions on various issues. Although I tried to create a relaxed atmosphere in the group discussions, I was aware that students might not feel comfortable answering questions and sharing their insights and meanings related to certain occurrences and events. Whilst previous research suggests that in interviews children are often unable to contribute when and if they are ready to discuss something, in the discussions with the students for this study I allowed the processes to remain open-ended, and also offered the students the opportunity to return to certain topics if they wished to revisit the issues at a later time, or to bring up something they wanted to discuss during the group lessons.

5.5. Emergent Methods of Analysis

This study employs a diffractive methodology (Barad, 2007, 2011), which has involved reading in and through texts, artefacts, and material-discursive practices, and attempting to bring them into conversation with one another. The use of

diffraction, as conceptualized by Karen Barad (2007) and further informed by Donna Haraway (1997), in the analysis of empirical data entails efforts to engage theory and data in a mutually constitutive relationship. This approach involves reading empirical material diffractively through various theoretical frameworks, thereby allowing theory to disrupt and reconfigure data in generative ways (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Mazzei, 2014). While diffraction exemplifies an abductive logic, in my view it added an element of heightened ethical awareness to the process, thereby calling me to acknowledge the world-making responsibilities of research and the ongoing ethical consequences of the researcher's agentic noticing in (re)making the world (Augustine, 2022). This feminist ethics of knowledge (Barad, 2007) is predicated on the idea that practices of knowledge are inherently political and that ethics is inextricably linked to knowledge and knowledge production. As Barad (2007) contends, whereas representational analysis begins from a position outside the observed phenomena and seeks to understand them through methodologically structured interpretation and reflection, diffractive analysis seeks to account for the materially felt consequences of entangled patterns and how they enact transformation or variation through the process. Barad conceptualizes diffraction as a productive alternative to reflection; while both are optical phenomena, reflection is associated with mirroring and sameness, while diffraction emphasizes the small but consequential differences that are made. This includes recognition of the researcher as a situated subject, as embodied, located within specific socio-material contexts, and unable to fully extricate themselves from the interpretive lens through which organizational or social realities are constructed.

Overall, the research process cannot be divided into clear stages of fieldwork and analysis. Throughout the generation of empirical material with the student groups, the analytical process was ongoing, with readings of various insights against the generated data and the embodied process of working with the students. Between the first and second phases of the intervention, I fully transcribed the first two group lessons in addition to the two student group interviews and the teacher interview. By reading the transcripts and repeated viewings of the video material, I sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of the six-week project up to that point, annotating the printed transcripts with brief analytical notes. At the beginning of the process, it was not yet determined what specific theoretical frameworks would be used to read the generated empirical data. In this research project, therefore, analysis did not take place after the "field" work, but rather ran throughout the project, from the (re)construction of the rationale for the intervention to the reading of different findings against each other throughout the project. The processes of data generation and analysis could thus be

characterised as inter/intra related. The post-"field" work was overlaid with multiple revisits to previous "stages" of research, such as the literature review and a detailed examination of the music school context and its development. This relational understanding of the process rejects the division between different "fields", such as the "field" where the empirical work is carried out, the "field" of representation, in other words writing, and the field of subjectivity, the author/researcher (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Following the co-constructed processes with the student groups, I first approached the generated empirical material with the analytical work of thematic analysis and coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022), attempting to create codes that represented the meanings and patterns in the data, examining potential regularities in the events and grouping the events I had initially marked into broader conceptual categories or themes. At this stage of the analysis, I was also trying to get a sense of the projects as a whole, the particular cases in each group of students, and the changes in the projects over time. This involved making brief notes in the margins of the transcribed material (interviews, the WhatsApp group and individual discussions, and the researcher's journal). For me as a researcher-teacher, this process of going through the video material also allowed me to reflect on my role as a teacher. To work with the large amount of video data from the group workshops, data management was supported by technology (Atlas.ti) that allowed comments and observations to be made on the video material. Initially, I also attempted to transcribe the group lessons. However, I found this approach inadequate for capturing the complexity of the group interactions, as much of the interaction in the lessons was non-verbal, including the actual music making itself, students' gestures, and embodied responses. Based on my experience of working with children, both silences and pauses had the capacity to speak (Mazzei, 2007); therefore, I considered that the data were bound not only by speech but also by silence (Mazzei, 2013). Conducting mere transcriptions of the group lessons privileged spoken content, thereby constraining my ability to capture and interpret the broader social dynamics at play – dynamics in which both verbal expressions and silences held significance. Whilst I therefore fully transcribed the verbal interactions of the first two group lessons, I continued working with the video material directly in Atlas.ti, using annotations to capture the non-verbal dimensions of interaction alongside the unfolding events during the lessons. As emphasised in prior research on student voice, engaging meaningfully with students' perspectives necessitated attentiveness to what was unspoken, as "there may be something embodied that lies between and beyond 'voice/not voice' " (Thomson, 2011, p. 27).

After this phase of data analysis, I had a total of 122 annotations within the video data and dozens on the transcribed material (interviews, the WhatsApp

group and individual discussions, and the researcher's journal). Continuing the process, I had 137 annotations within the video data, which I grouped into seven categories. This process of categorising and reviewing the events and assigning codes to several similar occurrences in the data involved re-examining and comparing the categories and subcategories and determining whether they were related. A theme could be described that represented some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. At the end of the initial approach to analysing the empirical material, I had 192 annotations which I grouped into twelve categories, three of which – tools and artefacts (1), norms and rules (2) and community (3) – were informed by cultural-historical activity theory. The other categories included aspects of learning (4), changes in the processes through co-construction (5) and the role of the teacher (6), access and agentic possibilities (7), expectations of students (8), students' experiences of participation (9) and their positioning (10), the holistic nature of the processes (11), and changes in conceptualisations of art making (12).

The selection of data for closer analysis was guided by the study's focus on children's participation and agency in co-constructing educational practices. I attended particularly to moments that revealed children's agentic possibilities and participation in co-constructing practices: negotiations between students and institutional structures, instances where students exercised or were denied agency, and interactions that illuminated the conditions shaping their possibilities for participation. The research questions functioned as a lens through which to identify analytically significant moments within the extensive video and interview material. However, this selection process required continuous critical reflection, extending to examining how my methodological choices themselves shaped the process. For example, whilst I considered that the thematic categorisations I initially made contributed to a clearer organisation of the material (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), I experienced that the coding process could also privilege data that recurred across multiple instances. This presented a methodological challenge: whilst thematic analysis seeks patterns and repetition, a study examining inclusion required equal attentiveness to singular moments – isolated instances of exclusion that may have occurred only once yet carried significant weight for understanding students' experiences of participation.

This tension prompted me to reflect on how to "code" these singular events and "non-data" that escaped the radar of representation and the action of coding: silences, sighs, twitches, and laughter, or the sense of something unsettling or uncomfortable, such as embarrassment or discomfort in myself or in the other participants that caught my attention. These were what Maggie MacLure (2013) calls the data that "glowed" (p. 661), moments that made me pause and required me to pay attention to all the details present within them. One such instance,

which I was compelled to revisit, was an unexpected discussion with one of the guardians of the participating students (more in Section 6.5). During this conversation, in which I had not anticipated, the guardian questioned why I was not also seeking the guardians' voices in the research. This challenge drew my attention to broader issues of stakeholder representation in music schools and ultimately directed me toward the concept of the student voice itself – a perspective that became central to the entire study. Reflecting on the focus of this study, I recognised the importance of highlighting such singular moments: those that resisted generalisation but were essential for understanding the complexities of student participation.

A central consideration in the analytical process of this study was how various methodological choices would influence the extent to which children's perspectives were foregrounded. As Karlsson (2010) notes, researchers observing children's activities are often confronted with an abundance of material. In this way, the researcher has a limited opportunity to make observations, but also the power to determine which aspects to attend to, follow, and ultimately include in the analysis, thus shaping the representation of children's experiences. According to Karlsson, it is therefore crucial in child research to consider what criteria are used to select the parts of the material to be analysed in more detail, what is ethical to analyse (see also Alderson, 2004), and what perspectives and limitations the children have on the choices, interpretations, and concepts made by the researcher. While some of the qualitative analysis strategies for interviews suggest looking for themes that the interviewees themselves frequently mention and to which they give particular emphasis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), I found the process of identifying recurring themes or patterns in the discussions with children not without its challenges, as it reduced the complexity of detail and positioned "repetition", "similarity", or "sameness" as criteria by which divisions were made within the data. I also experienced challenges in approaches that reduced variability or used analytical simplification to reduce the complexity of events or applied predetermined abstractions to complex phenomena for ease of reporting.

Although I had not begun the analysis with the intention of producing an overarching research narrative that would "explain" the meaning of the participants' responses or the essence of the co-constructed processes, I experienced that it was only after the initial attempts at analysis that I became aware of the challenges of working with the empirical material. As I experienced it, new encounters with other materials and theories blurred the boundaries of the materials and kept them changing and moving (St. Pierre, 1997). Although I had attempted to use "peer debriefing" and "member checks", which are seen in traditional qualitative methodology as providing credibility (p. 184), I

experienced that these occasions did not provide a way of "closing" the process but rather kept the process in motion. Reflecting the data back to the participants did not therefore produce "fixed" or "correct" interpretations that the participants could recognise and verify but rather opened up further lines of thought. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's (1976) conception of meaning as an endless play of difference, I came to understand meaning-making as something that always escaped, never became "finished", but rather refused and resisted fixed and stable meaning (see also Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Conceiving the social world as dynamic, affective, and perpetually in flux thus complicated my ability to fix meanings or encapsulate them within language. In interpreting the students' voices, I was therefore compelled to engage with Pat Thomson's (2011) assertion that my responsibility as a researcher was to make the interpretation of the children's voices an explicit process of seeking at least some kind of agreement about what meanings were intended, while at the same time recognising the impossibility of ever reaching a final meaning or agreement.

Rather than pursuing data saturation or coding imperatives for stable meaning, the analytic process in this study was oriented toward engaging the data from multiple perspectives to allow meaning to move (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and to resist the anxiety of getting the meaning/interpretation "right" (Masny, 2013). As Alessandra Mazzei (2014) suggests, to disrupt "habitual normative readings" (p. 742), such as those produced through conventional coding, a diffractive analysis approach can involve reading the data through multiple theoretical insights to generate thoughts and productive emergences, thus also challenging imperatives to produce coherent and familiar narratives. Accordingly, I have read the empirical material not in the traditional way, as "evidence", but rather as non-representational and transgressive (St. Pierre, 1997), intervening in a process to diffract rather than foreclose thought. St. Pierre's notion of transgressive data emphasizes how memories and new encounters with other materials and theories blur the boundaries of materials and keep them changing and in motion, creating spaces for unexpected insights and connections. The questions of how to attend to data through a rhizomatic approach (Masny, 2013) and the possibility of developing a politics of representation that could make conscious shifts towards possibilization (Sannino & Engeström, 2017) remained present until the writing of this report.

Hence, this study distanced itself from traditional quality criteria emphasizing generalizability, external validity, and replicability. The diffractive methodology adopted reframed these quality concerns: rather than pursuing validity through replication or reliability through consistency, the study sought accountability through reflexive transparency about how knowledge was co-constituted through researcher-data-theory entanglements (Barad, 2007; Lather, 1993). This approach

recognized that rigor lay not in claims of researcher detachment but in making visible the material-discursive practices through which particular understandings emerged. Considering practices of knowing as inherently political and ethics as an integral part of knowledge production (Barad, 2007), rather than forming simplifications about children, the study required a critical re-evaluation of how uniformities and generalizations ultimately benefit children as a social group (Powell et al., 2013). The urgent question became whether complexity could become an asset, advocating for portraying scientific knowledge's ambiguous nature rather than perpetuating foundationalist essentializations. Accepting complexity required embracing incompleteness, ambiguity, and diverse perspectives rather than striving for absolute coherence. This stance involved an ethical responsibility towards the research participants and readers, distinguishing between "knowing well" and "knowing responsibly" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002, p. 124). The analytical approach adopted in this study thus reflected a commitment to developing a politics of representation capable of making conscious shifts towards possibility, recognizing that socially impactful knowledge must be actionable – that is, knowledge that can be translated into transformative action in educational practice (Engeström, 2007; Sannino & Engeström, 2017).

5.6. Research Ethics

It has been contended that child research is one of the most demanding areas of research (Tuukkanen, 2018). Ethical decisions are accentuated in child research due to the vulnerability of children: issues of authority and power positions are at play, as children do not have the same position in society as adults (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). As discussed in the previous section, due to the involvement of children in the study, there were several considerations in the construction of the methodological approaches in this study, which were further subjected to the considerations of ethics in child research.

One of the first imperatives in these considerations was to consider whether the research was necessary and should be undertaken in the first place, and further, whether children needed to be involved and in what capacity, or whether knowledge could be gained through other means (Graham et al., 2013). While the purpose of this study was to find ways to increase children's participation in the actions and related decision-making in their music school education and to listen to their voices and perspectives, it was also crucial to determine whether the study would actually benefit the individual child participants and, more widely, children as a social group (Powell et al., 2013); in other words, whether the study would

increase knowledge and potentially influence policy and practice in a wider sense, and what the potential harms would be for the study participants, their families, and wider community groups. Closely tied to these considerations was the critical need to examine whose desire for change, particularly in enhancing children's participation, was prioritized within the study, and whose agendas were at the centre of the actions in interventions; in other words, who had the legitimacy to define the actions undertaken and what opportunities were afforded to the participants – in this study's case, the students – to engage meaningfully in the co-construction of the research process and the evaluation of its outcomes.

Ethical research with children is underpinned by the principles of justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence (Graham et al., 2013), alongside considerations of authority and power dynamics. Consequently, ensuring ethical research with children also required me, as the researcher, to reflect critically on issues such as the children's wellbeing. This included assessing the potential impact of the study on their experiences, should the research proceed, as well as evaluating the participants' willingness and capacity to engage in the study. Additionally, it was essential to implement strategies aimed at minimizing any potential distress for the students throughout the research process.

As stated in the introduction, whilst some of the characteristics of this study can be attributed to the research strategies of co-research (Kulmala et al., 2023), the study did not involve the students as research partners in the initial planning or reporting phases of the research project. This decision not to conduct the study as co-research, where children would decide on the participating music schools, contact potential participants, and participate in data collection by conducting interviews with peers, thus sharing roles and responsibilities as joint investigators in one or several stages of the research process (Seidl et al., 2025), involved carefully weighing competing ethical commitments. An initial concern centred on students' time resources and the project timeline in general, which remained uncertain due to funding constraints affecting the project's continuation and completion. Acknowledging that students already had commitments in both comprehensive school and music school, as well as possible involvement in other extracurricular activities and family obligations, there was a need to evaluate whether these additional responsibilities would impose an unreasonable workload and add stress to their already demanding schedules. The idea of setting up separate meetings to discuss research data during the reporting phase raised additional concerns about how to share responsibility in a project whose duration and scope remained undefined. I was aware that that students' limited involvement could constitute tokenistic participation rather than genuine partnership. In this study, the anonymity of participants was maintained as an ethical safeguard, given that all children involved were minors under the age of

18. Scholarship on co-research has highlighted additional complexities of co-research with adolescents, particularly regarding authorship and recognition: adolescents find it difficult to claim their work if they cannot be acknowledged in research by name (Warritch et al., 2024). Genuine co-research would also have required addressing complex practical questions, including how to appropriately compensate young researchers and provide the training and support necessary for meaningful participation.

I acknowledge that the decision not to conduct this study as co-research limited students' influence over the research process. However, to support students in taking an active stance, the study employed a formative intervention methodology, which, unlike other interventionist designs, did not follow a fixed, predetermined structure but evolved through mutual appropriation, with ideas being reshaped – sometimes unpredictably – throughout the process. Furthermore, within the diffractive methodological framework, the children were not merely viewed as research subjects or even collaborators in discrete research tasks, but rather as co-constitutive agents throughout the knowledge production process. Diffractive methodology recognizes that knowledge emerges through intra-actions (Barad, 2007) – the mutual constitution of researcher, participants, material practices, and theoretical insights. From this perspective, the students' active participation in co-constructing music school practices during the formative intervention was integral to the analytical process itself. Their negotiations, resistances, creative solutions, embodied responses, and voiced concerns continuously shaped what could be known and how it could be understood. The data that "glowed" (MacLure, 2013) emerged precisely through the students' agentic engagement with the intervention processes – their silences, hesitations, enthusiasms, and challenges all contributed to the material-discursive practices through which understandings were produced. Thus, while students were not asked to perform researcher tasks such as coding transcripts or writing analytical memos, their ongoing participation in the co-construction process meant that they were involved in generating the very phenomena being studied. In this sense, the diffractive approach positions children not as external informants providing data for adult analysis, but as active participants whose embodied engagement constituted the research process itself – not the preparation of the analysis, but the analysis itself.

The decision to conduct this study with children and young people was primarily based on the recognition that they were experts in their own lives, having unique knowledge that could not be obtained in any other way without their participation. The issues related to civic participation are issues that require the input of those involved (Kulmala et al., 2023). The questions for this study were therefore such that they could not be answered without the participation of

the stakeholders themselves, the children and young people. Once the decision to conduct this study was made, the procedural ethical obligations of the study included applying for an ethical approval from the Ethical Review Committee of the University of Arts Helsinki, Sibelius Academy, and obtaining informed consent to participate not only from the guardians of the participating students (see Appendix B) and the participating music schools (Appendix E), but most importantly from the participating students (Appendix C, D) themselves. In addition to protecting the anonymity of the participants, the principles of research ethics had to be followed in the management of the research materials and data, including the creation and storage of the research data and related descriptive information, the metadata, in such a way that the material remained usable and reliable throughout the research. The protection of confidential information, data security and data protection, had to be ensured in accordance with good scientific practice and the instructions and regulations issued by the University of the Arts, in addition to the national guidelines provided by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2009, 2019, 2023). The Data Protection Act (1050/2018) and the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) established the legal framework for this study, defining the conditions under which personal data may be processed.

While the research process began with a formal, ethical review process by obtaining ethical approval from the Ethical Review Committee of the University of Arts Helsinki, this procedural process was seen as only part of a more dynamic research ethics process that was present throughout the project, from the design of the study to the writing of this research report and the communication of the study's findings. Viewing the ethical decisions as contextually produced and practised involved an understanding of these ethical acts as situated ethics (Simons & Usher, 2000), relational and contingent, which required in situ ethical decisions (Ebrahim, 2010) made based on contextual priorities rather than abstract ethical standards. In retrospect, then, the ethical issues I had identified at the beginning of the study were part of the pervasiveness of the ethical concerns I encountered by the end of the project.

My experience of the project resonates with a feminist ethics of knowledge (Barad, 2007), which can be characterised by the assumption that practices of knowledge are inherently political and that ethics is part of knowledge and knowledge production. Practices of knowing are thus not modest observations of an independent reality but are constitutively involved in the material becoming of the world. From these understandings, ethics is not something that can be added on, by choice, but is rather a fact of life: the world is inherently an ethical matter and knowledge-making is itself a matter of ethical concern. In what Barad (2007) calls "ethico-onto-epistemology", this inseparability of ethics, ontology, and

epistemology in (scientific) knowledge production is described (p. 90). The need to distinguish between what it means to "know well" and "know responsibly" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002, p. 124) also required recognising the responsibility and accountability of this research to others and the epistemic responsibility of the study not only to the research participants but also to those who read and reinterpret the understandings and claims made in this study. Addressing these ethical concerns required ongoing reflexivity on my part as a researcher and an attempt to be as transparent as possible about the epistemological, ontological, theoretical, and personal assumptions that informed this research, allowing the reader to assess the appropriateness of the actions I took in relation to the ethical issues in this study. Whilst I did not assume that there was a correct, fixed standpoint from which to observe the world of practice, nor that children's meanings were "out there" to be studied, reflected upon, and their meaning/knowledge derived (Barad, 2007), there were several different occasions during this study that required careful consideration in order to avoid interpretations of positivist claims to represent the world "as it really is", innocently and accurately. As this study was conducted with the aim of producing information for the benefit of the target group, children and young people, I therefore had to acknowledge the world-making powers of the practices of research enquiry, in other words the capacity of research in itself to constitute the nature of its objects and subjects of study (Mauthner, 2018).

According to the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2023), although research publications aim to avoid damage and harm, they can also have harmful consequences for research subjects. In relation to this study, for example, this meant carefully considering how to present the findings of the study without creating further stagnation and stigmatisation of the social category of children, the problems of which I had become aware of during the study. This included avoiding the application of positivist ideas to information that was "found" as a result of the procedures of this study and implied as a notion of truth, with potentially harmful consequences for the wider group of children. These considerations included avoiding what Holliday (2016) describes as essentialist traps that reduce research participants to cultural stereotypes, which in relation to this study could be assertions that the social category of "children" has certain essential, stable, and shared characteristics. These considerations had to take into account that these stabilising categories could become stigmatic labels for individuals (Engeström, 2007).

Other ethical issues also related to my own role in the study. Although the dual role of researcher-teacher is quite common in child research (Peltokorpi et al., 2013), this dual role presented significant ethical challenges. Practitioner inquiry, while offering unique affordances, carries inherent constraints that

required careful consideration. Whilst conducting research with children presented challenges in itself, my dual role introduced additional ethical complexities, as I simultaneously occupied the position of teacher and researcher in the co-constructed projects. While it is well documented that insider knowledge enables researchers to understand the nuances of educational contexts in ways that external researchers cannot easily access (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), these affordances are accompanied by significant constraints. Among the most crucial aspects of this relationship are issues of authority and power that are inherent in educational contexts. Practitioner researchers must remain vigilant about the ways in which their professional authority may shape participants' responses and willingness to express dissent (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007). Children may feel compelled to participate or respond in particular ways simply because their teacher is asking, regardless of assurances about open expression. Establishing a relationship with the students that included my role as a researcher was therefore not straightforward, given the power and status differentials that exist between teacher and child participants. The very trust that enabled effective teaching relationships could become ethically problematic when leveraged for research purposes – established trust should not be abused for the purposes of research (Mills, 2007).

Beyond these concerns, the dual role also created challenges for critical reflexivity. Practitioner researchers may struggle to maintain analytical distance from practices in which they are deeply invested (Anderson & Herr, 1999). My own commitments to the pedagogical approaches being studied meant that I had to work consciously against confirmation bias and remain open to findings that might challenge my professional assumptions. Guarding against the tendency to interpret data in ways that validated my own practice required ongoing reflexive attention throughout the analytical process.

Ethical considerations remained central throughout the reporting phase of this study, necessitating ongoing reflection on how to uphold a high level of epistemic responsibility (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002) and how to develop a politics of representation that could make deliberate shifts towards possibility (Engeström, 2023); in other words, how to present the findings of the study in a way that is both sensitive to the ethical issues of child research and beneficial to the individual child participants and, more widely, to children as a social group. In reflecting on the overall aims of this research and the values and beliefs that were present throughout this research project and in the shaping of the research (Bresler, 2015), I was inspired by Simon Ceder's (2019) call for the cultivation of relational alternatives in education: approaches that escape centrism in both educational thought and research. In this study, I posited that these questions needed to be considered not only from the perspective of the participating children

and young people, and children and young people as a wider social group, but also from the perspective of music education and music schools in Finland more broadly, as I conducted the study in a professional context, having worked in various music schools for over two decades prior to the study. While I believe that research must be undertaken without fear of reactions from the authorities related to the research context, I needed to consider the possible outcomes of my research, including possible negative reactions I might receive as a researcher, recognising that research on children's issues has previously provoked such reactions against researchers (e.g., Rikala & Korsberg, 2022).

6. Seeking Student Voice Through Co-Construction

In the following two chapters I will present the findings of the study by drawing on the empirical material generated by the student projects as part of the formative intervention in the two music schools. Since a central focus of the student projects in this study was to find ways to support student participation in co-construction processes and to allow student participants to explore issues that they deemed meaningful, the focus of the analysis has been to examine the process of negotiation and the potential for student agency in these co-constructive processes. This examination includes what kinds of initiations were made by the students involved in the study that influenced collective decision-making, as well as the underlying intentions that could be discerned in their actions during these negotiations.

Chapter Six begins with an elaboration of the starting points for the co-construction process and my preliminary understanding of the process. All personal names referenced in this report are pseudonyms, and certain details concerning the teachers, schools, and students have been modified to ensure participant anonymity. To further safeguard the confidentiality of the participating music schools, specific references to local curricula have been omitted. Instead, the analysis draws upon the National Core Curriculum framework to highlight some of the starting points for the intervention.

6.1. Envisioning a Student-Centred Practice

The aim of the intervention is to transform a teacher-centred practice to a student-centred practice where the students negotiate the classroom practices and curriculum, share authority and responsibility of the learning process. This also means selecting the working approaches

together with the students. I also aim to advance the development of a peer-directed learning environment by negotiating with and building on students' interests and experiences. What were the starting points for my intervention? At the outset of the intervention, I posed several key questions to myself: How could I maintain and create conditions that allowed students to engage in activities that promoted active agency? For a student-centred practice, I felt that student agency would be one of the foundations on which to build. For students to be agents in their own learning, their agency needed to be supported so that they could gain a sense of autonomy and competence in their learning. Furthermore, for a student-centred practice, instrumental learning would need to have some promise of application in students' lives and provide personal fulfilment for them. How, then, might the practices develop students' sustained interest in instrumental learning and support their long-term prospects for engaging in music making? (The author's research plan four months prior to the first student project)

The interactions with students that took place on the premises of the two music schools over a period of twelve months were the beginning of a long process for the research of this study, the outcomes of which were not known at the outset. Engaging in collaborative projects with the students, facilitated through shared decision making and a commitment to find ways to enhance students' participation in the co-construction of music school practices, required revisions to the initial research design. These adjustments extended not only to the methodological execution of the fieldwork but also to the conceptual frameworks underpinning the study. At the beginning of the student projects, I drew upon methodological approaches of case study research (Laine et al., 2007) and the theoretical frameworks of student-centred learning (e.g., Weimer, 2013). As outlined in my preliminary research plan, my aim was to critically reconsider the roles of teacher and student with the aim to "transform a teacher-centred practice into a student-centred practice". At the time of conducting the first phase of the intervention, these roles had been the focus of much critical discussion, with a central target of criticism being, for example, the transmissive and authoritarian approaches to instrumental teaching, which were seen as potentially inhibiting the development of artistic identity (Gaunt, 2008, 2010, 2011) and autonomy in musical learning (e.g., López-Íñiguez & Pozo, 2014a, 2014b). Some of the student-centred learning theories that emphasised learner autonomy and independence (e.g., Weimer, 2013) implied a transformation from dependent to independent, autonomous, and self-directed learners, where the teacher's role was to bring out and help realise the potential of the students.

The initial contradiction that served as a catalyst for this study's formative intervention (Engeström & Sannino, 2010) was the policy-practice gap between the governmental regulation for music schools and the real-life practice in which I had been involved as an instrumental teacher in various music schools over the previous decades. While the active participation of students in their personal and collective work and in the operational environment of the music school was a policy priority (at the time of the intervention, FNAE, 2002), I experienced that the involvement of children and young people in local decision-making processes was limited. Accordingly, in envisioning approaches for co-constructing music school practices with students, the guiding framework for the intervention was drawn from existing music school policy. This policy was grounded in the principle that teachers and students collaboratively negotiate a curriculum informed by the National Core Curriculum, while remaining responsive to and reflective of students' individual interests and cultural backgrounds (FNAE, 2002, p. 7). In the above quotation describing my starting points, I have drawn on several aspects of the National Core Curriculum, which emphasises the active role of the student and the need to give students opportunities to influence their personal and collaborative work and the environment in which they work. At the time of the intervention, the National Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2002) articulated the concept of learning, and the role of the student as follows:

Based upon the conception of learning that emphasizes the active role of the student, it follows that the study environment should give students the opportunity to set their own goals, to learn to work independently and together with others, and to find ways of working that suit them. The key is the interaction between the teacher and the student and among the students, as well as the consideration of different ways of learning, working and assessment. (p. 7, translation by the author)

Further, in defining the conception of the learning environment, the 2002 National Core Curriculum maintained that "a good learning environment enables the development of the student's interaction skills and skills for making initiatives and being persistent. It further encourages the student's activity, creativity, independent thinking and learning motivation and enables safe growth and development" (p. 7). Although the formative intervention was conducted at a time when the 2002 National Core Curriculum was in force, a comparison with the 2017 National Core Curriculum indicates that the conceptualisation of the student remains largely unchanged. The 2017 National Core Curriculum continues to depict the student as an "active agent" (FNAE, 2017a, p. 11) who "learns to set goals and to work in accordance with these goals, both independently and together

with others" (p. 11), a phrasing that closely mirrors the formulation found in the 2002 curriculum. In the 2017 National Core Curriculum, the active participation of students is further emphasised by defining the starting points for music studies as "students' strengths and interests" (p. 47). Through the 2017 curriculum reform, individualised learning paths and student choice in curriculum content have been further supported by allowing music schools to locally determine the distribution and number of teaching and learning hours for studies (p. 15), thus removing the previous nationally determined division into instrumental/orchestral studies and music theory/solfège studies (FNAE, 2002, p. 8).

The shift toward a music school education that actively incorporated students' perspectives was already underscored in the 2002 National Core Curriculum. In her examination of Finnish music school policy, Björk (2016) notes that the elevation of the ideal of a good relationship with music to the status of official policy in the 2002 National Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2002, p. 6) was a remarkable change in the history of the Finnish music school system, the meaning of which was deliberately left open, thus leaving space for it to be defined more precisely in practice (see also Heimonen, 2002, p. 144). In Björk's view, this emphasised the autonomous role of music school teachers in Finland, who are seen as having not only the right but also the obligation to express their own interpretations of the curriculum text in their teaching practice.

While developmental projects in music education often aim to implement change through the adoption of predefined approaches or specific methods in instrumental learning, this study did not begin with a fixed model to apply; rather, the starting point was to find ways to increase students' participation in the co-construction of shared practices and to allow them to participate in decision making and influence their music school education. The starting point of the intervention was therefore to remain open to the students' initiatives, not to define in advance specific areas in which the students could participate, but rather to try to create an open space for exploration. Organising and assembling the activities with the students and working together through dialogue and negotiation was an effort to create a space for co-configuration, a concept used by Engeström (2004b) to describe the joint development of new practices and the active involvement and input of stakeholders in the creation of services (Engeström, 2008).

Consistent with Berry Mayall's (2002) perspective, I concurred that foregrounding a focus on student agency provided a means to examine how students' interactions with others could make "a difference – to a relationship or a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints" (p. 21). This emphasis also contributed to what I conceptualized as an emergent curriculum: one shaped by students' interests and inquiries and generated in a dynamic and spontaneous manner through processes of joint action between the

students and myself, as the teacher-researcher. For the idea of emergence, I was influenced by the work of educational theorist Keith Sawyer (2011), who characterizes teaching as something that takes place between structure and improvisation, an emergent pedagogy that is strategically directed by the teacher, but at the same time emerges from the interactive give and take between teacher and students, and students and each other. In suggesting that teaching could be seen as an improvisational activity, Sawyer highlights the collaborative and emergent nature of effective classroom practice, which takes place within broad structures and frameworks and requires a strategic balance between structure and open-endedness. In Sawyer's (2004) view, rigid adherence to a predetermined plan or script and/or too much control could circumvent the co-construction process. Therefore, in exploring how to maintain and create conditions that allow students to engage in activities that promote active agency, I felt it was important to explore how to maintain sufficiently loose structures and permeable boundaries to allow room for moment-to-moment decision-making.

6.2. Destabilizing Instrumental Pedagogy Through Friendship Groups

Upon reflection, I identify two parallel, overlapping processes in the formative intervention: the intervention as a research process, and the intervention as a pedagogical process, in which I actively sought to revise my own pedagogical approaches – in other words, intervened and destabilised previous ways of organising instrumental lessons in order to create the space, time, and opportunity to learn from changes within the practices. This idea of changing the actual practices to make potential challenges visible drew on the idea of formative intervention (Engeström, 2016), where change is initiated to learn from the system in order to find out what can be done in an action. In this study, the most central change was the destabilisation of the individual teaching mode by creating a space for joint collaboration and sharing of one's own experiences through the group sessions, in which the groups were formed based on the friendship of the group members. This pedagogical intervention in the prevailing culture of operation meant that the activities were not organised around a fixed repertoire or an appropriate arrangement, for example by forming ensembles according to the requirements of the repertoire, which indicated the instrumentation and number of instrumentalists in the ensemble (e.g., a string/wind quartet), or the presumed ability levels of the students, but rather drew on the students' own social networks. This approach allowed for flexible groupings, thus permitting any combination of students to form ensembles.

The idea of working in peer groups drew on the critical notions of previous studies that had suggested the dominance of canonised forms of interaction in instrumental education (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013, p. x). These studies argued that music-making in traditional settings is often directed by established performance practices and repertoire choices, rather than fostering peer collaboration. The dominant paradigm in ensemble education has been referred to as the "band-orchestra-chorus trilogy", music inherited from the military, aristocracy, and church, which represents a model that has underpinned the hegemony of military-industrial models in instrumental ensembles (Colley, 2009, p. 56; see also Campbell, 2004; Webb & Seddon, 2012). Similar to the historical legacy of large ensembles in US public school music programmes (Mark & Gary, 2007), these large ensembles, such as wind bands and string orchestras, are also common in Finnish music schools, with small ensemble playing often forming a smaller part of students' music school studies.

Based on my experience, peer-led music making seldom took place in the music schools in which I had worked. On the rare occasions when student ensembles involved siblings, for example, these groups were typically organised around a fixed repertoire for a specific instrumental arrangement, such as a woodwind trio or string quartet, often requiring a comparable level of technical proficiency from the participants. Alternatively, ensembles might be structured around a particular set-up, such as a pop band, determined by the choice of instruments or voices. Additionally, although some students' guardians played instruments, intergenerational music-making was rarely encouraged. This observation aligns with the insights of Mauno Järvelä (2014), the founder of Finnish folk music pedagogy Näppärit, who notes that intergenerational music making remains a relatively novel phenomenon in Finland.

In considering the alternative instrumental ensembles that would draw on peer work, I also acknowledged emerging research indicating that collaborative learning approaches were underutilised in music education (e.g., Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013). Despite the recognition of the importance of the social context for music learning, and the fact that making music with others was considered important for increasing motivation and the continuation of music studies, individual lessons were still central to formal instrumental learning in Finnish music schools. This observation was later also supported by the Finnish Association of Music Schools' member school surveys, which reported low percentages of ensemble playing in music schools (e.g., Klemettinen, 2016, 2019). This policy favouring individual-based teaching contrasted with a body of research highlighting the significant benefits students can gain from engaging in productive peer relationships. Such studies emphasize the critical role of social support in fostering musical achievement (Creech & Hallam, 2003; Green, 2001;

Hallam, 2012; Moore et al., 2003) and underscore the positive influence peers have on student resilience (Hirvonen, 2003). Moreover, several studies have argued that the reasons for musical participation are often social (Sloboda, 2005; Veblen & Olsson, 2002), even the primary reason for students' participation (Pitts, 2005), revealing a gap in the recognition of the social dimension and the importance of peer learners in music education (e.g., Folkestad, 2006; Latukefu, 2010; Miell & MacDonald, 2000). These forms of collaborative music-making have more commonly been associated with informal, non-structured learning contexts (Green, 2001; Sloboda, 2005; Westerlund, 2006b). Harwood and Marsh (2012), in their comparison of music learning in and out of the classroom, found that children's music-making outside school – whether in playgrounds or at home – was typically organised around friendship or family groups, in contrast to the more structured, class-based learning in formal educational settings.

Previous research has also suggested that learning from and with peers can also create greater motivation to participate in music making, pointing to the importance of models of musical expertise, whether from teachers or other peers, for the development of expertise (Hallam, 2002; Kamin et al., 2007), as well as for creative music making such as improvisation (Coulson & Burke, 2013) and group composition (Fautley, 2005). It has been proposed that the most effective musical collaborations emerge from children working within friendship groups as these groups demonstrate what has been termed transactive communication – the dialogical exchange essential for successful collaborative processes (Miell & MacDonald, 2000). Additionally, peer assessment experiences have been shown to contribute to student learning (Lebler, 2013). High achievers in musical learning have been found to find their peers supportive and also express greater happiness when working with like-minded peers (O'Neill, 1999a).

As discussed in Section 5.2, the idea of forming the participating student groups as friendship groups for this study was also influenced by the work of Green (2002, 2008), who, drawing on her research into informal contexts of musical learning, advocated for increased opportunities for children to engage with music of their own choosing within peer group settings. Acknowledging the practical challenges associated with this approach, particularly the limited availability of repertoire and instructional materials for heterogeneous small groups (Hallam, 2012), I was prepared to support the groups in making arrangements of the repertoire they wished to learn, and to use improvisation and composition as a means of making music together. However, this process took iterative turns and was shaped by the interaction with the students, including the more informal discussions and observations of the guardians (more on this in the next section). The experiences also influenced the formation of the perspective on the policy-practice gap that I initially observed, especially as the guardians' points

of view urged me to consider the overall organisational decision-making in music schools together with the situationality of the interactions with children in my teaching practice.

6.3. Project of the Ninth-Grade Students

In this study, the first project undertaken by a participating student group, was a five-week undertaking by a group of twelve ninth-grade students, named after the song⁴⁵ that the student group had chosen to arrange and work on during the project. At the time of the study, the students were concluding their comprehensive school, marking the end of nine years of compulsory schooling. The group consisted of music school students who played various instruments, from violin to piano, guitar, and cello. The project took place over the final five weeks of the school year, during which the group met for nine sessions, each approximately one hour in length. Additional rehearsal time was incorporated after the students expressed a wish to perform at the music school's end-of-year concert. The project culminated in two dress rehearsals and finally a performance at the students' own school spring celebration (*kevätjuhla*) and graduation ceremony commemorating the completion of compulsory schooling.

Although it was difficult to determine precisely which of the students in the group had originated the idea for the project, it became evident over the course of our weekly sessions that the group's collaborative approach was influenced by their prior experiences of working together on self-initiated vocal projects. Before the launch of this project, a smaller group of ninth-grade students had independently engaged in arranging and rehearsing a cappella vocal pieces. At our first meeting to discuss the project, the group presented their ideas for the project: they wanted to extend the previous work they had done with their a cappella vocal group by adding instruments to the planned vocal arrangement. The song they had chosen for the project was by an electronic music group that had a rather unique combination of musicians: a number of string players and vocalists along with a drummer and a bassist/keyboardist.

One of the group members later described the reasons for choosing the song for the project because it was a bit different, not like basic [group interview]. The song had gained popularity in the years leading up to the project, becoming an international hit after its release with over 520 million views on YouTube (source: Wikipedia). The Grammy Award-winning song was described as a blend of

⁴⁵ To enhance anonymity, the title of the song has been intentionally omitted from this analysis.

classically inspired violin and modern popular music, which inspired the ninth-grade student group, as the group's players also had a classical music background. The lyrics of the song conveyed the idea of being with someone with whom you can find true happiness and peace, emphasising the importance of their presence. In a group interview conducted later in the project, the students described how their self-directed way of making music had been inspired by the film *Pitch Perfect*, released some years prior, which portrayed an a cappella group creating mash-up arrangements of popular songs. As the project progressed, it became apparent that the students' self-initiated processes of music-making mirrored those outlined by Green (2002, 2008) in her research on informal and non-formal learning among adult popular musicians. Specifically, the group's integration of listening, playing, aural transcription from recordings, and arranging aligned with the learning strategies that Green had observed in non-formal settings. These parallels suggested that the students were engaging in a form of music learning that emphasised peer collaboration, autonomy, and experiential processes, rather than formal instruction.

The student-initiated work of arranging the songs for their own ensemble was therefore quite unique. While group work among students is relatively common in music education, existing research indicates that it is far less typical for students to take the lead in forming and directing such groups independently (Villa et al., 2010). Similar to Green's (2002, 2008) studies, where the element of self-selected and co-selected repertoire was one of the underpinning characteristics of the musicians' approach, the students described how they had chosen the songs themselves and tried to write down the music for the group members through repeated listening to the vocal parts. However, unlike the adult learners in Green's research, who typically used these methods to develop instrumental technique, these students applied the same strategies in arranging vocal music for their ensemble. During the group interview, they shared, with some amusement, how their rehearsals had drawn attention at school, particularly when they sang together during break times. They had also practised at the homes of some of the group members, illustrating a high level of commitment and peer-driven motivation that extended beyond the institutional setting.

As the students described, prior to this project they had not played together as a mixed-instrument peer group during their years at music school. From my perspective, the students' initiative in arranging and rehearsing a piece collaboratively aligned closely with the aims of the intervention, which sought to co-construct the music making practices with students, foster autonomy, encourage shared decision-making, and centre the learning experience around the students' chosen repertoire. Throughout our sessions, the students collectively arranged the song, assumed different roles within the group, and actively sought

out performance opportunities in both their comprehensive school and music school contexts. At the initiative of the group, we incorporated the use of WhatsApp, a cross-platform messaging application, as a tool to facilitate the project. The group used the platform to coordinate rehearsal schedules, reflect on progress made during previous sessions, and delegate tasks to be completed outside of rehearsals, which was particularly helpful when a group member was unable to attend in person.

Building on the students' self-directed approach to the project, I adopted the role of facilitator, whose primary responsibility during each session was to elicit and support the students' ideas for the final arrangement, while remaining responsive to any emergent directions the project might take. This facilitative stance was intended to create an environment in which the students' voices could genuinely shape the process, rather than simply contribute to a predetermined outcome. In the following subsections, I examine the evolving process of negotiation, with particular attention to events that I experienced as focal points of negotiation for exploring the potentials for student agency. For the ninth-grade group, the negotiations involved not only finding a common space to pursue the project, but also accommodating the group's initiations, such as the initiation to take part in school concerts.

6.4. Multivoiced Negotiations: Diverse Perspectives in Collaborative Projects

Following the ninth-grade students' initiative to collaboratively arrange and rehearse a piece, the idea of performing together was also brought up early in the project. During our initial planning discussions, the students conveyed a strong desire to perform with this group of friends one last time before concluding their nine years of compulsory education. Their preferred venue for this farewell performance was the end-of-term concert at their comprehensive school. However, the realisation of this performance required negotiation with the school's music teacher, who held responsibility for curating the spring festival programme. As part of the logistical planning, I contacted the teacher via email to inquire about the possibility for the group to perform at the concert:

Hi!

We are preparing with the ninth-grade music students one piece that they chose as a vocal/instrumental performance, that the girls would hope to get to perform in the spring concert. I tried to get more details from the

girls about when this concert is, but this is unclear for me, perhaps a certain Saturday in May? Would there be a space in the concert for one, approx. 5 minutes piece? Their intention is to make this their final occasion of their playing path together, because this is the last spring that they are performing with this configuration.

The comprehensive school's music teacher replied later on the day:

Hi Tuulia,

It is great that the girls have this will to perform, I will definitely take it into consideration. In the spring festival there are only a few spots for performing and there are many ninth graders who wish to perform. So at this moment I'm afraid I can't promise to have a space for them, but I'll get back to you when I know more. If for some reason they cannot perform in the spring concert, do you think they would like to perform in another event in school on April 28th? The spring festival is on Saturday the 1st of June.

Thanks, [Name]

Ultimately, due to the students' demanding spring schedules, our first rehearsal could only be arranged on the same day as the concert proposed by the school's music teacher. Consequently, I informed the teacher that the suggested date would not be feasible for the group and that we would wait for the teacher's response regarding alternative possibilities. Upon receiving confirmation that the concert in which the students had hoped to perform was the school's graduation ceremony, I recognised the limited availability of performance slots within the programme. The graduation ceremony was usually held as a joint celebration for the whole school community as part of the spring festival (*kevätjuhla*).

Another potential venue for performance was the music school's end-of-year concert. Participation in this event also required negotiation, which meant sending a proposal of our rehearsed piece with the names of the performers and their instruments to the head of the music school, who would then decide on the programme based on all the teachers' proposals. The tradition of the music school's spring concerts can be traced back to the music school's "review" tradition, where "general reviews" (*yleinen näyte*) and other public reviews, such as the spring reviews (*kevät katselmus*), were held to present the students' level of skill and development (Pajamo, 2007, p. 48). According to Kuha (2017), these "student reviews" (*oppilasnäytteet*) were related to the status of the music school (p. 431). Specifically, for the music school to obtain the status of a conservatory,

the music school had to have considerable evidence of its successful pedagogical outcomes (p. 543).

Although the end-of-year concerts were no longer explicitly framed as showcases of the music schools' pedagogical success, the selection of performers typically remained under the discretion of the head of the music school. These spring concerts continued to function as curated events, where performers were most often students graduating from the music school, those who had completed instrumental examinations during the academic year and received positive evaluations from examination juries, or students who were otherwise deemed to have demonstrated notable success in their studies, often evidenced by the awarding of diplomas or other formal recognitions.

A few weeks prior to the commencement of our project, it became evident that the group would not be granted the opportunity to perform in the music school's end-of-year concert:

I contacted the director of the music school to discuss the concert at the school. The principal said that there was no room for two pieces with the same instruments, and that the school would be furious if the principal disobeyed the rules. With the presentation of diplomas, speeches, and performances, it would be a two-hour event. He went on to say that everyone leaving the school after this spring deserved a place in the concert. While I expressed that some of the players in this group would also be leaving the school, I said that of course I did not want any of my colleagues' groups to be left out, so we would not continue with the concert plan. (Researcher Journal)

The students' initiative to participate in the concert created a delicate situation among us as instrumental teachers. If our group were to be included in the programme, it would mean displacing another teacher's group of students. While it might be assumed that this was merely one of many possible performance opportunities, for these particular students, most of whom were completing both their music school studies and their nine-year journey at comprehensive school, it represented what they perceived as their final chance to perform together. I considered it essential that they, like any other student wishing to perform, be given that opportunity. Although the music school might have had the capacity to organise multiple spring concerts to accommodate all interested performers, it had long been the practice to hold a single end-of-year concert, much like the spring festival tradition in comprehensive schools. This practice, while limiting, was not unusual within institutions where evaluative performances create barriers for participation, as some students are excluded from participation (Mitchell, 2010).

In the context of this study, I was fortunate that, upon recontacting the comprehensive school music teacher regarding the possibility of participation in the school concert, the teacher confirmed that he could offer the group a performance slot. Given this opportunity, the students decided to focus their efforts on preparing their selected piece for the comprehensive school's end-of-year concert.

6.5. Considering Other Stakeholders' Views

While the primary aim of the intervention was to foreground the perspectives of the student participants, my initial outreach to the students' guardians to present the idea of the project revealed that some of them also had perspectives on the project they wished to share. In a conversation with one guardian, I became aware that my original intention to emphasise creative processes such as arranging, improvising, and composing implicitly carried a value judgment that deprioritised performance. This assumption was challenged when the guardian expressed disappointment that the family was rarely able to hear their child perform publicly, noting that the instrumental teacher seldom organised performances. The guardian felt that, given the time and effort the child invested in learning the instrument, the family wished that they could enjoy this music making with the child through performance and be part of the child's hobby.

This exchange marked a turning point in the study, prompting me to critically reflect on the assumptions I had made regarding teaching practices and the implementation of national policy in music schools. Although the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in the Arts considers regular performance opportunities to be part of music school studies (FNAE, 2002, p. 9), it became evident that this expectation was not consistently realised in practice. The guardian's feedback brought into focus the disparity between policy and local implementation, revealing how much students' experiences could vary depending on the working methods of individual teachers. This prompted a broader consideration of the local institutional conditions and the extent to which national guidelines were being actualised within everyday pedagogical practice. As the research project progressed, ongoing discussions with the participating students revealed notable variation in how performance featured within their music school studies. While the rehearsal of solo repertoire was a central component of the curriculum, this did not necessarily translate into regular performance opportunities for all students. In practice, the extent to which students were able to perform appeared to depend largely on the individual pedagogical approaches and organisational capacities of their instrumental teachers.

This conversation with the guardian revealed an additional, critically important dimension, which, in retrospect, I regard as pivotal. During our exchange, the guardian asked whether I had considered seeking parents' views on their children's music education. While the question initially felt unsettling and unexpected, it prompted a moment of significant critical reflection. It drew my attention back to what MacLure (2013) describes as "glowing data" (p. 661), a moment in the research that continued to resonate and demand further inquiry. Why had I not considered including guardians' perspectives from the outset? Although I had explored other potential study formats, such as engaging in collaborative reflection with fellow teachers, the idea of involving parents had not occurred to me. Although I acknowledged the potential value of such engagement, I had not included guardians in the study design. My initial rationale centred on prioritising student voice and fostering conditions for student agency, which led me to frame the project almost exclusively through the lens of the child's experience.

However, this realisation prompted a deeper inquiry into the structural positioning of stakeholders within the music school context, sensitizing me to the broader issue of stakeholder inclusion and, more specifically, to the complexities of negotiating "voice" in shaping the aims and objectives of music schools. My reflections suggested that, for example, guardians were often viewed primarily as supporters of their children's instrumental learning, rather than as active contributors to the planning orientation of their children's studies. Parent involvement was typically limited to feedback mechanisms, rather than participation in the early-stage planning or negotiation of learning goals. In music education research, the role of the guardians has also mostly been discussed in terms of support for children learning instruments (e.g., Creech & Gaunt, 2012). The encounter with the guardian thus served as a critical point of rupture in this study, challenging the assumptions underpinning my intervention design, and prompted me to reconsider the implicitly top-down nature of my pedagogical intentions, even in a study premised on student agency. More significantly, it shifted my understanding of the child as a solitary individual within a formal institution to a participant situated within a broader social and communal context.

6.6. Identifying Contributing Actors: Engaging With the Material Conditions of the Project

If the educational ideal is to place students at the centre of educational processes and practices, why is this not happening? Who negotiates the positions of the protagonists in the field? How do musical practices in

particular influence these negotiations? Who are the actors in the field? If a student-centred practice would not be centred on the student, what would it be centred on? If not the student, who is the protagonist? (Researcher Journal)

Amongst the wide-ranging and at times ambiguous definitions of student-centredness, one commonly cited principle, particularly among educational stakeholders and policymakers, is the notion of placing students at the heart of educational processes. This involves not only acknowledging students' perspectives and lived experiences but also actively seeking to enhance their position within the educational framework to inform and improve pedagogical strategies and learning outcomes. At the outset of this intervention process, I conceptualized my goal of transforming teacher-centred practice into student-centred practice as a commitment to maintain and create conditions that would promote students' active agency in co-constructing instrumental learning practices and playing an active role in decision making. As discussed earlier in this chapter, as the intervention progressed I felt the need to find more nuanced views to examine the phenomenon, as some of the initial theoretical frameworks of student-centred learning that I had approached did not take into account many of the aspects that I felt were relevant to consider in examining student agency and the co-construction of music school practices. Some of the more overlooked dimensions in existing student-centred literature were related to the mundane aspects of instrumental music-making, namely, the musical instruments themselves and the wider socio-material conditions, including space, that shaped students' agentic actions and participation in instrumental music making. I felt that much of the discourse on student-centred learning tended to emphasise interpersonal dynamics between teachers and students, often abstracting these interactions from the material realities in which they are embedded. This project, however, highlighted how the students' choices and participation were contingent upon a range of socio-material and relational conditions. These included access to specific instruments, students' varying levels of skill and familiarity with those instruments, and their ability to further develop their competencies within the time frame of the project.

This element of relationality and socio-material dependence required acknowledging that agency could not be solely attributed to specific actors but was distributed across a network of socio-material relations. The students' initiative to form a large ensemble incorporating multiple instruments brought to the fore these material contingencies. For instance, access to the necessary resources, such as a rehearsal space with a public address (PA) system, microphones, amplifiers, and a drum kit, became a critical concern. The music

school lacked such equipment, necessitating reliance on the comprehensive school's music classroom, which was equipped with the required infrastructure but only available during restricted time slots. Utilizing the facilities of the comprehensive school thus imposed additional constraints, as it restricted access to some of the music school's instruments due to scheduling conflicts: the instruments were unavailable during the limited time slots when the comprehensive school's music classroom and its PA system could be used. For us to carry out the project at the end of the spring term, the arrangement imposed additional scheduling complexities, particularly as the fixed timetables of both schools and the students' other extracurricular commitments had been set months prior. In addition to finding a suitable time for twelve students and myself, only a limited space for rehearsals was provided both by the music school and the comprehensive school.

Throughout the process, it became increasingly clear that material conditions not only shaped the parameters of participation but also actively contributed to the unfolding of action. In the project by the ninth-grade students, one of the most concrete outcomes of the material conditions was that despite our best efforts to consider all aspects of the technical production of the performance, in the end the school's technical equipment was inadequate to meet the needs of the group: there were not enough channels in the concert hall's audio mixer to make the large ensemble audible. While the school had a sound system for the audience, there were no monitors for the performers, which made it difficult for them to keep time as the sound bounced back from the hall and caused delays. As some of the performers could not hear themselves or others playing, it was difficult to achieve a balanced sound, which affected the overall sound quality for reasons beyond the students' control. In the final performance, some of the vocals were not heard or were heard unevenly. Small details that further contributed to the whole included, for example, the stage synthesiser, which defaulted to a tuning of A=440 Hz, whereas the rest of the ensemble tuned to A=442 Hz. While this discrepancy had been identified and addressed in rehearsal, the synthesiser was inadvertently powered off between performances. In the haste of the live context, the pianist forgot to retune the instrument, resulting in tuning discrepancies during the performance. These seemingly minor technical details cumulatively shaped the students' capacity to deliver the performance as intended.

Throughout the ninth-grade students' project, I considered that the students' agency and possibilities for action were interwoven with, and contingent upon, material conditions: the students' access to and proficiency with instruments, their capacity to read musical notation or to engage with alternative means of knowledge acquisition, such as listening to the original recording or learning aurally through peer interaction, and the reliability and functionality of the

material artefacts involved. Another aspect was how the material, for instance the original recording, guided the students' efforts and provided a point of reference for what they wanted to achieve. For the violinists, the potentially auto-tuned fast riff of the recording posed a significant challenge on their acoustic instruments, a concern the students themselves had raised regarding the quality of their performance in comparison to the recorded standard.

Whilst I experienced the opportunity to support the students' participation and their involvement in decision making, there were several moments where we encountered resistance to the students' attempts; in other words, instances where the students' efforts to enact agency were impeded by broader relational and material constraints. Thus, in my attempts to enable the students to achieve spaces and positions for agency, I identified several issues that affected the students' intentions, as described in the previous section, such as the negotiation of performance opportunities as well as the material and spatial dimensions of the students' projects, which conditioned and contributed to the students' participation.

6.7. The Process of Co-Construction: Considerations in Decentralized Decision-making and Working with Open-endedness

Adopting a collaborative approach in this project, which aimed to reconfigure the practices with the students, shifted the focus of our interaction towards decentralised decision-making, where the group members were supported to participate in making decisions about the project. One of the students described her experience of the situation in the final interview, when she concluded that *Perhaps in a large group it is harder to work fluently, when there are more people whose opinions need to be addressed* (student interview). The starting point for this project was different from ensemble playing with a ready-made score where roles are assigned to each player. A central issue for the group was therefore to consider what roles each person would have in the ensemble, including negotiating whether they would play instruments, sing, or do both, and collectively envisioning the broader structure and presentation of the performance, including potential choreographic or visual elements. In terms of the students' ability to proceed with the project, as discussed in the previous section, the materiality of music-making shaped the formation of these decisions: for example, decisions about some of the players' roles were dependent on the number of instruments available, and general questions about the PA system for both singers and instrumentalists.

My primary role as a teacher in this project was to support everyone's participation and the collaborative co-construction process. This included assisting students in resolving technical challenges related to their individual instruments and helping them navigate practical aspects of implementing their shared vision. Rather than merely discussing the plan for the overall arrangement, my pedagogical intention was to create opportunities for active engagement, to prioritising doing, trying, and playing to allow the students to explore different possibilities, including options that required practice and possibly seeking advice from their own instrumental teachers. Constructing the rehearsals together also allowed me to form an idea of what the students were interested in and how they were approaching the project, whether they preferred to take the initiative in arranging their parts or needed my help with the arrangement, and how receptive the students were overall to assuming responsibility for their own work.

Whilst all of the students were able to attend every session, and at times I divided the ensemble into smaller sub-groups to focus on specific aspects of the arrangement, one student later reflected in an interview that the full-group rehearsals could at times be overwhelming due to the high volume of sound, stemming from multiple students simultaneously experimenting with their parts. This sometimes resulted in a loss of concentration, particularly when students had to wait extended periods for others to try out ideas. Working in a large group required both practice together and individual rehearsals at home. Throughout the project, however, I observed noticeable differences in students' levels of commitment to out-of-session preparation. In the final interviews, some students expressed frustration that, by the time of the final performance, certain members of the group had not fully rehearsed their agreed-upon parts.

As I became more familiar with the students' interactions and their approaches to the collaborative process, I observed that some students tended to direct their questions primarily to me, often positioning me as the final authority or decision-maker regarding the arrangement:

Do we take one or two instruments into this piece?

Do we play the same in the beginning?

Do we play those with the large chords?

(first group session)

Rather than engaging the group in collective negotiation, several of the students directed their questions to me in a binary manner with "yes or no" questions, or with a strong demand for me to make the final judgement or decision, also in a straightforward way: *What are we playing?* (first group session). While my attention was frequently occupied with assisting others as they experimented with

various ideas, I noted expressions of frustration among some students, who remarked to one another: *We still haven't been told what to do* (first group session).

While most students expressed in their final interviews that they had appreciated the opportunity to negotiate decisions collaboratively, some group members indicated a preference for more explicit instruction from me as the teacher. The move towards a co-regulated way of working was therefore not unreservedly welcomed by all the students, some of whom had hoped for more precise instructions from me as the teacher as to what they should do in the project in terms of arrangement and their roles in the ensemble. Although I was aware that in many classroom settings the teacher typically controls the content, pace, and trajectory of learning, in this project I deliberately encouraged the students to make suggestions for their individual parts and to listen to others while making these decisions for the final version of the song. For some of the students, the co-constructed way of working therefore also meant letting go of some of the assumptions about the role of the student (see also McElhaney & Linn, 2012): a shift from a passive recipient of instruction to an active participant responsible for her own contribution (see also Härkki et al., 2023). Placing the students' own ideas and questions at the centre of the work processes in the classroom required tolerating openness, as the emerging outcomes, stages, and content could not be fully known in advance (see also Littleton et al., 2012; Viilo et al., 2017). Moreover, I observed that some students were navigating additional layers of complexity, such as adapting their parts to instruments not featured in the original arrangement or learning to synchronise with others in a genre or ensemble format that was unfamiliar to them. In effect, these students were engaging in "double work": developing both ensemble skills and instrumental adaptability within a collaborative learning environment. Some students also found it challenging to work in such an ensemble, as they were not used to playing in an orchestra.

In seeking to support the collective creation of the project, I aimed to foster an environment in which students could contribute iteratively, proposing, elaborating on, and extending one another's musical ideas. This approach necessarily introduced an element of open-endedness into the process. In reflecting on the project at its conclusion, I became increasingly aware of my own assumptions about the students' capacity to engage with this mode of collaborative, co-constructive work. I had anticipated that the group would be well-prepared for this approach, in part because many of the participants had received between 9 and 11 years of music school instruction and music-oriented teaching. Over this time, they had developed considerable musical and technical proficiency on their respective instruments. However, my assumption that the students, who were nearing the completion of their music school studies, would

exhibit a significant degree of self-direction, or that their advanced instrumental skills would enable them to make more independent decisions regarding the arrangement, prompted a re-evaluation of my expectations. This became particularly evident when I observed that some students were less proactive in assuming responsibility for their individual tasks during the project.

Part of the challenge stemmed from the students' prior experience: despite their extensive training, it became apparent that several students had limited experience collaborating with other instrumentalists. The practice of arranging music and engaging in ensemble work was not a frequent component of their music school education. The experience prompted me to reconsider whether strong individual skills in instrumental performance necessarily translate into the capacity for open-ended, dialogical forms of musical collaboration, particularly within settings that require shared authorship, negotiation, and responsiveness to others' ideas.

Students also articulated varying expectations of their instrumental teachers, with some expressing a preference for particular methods of instruction over others. This topic was explored in greater depth during the final group discussions:

Anna *For me it's perhaps, because I'm like, perhaps, a very logical person, or like it is easier for me to look from notation, easier that I'm given the music and then I can make my own decisions on what I need to play. It is easier for me to be told what to do. Rather than saying "let's try and play a little bit".*

Ella *For me it would be awful if I was always told what to do, because I can't concentrate a lot, I'd rather just do it right away.*

Navigating these differing expectations prompted me to engage in a more detailed discussion with the group about the role of the teacher. Whilst my hope had been that the project would encourage students to step back and adopt a broader perspective, considering options and alternative approaches that were not immediately apparent, working in this way was not so straightforward. Although the idea of the arrangement was that it would be constructed collaboratively, I needed to encourage some of the group members to remain open to the emergence of the final version by reminding them that we could try different things and that whatever we explored needed not be the final version of the arrangement. To generate ideas for the arrangement, I encouraged the students to experiment with their instruments, although I noticed that the students' previous experience of this approach varied: some of the students seemed to have experience of trying things

out with their instruments without a fixed notation, while others were more reliant on having a notation.

Allowing the project to remain open-ended involved encouraging students to consider the contributions of others in the ensemble as they made decisions about how to move forward. I thus found myself repeatedly saying, "it depends on", making a conscious effort to help the group understand that every decision regarding the final arrangement would depend on how we collectively determined the roles of the other players:

Tuulia *Play at the beginning today, it doesn't have to be the final version. Could we even try it if you improvise on top of it there, can we try? It doesn't have to be the final version.*

...

Clarissa *Do we play just the bass notes or whole chords?*

Tuulia *It depends on if the violin is joining there.*

[first group session]

While getting to know the students, their hopes for the project, and the roles they envisioned for themselves, my aim was to try to support and build the group's interaction together, to create a safe space where students felt comfortable sharing their ideas and felt that their ideas were heard and welcomed. I noticed that the students themselves helped maintain a positive atmosphere, encouraging others to try out ideas or offering words of affirmation like, *This is going to be great* [first group session]. Support for others was also given by saying positive things about others' playing, or, later in the project, by helping others to learn their individual parts, for example by recording parts of the music on their mobile phones and sharing the recordings in the WhatsApp group for others to listen to and practice by listening. In the project, the app also allowed students to record the arrangement so that they could remember their ideas for their improvised solos. Some students also mentioned using their phones outside the classroom to record their improvisations and compositions, allowing them to develop their ideas without needing notation.

Creating this space that welcomed a variety of perspectives, with an element of open-endedness and even uncertainty about the final outcomes, was essential. As the outcomes of the project were not decided in advance, this required both a tolerance of openness and an active participation in the design of the project, rather than expecting me as the teacher to come up with the answers to the various questions. Despite some of the challenges I experienced with some of the group members seeking my final judgement on what they should play, there were also

instances where the students engaged in discussions, made suggestions, and negotiated the decisions:

- Iina *It could at least begin with the tadadada [singing the beginning rhythm] with strings and piano could play the bottom notes like tytytyym [singing the rhythm]*
- Vella *Or cello*
- Iina *Yeah, or cello, if Jenni wants to play them with the cello. And if Niina and Viola want to play the upper parts with the violin. And then the singing would start, it could be that for example half of us would sing in that part.*
- Vella *Yeah, not all of us singing at the same time.*
- Iina *No definitely not all of us singing at the same time.*
- Vella *It would be nice if one sang a little part and then the other sang a little part ...*

To help the group generate different ideas for the arrangement, I shared videos of various ensembles in our shared WhatsApp group, which served as a basis for discussing alternative arrangements. While my intention was to explore multiple possibilities for the arrangement, by the end of the second session, the group's first full session together, the students had already developed a plan for dividing the vocal parts, which ultimately remained unchanged until the performance.

This decision was made in a straightforward way by one student asking the group: "*Hands up, how many would like to do a solo?*" [second session]. Although my plan for the second session was to focus on the vocals, given the unexpected lack of instruments that day, and to discuss the overall arrangement, I had hoped we could explore arranging the vocals alongside the instruments. Although involving everyone in the vocal solos presented additional challenges to the performance, I did not however want to interfere with this decision, as there was also a rather democratic element to the way the decision about the vocals was made: everyone was allowed to express their opinion about the opportunity to sing in the project, and the division decision was made on the basis of that.

Since everyone eventually wanted to sing a solo, it was decided that each verse and chorus would be split between the group, resulting in two lines of lyrics for each singer. The decision to involve everyone in the singing of small sections of the song posed a challenge to implementation, as it became apparent during the dress rehearsals that the concert hall's audio mixer had a limited number of channels. Although the students initially thought the school had enough microphones, thanks to a recent investment for a school musical, there were not enough microphones to accommodate both the instrumentalists and vocalists. This forced the group to alternate between vocal and instrumental mics mid-

performance. This created additional complications for the school music teacher, who was in charge of live mixing. She had to adjust the volume levels, raising certain parts while lowering others. Ultimately, the decision to split the vocal part into twelve segments caused the melody to shift from one person to the next, making it challenging for the audience to follow the melody. At times, it was almost inaudible, due to the difficulties with microphone use and the live mixing process.

Dividing the song into twelve vocal parts led some of the students to feel that their roles in the ensemble were too limited, later commenting that they did not want to be just snapping fingers (WhatsApp discussion). At the time, I was not fully aware of this challenge, but the students later had the courage to bring it up during one of the discussions.

Previous research highlights that one of the central challenges for ensemble directors is the selection of repertoire that is appropriate to the musical and technical level of the ensemble (Dziuk, 2018; Hopkins, 2013). While this literature is based on situations where the teacher or director makes the selection of the repertoire to be rehearsed (e.g., Reynolds, 2000), I encountered similar concerns in this project. The music and arrangement had to present a sufficient level of challenge to keep the students motivated. If the students felt underchallenged or that their role in the ensemble was not acknowledged, they became frustrated, as was the case with the group's vocalists, who were not able to borrow the schools' instruments for the project and felt that they did not have enough to do, especially as the singing was divided into short segments within the group.

In instrumental learning, I consider the balance between challenge and ability as crucial to the learning process: supporting the student by continuously adjusting the process to align with their skills, providing enough challenge to promote growth without discouraging or overwhelming them. Finding this balance was in my view also relevant to the initiatives that the students undertook, as it was related to what the students were trying to achieve, the challenges of the task and the skills and abilities that the students had at their disposal. Despite the shared decision-making process and the students' increased autonomy in adapting the challenges, I recognized my critical role in creating approaches that made tasks more accessible and in supporting the development of their motivation. This required responding to the unique contingencies of each moment, making judgments based, for example, on how students took responsibility for their roles and how they navigated the challenges they faced in achieving their goals.

Allowing decisions about the project to be made collaboratively throughout the process required me to reconsider my own preconceptions about how the project would unfold. The decision to pursue the arrangement as initiated by the

students, while collaborative, did not, in my view, fully tap into the potential that could have been achieved with a different approach. I had envisioned the arrangement becoming something more unique, "not just a cover" (Researcher Journal), by taking advantage of the unique configuration of the group and working toward a distinctive sound that utilized the ensemble's potential. Towards the end of the project, I even ended up organising electronic drums in the concert hall to see if they would improve the overall sound. While the collective decision to split the vocals into several lines for each singer was inclusive and accounted for everyone, the limited equipment available for the performance led to some solos being almost inaudible. Despite continuing to prioritize collective decision-making, I began to question whether something crucial was compromised in the process. After the final rehearsals before the concert, I found myself reflecting on the entire process in relation to the project's outcome.

What is the role of so-called artistic vision in democratic decision-making? How is it included? Does the final project become somewhat "lame" if decisions about the design are made collectively? Do students find it more meaningful to have their opinions heard and acted upon, and to create the project together, than to be involved in a project where decisions are more driven by considerations of the overall work? Do these things need to be juxtaposed at all? (Researcher Journal)

Some of the issues that affected the end result were related to the technology available in the performance, which caused disappointment, something we had discussed with the group. These technical challenges disrupted the overall balance and caused frustration, as much of the work the group had put in became inaudible. As discussed earlier, without the use of personal monitors in the concert hall, it was difficult for students to hear themselves or others. As the concert consisted of different groups with different ensemble setups and equipment, the students were instructed to use the available space and stand in a line at the edge of the stage, further reducing the possibility of hearing each other or making eye contact while playing.

Although I felt that we had only scratched the surface of all the potential in the group, I wanted to discuss the experience with the group to see if they thought that we could have approached the project differently, for example by having a smaller group work on the arrangement and share ideas with the whole group. In the discussion, the students expressed that they felt satisfied with the project:

It is better, even if someone has a strong vision of the piece, to do things together than putting some people to lead.

Everyone's handprint is on the piece. It perhaps looks more like our group.
We didn't want to copy anyone but make it our own.
(Final group discussion)

My assumption that there was a need to create a more unique project by making better use of the unique configuration of the group seemed somewhat misplaced when I considered how the students responded to the outcome of the project in the final interview and after the concert. The group members shared their experiences in the WhatsApp group after the concert:

- 9.31 1.6. – *Thank you everyone it was so great to perform today* ❤️
9.32 1.6. – *I thought it was great too!* ❤️😊
9.33 1.6. – *It was amazing* ❤️
9.35 1.6. – *A great last performance and the result was absolutely awesome*
9.36 1.6. – *Yay, thank you for everyone!* ❤️❤️
10.36 1.6. – *it was a great performance thank you everyone* ❤️
10.37 1.6. – *❤️❤️ I agree! Thank you all the dear girls and Tuulia of course* ❤️
10.38 1.6. – *Thank you everyone. It was a great pleasure to perform and it went really well!!*
11.32 1.6. – *Tuulia: Great work everyone! Thank you for the project! And congratulations!*

Acknowledging that the course of the intervention would be subject to negotiation, revision, and disruption, I reflected further on the discussions with the students during the second phase of the intervention. The process of trying to locate why I had experienced a degree of disappointment with the outcome of the project when students shared conflicting experiences of the project led me to reflect on two issues in particular: student participation and the related expectations, and the question of "what matters" (Edwards, 2017, p. 4), that is, the meanings the students attribute to the activity.

6.8. Students' Reflections on the Project

At the end of the project, two group discussions were held to further explore the students' experiences of the project. The overall aim of the discussions was to reflect on the co-construction process with the participants and to discuss how the group had negotiated the roles in the project and the different ways in which the students approached the project. These meetings built upon the insights many students had already shared throughout the project via their individual blogs or the group blog on WhatsApp. One issue I wanted to discuss further was the shared leadership in the project and my expectations for active student participation. These expectations were challenged during the project, as some of the group members did not actively participate in the implementation of the project, a concern that was raised by some of the group members themselves.

During our first discussion meeting, with the aim to "mirror" (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 15) the material back to the participants, a short video clip from one of the rehearsals was shared to allow the group to reflect on their own work. The video selected was from the rehearsal where the group had worked on the singing independently. The second discussion session was organised as a follow-up discussion where I could clarify my understanding of the students' earlier responses and continue to discuss the students' thoughts on how it had worked and what they might have hoped for more from me as a teacher. Prior to the second discussion, I transcribed parts of the earlier interview to help guide our conversation.

6.8.1. Challenges in Shared Leadership and the New Roles

Throughout the project I consciously aimed to support the students' autonomy in decision making. Shared decision-making required a rethinking of our roles, the roles of teacher and student, as well as a general reorganisation of relationships within the group. My hope as a teacher had been that the process would foster the students' commitment to the process: as the goals of their initiatives became more personally meaningful, I believed that the students would work harder toward something in which they were genuinely invested.

Despite these assumptions, I also faced challenges: students who, in my opinion, did not take responsibility for their role in the group, an issue that was also raised by the students themselves in relation to their practice.

It makes things problematic when others can't do their part and others who can/who don't have a lot of things to do ... I wish everyone could learn their parts. (WhatsApp blog)

I had observed this lack of commitment in some of the students, for example by their questions about the key of the song in the second-to-last rehearsal, which gave me the impression that they had not practised their parts at all because they did not know what key the song was in. I was also puzzled by the students who had a high level of technical ability, but had expected me to tell them what to play from the beginning of the project. Although I had explicitly valued and encouraged students' personal initiatives instead of waiting to be told, it was challenging to support some of the students to take an active role in their own work.

Part of the reason for this may have lain in the culture to which some of the students were accustomed. Some of the students described how their teacher rarely asked them to practise ensemble parts at home. Typically, they rehearsed ensemble pieces together during class time. There were also differences in the students' responses: the string players said that they mostly practised at home. Some of the students claimed that some of their ensemble repertoire was so easy that they did not need to practise at home.

During the project, I initially assumed that my role as a teacher would be reduced as the students took on a more active role. However, through my experience, I realized that my role as a teacher in the co-construction processes needed to be just as active: in my view, the facilitator role that I had tried to position myself in was not working. In my attempts to step back and allow the students to, for example, work on their own in smaller group sessions, drawing upon the idea of the so-called informal pedagogy by Green (2002, 2008), the students had also experienced discomfort in taking leadership positions in the groups among their peers. In the interviews, one of the students commented that she found it difficult to work independently in the split smaller groups because she felt that something had to be done to move the process forward, but she did not want to lead the group:

Iina *I just argued there ... I was like, because I was irritated
that it didn't work out so I was like now everyone
[shouting and pointing a finger] Sing! Do! Play!*

Whilst the others commented that they had not experienced the situation in any negative way, some of the students expressed that they struggled to make their voices heard. As the discussion unfolded, their experiences seemed to challenge

the idea that teachers should step back or reduce their involvement. Instead, the students' feedback seemed to support the opposite perspective (see Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). The students' responses echoed the findings from the student interviews in Green's (2008) study, where students suggested combining informal learning approaches with more traditional methods. This could involve balancing peer-led learning with more structured, teacher-guided approaches (see also Green, 2009; Hess, 2020; Mariguddi, 2022).

In reflecting on the role of the teacher, one of the things that I wanted to discuss with the group was how they perceived my role in comparison to the typical responsibilities of an instrumental teacher, which entailed helping students to overcome technical challenges with their instruments. Throughout the project, my concern was that I could not help the students as much as I would have hoped.

- Tuulia *But there's a lot I cannot help with, for example Viola in her cello part.*
 Viola *But you can be like the outside listener...*
 ...
 Ella *We might have been able to do it together but it would have been so much more confusing.*
 Niina *Yes.*
 Jenni *And so much more terrible.*
 Iina *Mm.*
 Vella *I don't think any of us would have taken that challenge.*

I was referred to as the "*kaikkivastaava*" ("the person who oversees all operations"). While the students expressed that I was able to help them with the project, I had sometimes experienced that my inability to help some of the students with technical issues created barriers to the project. We continued to discuss the students' perspectives on this issue:

- Tuulia *Does it create feelings of insecurity if the teacher doesn't have all the so-called knowledge?*
 Lilja *Yes.*
 Jenni *Yes.*
 Anna *No.*
 Viola *Not like authoritative commands, but if you ask and she can't help you.*

As we discussed my role, a clearer understanding emerged of the students' varying views on their relationship with the teacher, as well as their different needs. For instance, the string players expressed that it was particularly important for the teacher to assist them with technique. One of my concerns before the project

stemmed from my background as a classically trained clarinetist and pianist, which limited my professional expertise in some of the instruments in the ensemble. Like many instrumental teachers, my formal training had been focused on developing expertise within a specific discipline (Barrett & Veblen, 2012). Since the friendship ensembles were not structured around a fixed repertoire or instrumentation but rather driven by peer relationships, they exhibited a high degree of variety, with students bringing diverse interests and backgrounds, potentially even a mixture of different technologies, including acoustic and digital instruments. The unpredictability of the elements in the projects was amplified by the ongoing formation of the projects through the contingencies of group interaction and student initiation.

Continuing the discussion, I shared my perspective on the process, highlighting the challenges posed by the project's many moving parts: an ensemble of eleven musicians and the need to coordinate spaces that fit the individual schedules of the group members. I then asked the students to reflect on their own experiences of working in this way.

Tuulia	<i>Could you work in this way?</i>
Viola	<i>You could. Because we did [with a smile] ... We have been able to get something done as well.</i>
Iina	<i>The end result is rewarding.</i>
Vella	<i>I don't know how long one could do this.</i>
Tuulia	<i>Could you tell me more about that?</i>

The discussion continued with the students describing a project they had done on their own, using the vocal parts from the film Pitch Perfect as a starting point for their vocal ensemble.

6.8.2. The Dynamics in Creative Processes

When discussing the different roles and shared leadership in the project, one point the students raised was related to the way of working in the way we did: creating something from scratch, arranging and negotiating things with others rather than relying on a pre-set arrangement. This approach made the process different from playing a set repertoire. The students shared a project where they had learned several songs independently and arranged an a cappella version for their group. Their way of working had been inspired by a film released a few years prior to our project, Pitch Perfect, in which an a cappella group makes mash-ups of songs. In our discussions, I noticed that the students' self-initiated music-making processes followed similar processes to those described by Green (2002, 2008) in

her studies of adult popular musicians and their ways of approaching music-making in informal, non-formal settings. These approaches involved integrated activities of listening, playing, aural copying from a recording, and arranging. In describing one such process, the students acknowledged that while the result was rewarding, they found the process to be somewhat strenuous.

- Vella *We did that medley amongst ourselves last year. And that was nerve-wracking.*
- Anna *It was so...*
- Vella *...because we did it just ourselves...*
- Iina *...so like taking action, when you have like nothing...*
- Vella *...you start from scratch...*
- Anna *...you can't like play it through, it's like something that you don't easily get into.*
- Tuulia *What was so irritating about that?*
- Jenni *When we were at Vella's place, and we hadn't done anything...*
- Lilja *...it was terrible...*
- Anna *...adding instruments into that would have been even more terrible.*

In the student project, one of the students had taken the lead in trying to arrange the vocal parts from a piano score.

- Vella *I like did for example, at the beginning, when I did all the music and I did like what each would sing, which parts, I like had no clue what the parts would be, I just circled those from the piano music for everyone, and then when I was like, check those out by yourselves, everyone came to me all the time asking how do you do this, can you explain, and I was just like I don't know. And then I was like aw, this is terrible.*
- Anna *Everyone was just like I don't know how to do this, I can't do this.*
- Iina *Not everyone was focusing. When we were like somewhere, they did something else, rolled on the floor. Then when one tries to say, 'can you focus please...*
- Jenni *...and you get so angry...*
- Anna *...because there's so many of us, so it easily goes into one person trying to focus and like to do things or some trying and others can't concentrate at all.*

When discussing how some group members had difficulty concentrating on the task, the students clarified that it was not always the same individuals who were, in their words, "goofing off" or losing focus. They explained that it depended on

how a person was feeling that day. According to them, sometimes it was simply very challenging to concentrate on the project. In the final interview, we delved deeper into this, as their way of working seemed interesting to me. One student described the process this way: There was always someone shouting and someone quiet, with some people considered to be shouting more easily (Student interview). The direct nature of the interaction between the students, as described by the group members, was quite different from what I was accustomed to, likely due to their friendship and the sense of security they felt in interacting this way. When reflecting on their past projects together, the issue of time was also raised in relation to the group's focus on their work:

- Vella *That's why the latest song that we just did was good because we did it so fast.*
Anna *Nobody had the time to focus on other things.*
Vella *Everyone had to check the parts at home.*

As I listened to the students discuss their way of working, I became interested in their thoughts on the planned length of the project. My concern had been that the project had been organised in too short a time frame. In my experience, project planning was rarely done collaboratively with the students, as the time frame was often determined by the teacher and the music school, which depended largely on the availability of rehearsal spaces. Reflecting on my own approach, I realized that when planning different projects, I had not always involved my students in discussions about how much time they estimated would be needed to practice and complete certain repertoire.

I was surprised when one of the students claimed that, in her experience, the time allocated for the project had been quite long. Upon reflection, other group members agreed that the project could have been completed in less time. When I asked the students to estimate what would have been a reasonable time frame, one student suggested that the group could have completed the project in a week. She wondered whether a shorter time frame would have put more pressure on the group to practise. However, the group was not unanimous on this point. Another student contributed that she thought it was good that everyone had the opportunity to try things out and figure out what to play. She felt that with a shorter project, they would have had to focus more on remembering what to play. The discussion continued as the group began to consider what the result might have been with a shorter project.

For me, the discussion raised an important perspective regarding the project's timeframe: why had I not considered discussing the timeframe with the students at the start of the project? Would it not have been possible to allow the students,

at this stage of their studies, to decide how much time they thought they would need to complete the project? While the chosen timeframe was also influenced by the study's aim of examining the process of co-construction, the discussion with the students prompted me to consider the benefits of involving them in the planning stages of projects. Even if the students would not be able to accurately estimate the time they needed to prepare for various projects, involving them in these reflections could be valuable in developing their ability to self-manage their music-making processes. I also reflected on whether involving the students in decisions about the timeframe might have encouraged some of them to take more responsibility for their own work, had they been given the opportunity to contribute to planning the project's timeline.

6.9. Reframing the Object of Activity: Transcending the Learning Frame

On the day of the final dress rehearsal, I entered the school's concert hall during the middle of the rehearsal. The students, along with the other performing groups for the Spring Concert, were rehearsing Suvivirsi⁴⁶, the traditional song sung at the Spring Festival at the end of the school year. Even from outside the hall, I could hear the beautiful sound of the strings. The three string players, accompanying the singing students who were practicing the song in the hall – two violinists and a cellist – were positioned between the rows of chairs in the audience, waiting for their turn to go on stage for the final rehearsal of their song. In this impromptu music-making, the players arranged the music as they went along. The rich, harmonious sound of the strings filled the hall. After weeks of hearing only the narrow riff and bass line from the violins and cello in their group's project, the full sound of the trio was a welcome change. After the students finished the song, I immediately suggested they accompany the school song for the Spring Festival. The students quickly shook their heads. "No way," they said. "This is the last time we'll be singing this song with our classmates. We want to sing, not play". (Reflections on the videos, Researcher Journal)

Developmental work research aims at expansive learning cycles, in which expansive learning is not linear and cannot be fully controlled by the interventionists. According to Engeström (2016), expansive learning processes, where the work processes of organizations are redefined and new objects for

⁴⁶Suvivirsi (English translation "Summer hymn") is a Swedish hymn from the early 17th century.

collective activity are constructed, are inherently multi-voiced, involving debate, negotiation, and orchestration. In these processes, contradictions within the activity system become more apparent as participants begin to question the meaning of the activity. As a result, they may deviate from established norms and seek alternatives. In formative interventions, Engeström emphasizes the importance of examining how the object of activity transforms during the intervention. This process of reorganising the object is set in motion when subjects become aware of the contradictions in their current activity in the perspective of a new form of activity. Expansions are not limited to fulfilling the working hypotheses of the interventionist, allowing a reframing of contradictions through emerging contradictions.

In this project, engaging in the developmental work did not take place collectively in a work organisation, as would typically be the case in developmental work research. Instead, I reflected on and confronted my own assumptions and understandings of the developmental contradictions within music school practices by working directly with the students and listening to their perspectives. By diffracting these experiences of the project against the disruptions that I had initially identified as in need of development at the beginning of the process, I engaged in what could be described as an attempt to create possibility knowledge (Engeström, 2007), aiming to expand my conceptualisations and consider alternative approaches.

At the end of the ninth-grade students' project, one of the events that further sensitised me to reflect on the purpose of the activities and the aims and motives of the students' actions was the moment I described above, when the string players joined to play *Suvivirsi*, impromptu, in the concert hall during a dress rehearsal at the comprehensive school. Looking back, my sudden excitement to suggest that the students join the song by accompanying the singers likely stemmed from the culmination of finishing a six-week project of trying to construct a good arrangement with a good sound, and after all the problems with the technology, the PA system with its microphones and channels, in the end we could not even hear ourselves or each other properly, and the overall balance made the instruments somewhat inaudible, causing the students a lot of frustration. In contrast, rather effortlessly and unexpectedly, without any need to amplify the sound, there was this impromptu moment with the students where they were making their arrangement as they went along, without any technical concerns about hearing themselves or others, utilizing the full potential of their instruments and their skills as instrumentalists. However, when I suggested they accompany the singers, they quickly declined. It was not about making music at that moment; it was about something else, something beyond the technicalities of performance, playing, or producing a beautiful sound.

The following day, at the graduation ceremony, sitting in the audience and taking part in the entire graduation ceremony, the six-week project came into perspective as I was able to step back from the immediacy of our project and begin to place it in the wider context of the school community and the families who shared this special moment of the ninth-graders graduating. At the same time as I had been focused on facilitating the co-constructed process and supporting the group to prepare the piece for the concert, the process challenged me to reflect on the meanings associated with the students' music making beyond the immediacy of the given situation, the goals I had set for the project, and what I had been focusing on.

Whilst I had been observing the students' ways of learning, trying to support the group to produce a high-quality outcome, my experiences of the project beckoned me to investigate the process beyond the framework of learning. At the same time as focusing on facilitating the co-constructed process from a learning perspective, it was only in retrospect that I thus recognised the variety of meanings that the project potentially held for the students, including how the opportunity to play together for the last time in the presence of families and the school community provided the group with a celebration of their friendship and shared journey through compulsory comprehensive schooling. This reflection involved confronting my own understandings and expectations of the students' participation and reconsidering the students' purposes for their actions, the "what matters" (Edwards, 2017, p. 4), including my conceptual categories about the students and the students' meanings of the project in relation to the wider community.

6.9.1. Expanding Perspectives Beyond the Learning of Skills and Knowledge

Following the first student project, I continued to reflect on the concept of participation and the implicit categorisations and expectations that shaped my thinking about student participation. This included thinking about the expectations of student participation and how these expectations were intertwined with the aims of the activity. This reflective process also encouraged me to think about the meaning of the activity more broadly. While skill development and knowledge acquisition were undoubtedly important and aligned with the National Core Curriculum's emphasis on identifying and supporting individual learning paths (FNAE, 2002), the final group discussions led me to reconsider the broader purpose of the activity. The students' reflections prompted me to move beyond a narrowly defined learning framework and consider other dimensions of meaning embedded in their participation. This reorientation evolved gradually: while in the

final discussions with the students I found myself primarily focused largely on learning and the individual ways in which students approach learning, asking questions such as, "When you think about your own previous learning and your approaches to learning, can you assess how you learn/would like to approach learning?" (Appendix H), despite the time spent on these topics, the students seemed to place far less importance on these discussions than I did.

One moment that crystallised this disconnect was a conversation about students' use of technology in their music learning, where I attempted to situate mobile phone use within a learning framework:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Tuulia | <i>Where do you think the idea for this came from? Is it like your own invention or did some of the teachers introduce the idea?</i> |
| Iina | <i>Isn't it always like someone says can you record this and not like [lifting up the phone] I have a phone and now I'm going to record</i> |
| Jenni | <i>At least I haven't been told to do it, I just have done it.</i> |
| Iina | <i>It is just one of those things, that if you're hungry you take food, it is one of those basic needs...</i> |
| Anna | <i>...I doubt it is...</i> |
| Iina | <i>...something like now I invented this, I recorded this. It just happens. You just take the phone. Like you can take video of your shoes or I can ... it is just one of those things.</i> |

Although the students had described their ways of using the different technologies for their learning, the student's expression it's just one of those things was something that I continued to reflect upon after the discussion. Overall, I came to realise that my efforts to explore the students' approaches to learning, particularly in relation to their use of technology, did not resonate with the students in the way I had anticipated, nor did it reflect what they themselves considered most meaningful in their experiences.

Looking back, I realised that my own assumptions were informed by widely accepted ideas in educational literature: that integrating familiar technologies could increase student engagement and shift the focus toward more learner-centred teaching (e.g., Crompton, 2013; Matzen & Edmunds, 2007; Salavuo, 2008). Around the time of the intervention, the rise of social media and social networking sites had attracted the interest of educators and researchers. Studies suggested that sites like Facebook could serve as a "third space" bridging students' schoolwork and personal lives (e.g., Aaen & Dalsgaard, 2015). These ideas had

reinforced my belief that digital tools could meaningfully support participation in the project.

While it was undeniable that the use of mobile technologies and cross-platform messaging apps such as WhatsApp had also expanded the possibilities for different uses of audio-visual media for this project, beyond the use of traditional notation, the project also challenged me to consider what was actually happening, as opposed to what I had expected, with the use of different technologies for learning and teaching.

Although I had tried to use WhatsApp as a platform for collaborative work, sharing videos of different musical arrangements to spark ideas and supporting the students' own suggestion to record run-throughs, it became clear in follow-up discussions that the group had not engaged with these resources in the way I had imagined. The students were not particularly interested in watching the shared videos. These experiences revealed that the effectiveness and relevance of technological tools were entirely dependent on whether the students themselves found them meaningful. As our conversation turned to their use of mobile phones outside the instrumental classroom, it became increasingly clear that the students' use of technology was, for the most part, not oriented toward learning but towards social relations:

Tuulia *What do you use mobile phones for outside of the instrumental classroom?*

Anna *Well, everything.*

Lilja *Social interaction.*

...

Vella *If you don't have it, it becomes a need, that you need to have it as well.*

Tuulia *Oh because others have it?*

Vella *Yes.*

Jenni *No like because your friends are there.*

...

Iina *You're like never alone.*

The students' responses aligned with research findings indicating that most teenagers are not compelled by gadgets per se, but by friendship (Boyd, 2014). According to this research, gadgets are of interest to young people primarily as a means to social ends, with friendships offering a space beyond the confines of family and home. Similar conclusions have been expressed in studies of Finnish children's and young people's leisure time, where children's and young people's use of social media was found to be primarily related to social relationships (Hanifi et al., 2021).

The discussions with the students sensitised me to consider my motivations for integrating technology in instrumental teaching. Like many educators, I had approached technologies through considering their suitability to serve a pre-defined learning goal (see also Cerratto Pargman & Jahnke, 2019). However, the experience of this project challenged these assumptions, highlighting the need for context-sensitive reflection on the actual roles these technologies play in students' lives. Rather than serving exclusively as instruments for acquiring transferable skills, students' engagement with digital technologies needed to be understood as socially embedded. This called for a reassessment not only of the pedagogical purposes ascribed to digital tools, but also of how, and whether, students were using them in ways aligned with those intentions.

Reflecting on earlier research that highlights the role of technologies as vehicles of agency for participatory culture (Veblen & Waldron, 2012; Waldron, 2013) and as tools for supporting children's own musical worlds and learning identities (O'Neill, 2014), the discussions with the students revealed a somewhat different perspective: one that calls for a more contextualised assessment of how these ideas apply in specific, local settings. When discussing their use of digital technologies and social media, the students did not portray themselves as active content creators. For instance, none of the group members had ever uploaded videos to YouTube, a platform often associated with participatory media engagement. One student remarked that she rarely visited the platform, pointing out: *What would I do there, there's nothing* [final interview]. The group's responses aligned with findings from a 2016 study on Finnish children and young people's internet use (Merikivi et al., 2016), which suggest that their engagement tends to focus more on consumption than on content creation. This research by the Finnish Youth Research Society found that only around 2% of 10–29-year-olds maintained a blog or vlog or created video content, while 12% reported sharing edited images or videos (e.g., memes or remixes).

Through these conversations, I became increasingly aware of the diversity in the students' relationships with social media, making it difficult to generalise their digital behaviours or assume uniform patterns of technology use. Another important consideration that emerged was the extent to which students wanted to use social media for school-related purposes. Prior studies have shown that some young people prefer to keep their social networking platforms separate from school activities (Boyd, 2010), expressing reluctance to integrate everyday technologies into educational contexts (Gosper et al., 2013; Madge et al., 2009; Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Acknowledging that students might be hesitant to use social media for academic tasks (Manca & Grion, 2017) highlights the importance of educators approaching such integrations with sensitivity to students' perspectives and boundaries.

The broader issue relating to the issues of technology and music making was concerned with the social meanings embedded in both. At the same time as I had been focused on observing the students' learning of skills and knowledge, including the skills of negotiation and collaborative deliberation, I experienced a need to examine the students' actions within a broader motivational and relational context. Viewing the students' actions from a learning frame seemed thus inadequate to bring out the purpose of the students' actions in relation to their wider community. This broader view, sparked by the comment of one of the guardians at the beginning of the process, opened up a view on the perspective of family and community. It also encouraged me to view the students not just as "learners" but as individuals deeply embedded in relationships, as part of both their family and their community.

6.9.2. Self-Reflection Regarding the Aims of the Project

As previously discussed, several factors contributed to the outcome of the ninth-grade students' project, including material challenges such as the issues with technology that ultimately influenced the final performance. These challenges also contributed to my own sense of disappointment with the project's outcome, as it seemed that much of the group's efforts had been undermined. Ultimately, the inadequacy of the technical equipment prevented parts of their playing and singing from being heard during the performance, limiting the full realization of what the group had sought to achieve. Even though the students had contrasting experiences of the project, it prompted me to reflect on the reasons behind my own sense of disappointment.

Edwards (2016) suggests that teachers and students may respond to and interpret the object of the activity in different ways, drawing on what they perceive and consider important. The object motive, what is important, gives direction to how the task is approached and therefore what the activity becomes for them. For Edwards, the cultural historical approach to motive is based on a collective idea of what matters to others and to oneself within a particular practice. Edwards (2017) uses the terms "what matters" and "motive orientations" to avoid the connotations that theorising "motive" outside of cultural-historical activity theory can have with individual needs (p. 4). Engeström and Sannino (2021) distinguish between this specific object as it appears to a particular subject, at a particular moment, in a particular action, linked to personal meaning (Leont'ev, 1978), and the generalised object of the historically evolving activity system tied to societal meaning.

In considering what I felt was important in the project, in addition to the social aspects, the musical outcome of the project also stood out. As a teacher, I felt it

was my responsibility to help the group to achieve the best possible musical outcome. While I had tried to delegate and transfer responsibility and authority for the project to the students, I ultimately felt that it was my duty to ensure that the project was carried out in a way that would most likely lead to positive experiences, as these positive experiences also had the potential to foster continued confidence and motivation for the students to pursue music in the future. This involved, for example, ensuring that the students could meet the musical challenges of the project and the repertoire they had chosen, and that I would do my best to support them to have a positive experience performing the piece in front of their school community and families. While I acknowledged that the issues surrounding performances were not entirely within my control, I felt the greatest responsibility for managing the socio-emotional aspects of the performance. Recognizing the sensitive nature of performances, I saw the challenges posed by the potential negative experiences of performance. If the performance was not perceived by the students as successful, these negative experiences could deter them from wanting to perform again, potentially diminishing their sense of self-efficacy and confidence. Any feelings of embarrassment during the performance could have a devastating impact on their motivation to participate in future performances. Although the ninth-grade students had initiated the desire to perform at school themselves, this did not eliminate the element of performance anxiety or the need for them to feel a sense of achievement in their idea of "success" (see also Pecan et al., 2018). This also meant acknowledging that performances that did not reach their highest level of musical satisfaction could lead to disappointment and frustration.

This sense of responsibility as a teacher to support students in having an enjoyable performance experience has been highlighted in other research (see Haning, 2021). The need for music teachers to present high-quality performances has also been discussed in relation to community expectations. While these expectations are often framed as a need to "please" the community, in the case of this project I felt that community expectations were less of an issue. Rather, I wanted to support the students to have a positive experience performing the piece in front of their school community and families. As the group brought joy to themselves through their musical engagement, they were also bringing joy to their community, family, and friends. In my experience, discussions around musical performance often overlooked this key element: sharing musical experiences with the community has the potential to bring joy to others.

Research has documented challenges with performance-focused music education. Performance preparation can sometimes lead to an overemphasis on the quality of the musical "product", at the expense of students' understanding of musical concepts or the broader music curriculum (Haning, 2021). This has been

described as a "performance paradox", where increased authoritarian control over student ensembles is used to push for higher levels of performance excellence, often neglecting the quality of education for the students (Freer, 2011). While I do not believe this was the case here, as I did not compromise educational quality in pursuit of performance excellence, I did come to realize that the quality criteria for the project were different for the students than for me. While I was focused on the musical outcome's quality, for the students the quality also encompassed social aspects, such as being together, playing together for the last time, celebrating their friendship, and acknowledging the journey they had shared with their school community and families.

While my effort to achieve a unique musical outcome was not necessarily in opposition to the students' aims, I believe it influenced how I approached the project and ultimately shaped what it became for me as a teacher (Edwards, 2017). However, I did not view our aims as entirely separate. For me, acknowledging these differences meant broadening my understanding of "quality" to incorporate the aspects the students found meaningful in the process. While I recognized that one of my goals was to produce a high-quality musical outcome, I do not believe this was the only goal of the project. In attempting to articulate the meanings within the process, I acknowledge their contingent nature and the difficulty of fully capturing the essence of the students' motives for their actions. Nevertheless, I see this process as central to the development of my own thinking.

6.9.3. Identifying Expansions: Reframing Student Participation

As discussed at the beginning of this section, developmental work research aims at expansive learning cycles in which the work processes of organisations are redefined and new objects for collective activity are constructed through multi-voiced processes of negotiation and orchestration (Engeström, 2016). From an activity theory perspective, the learning cycle, in which the object of activity is jointly developed by multiple actors, is conceptualized as expansive learning (Engeström, 2004b). This theory proposes that the learning process consists of expansive actions, modelling new ways of functioning and exploring solutions to the internal tensions experienced in practices within an organization. Expansive learning is viewed as transformative, expanding the shared objects of work and leading to a reconceptualization of the object of activity (Sannino et al., 2016).

This qualitative transformation and reorganisation of the object (Engeström et al., 2003) does not, however, "imply an abrupt break with the past or a once and for all replacement of the existing object by a completely new one" (p. 183); rather, expansions both transcend and retain previous layers of the object. In Engeström's (2001b) view, expansions are not limited to the dimensions of time

and space, but also open up and problematise other dimensions, such as the ideological-ethical dimensions of power and responsibility, as well as systemic-developmental dimensions that link individual actions to collective and historical transformations of the system (p. 283).

Reflecting on my own perspectives as a practitioner after the first phase of the intervention, I considered that the changes in my own perspectives in relation to the object of the activity (Engeström, 2016) were related to the need to reframe the students' participation and actions from a larger frame than that of "learning" in their situated, motivational context. Going beyond this frame of learning required, in my view, a reconceptualization of students not only as "learners" but as persons in relationships, as part of their wider social communities. Reconceptualising the object of the activity (Sannino et al., 2016) on my part therefore involved extending my initial focus on supporting the students' individual ways of learning and active participation, to recognise the wider meanings attached to their music making, the "what matters" (Edwards, 2017, p. 4) in the students' meanings of the project in relation to the wider community. Edwards (2017) portrays this relational work as deeply ethical, as it allows for creative responses to emerge from what matters to each individual, while also connecting people dialogically to each other and to a common good (p. 2).

Confronting my own assumptions about participation also required reconsidering the frameworks I had used to categorize students and their participation. I needed to reflect on whether expectations of "active" participation inherently included normative notions of learning and learners (see also Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017), thereby shaping certain ideals and norms of participation with associated agency requirements. As child researchers have pointed out, children and young people may express agency in ways that do not align with adult expectations. In these cases, children's agency may not be identified in the encounters (e.g., Juvonen, 2015; Lappalainen, 2017). Consequently, participatory ideals risk forcing children and young people into certain roles, limiting their ability to shape their own participation (Peltola & Moisio, 2017).

Bruce Macfarlane and Michael Tomlinson (2017) critique how student participation becomes performative, what they call "participatory performativity". This turns student engagement into an authoritarian construct with a hidden curriculum that promotes a particular student profile, effectively disciplining students toward conformity and desired personal behaviours. In this context, students who do not conform to expectations, such as those who remain silent rather than speak up, may be negatively labelled "social loafers" (p.20). Leslie Gourlay (2015) has referred to this as the "tyranny of participation" (p. 402), where active, public and observable forms of participation are favoured in

the ideology of student engagement. In continuing the intervention into the second phase, I felt it was crucial to reflect on the expectations of participation within the music school context and the extent to which the promotion of certain types of student profiles and/or norms potentially limited what was possible for students within the music school practices, and the potential barriers for individuals to comply with the norms.

7. Transcending the Learning Frame Towards What Matters

This chapter draws on empirical material generated during the second phase of the intervention, which involved four student groups. Two of the groups, the third-grade group "Nuottitytöt" and the fourth-grade group "Glitterstarat", participated throughout the entire eight-month duration of the second phase of the intervention. The remaining two groups, comprising a trio of fifth-grade students and a pair consisting of one eighth- and one ninth-grade student, were formed during the spring term for shorter six-week projects.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the outcomes of the first intervention phase led me to broaden my initial analytical focus to include the meanings that students attached to their purposes for learning. Drawing on the theoretical framework of cultural-historical activity theory, Edwards (2007) conceptualises this process as involving relational agency, that is, "a capacity to work with others to extend the object on which one is working by bringing to bear the sense-making of others and drawing on the resources they offer in responding to that sense-making" (p. 4). According to Edwards (2012), such relational engagement necessitates a shared interpretation of the object of activity: "so that its complexity is revealed by recognising the motives and resources that others bring to bear as they too interpret it" (p. 26). Thus, in attempting to identify the meanings that students projected onto their projects, the "what matters" (Edwards, 2017, p. 4), my role became one of facilitating an ethical and responsive engagement with student agency. This entailed supporting students in articulating and pursuing their motives, while simultaneously navigating the differences among them. My aim was to create conditions under which their projects could become meaningful and actionable: an endeavour that required a dynamic alignment between my teaching intentions and the students' emergent purposes.

I will begin the chapter with an introduction to the four groups and continue by drawing on the discussions with the participants. As in the first phase of the

intervention, all names used in this report are pseudonyms. In addition, certain identifying details related to the school, the teachers, and the students have been modified to ensure anonymity.

7.1. Nuottitytöt

Nuottitytöt ("Notegirls"), as the group came to call themselves, was a group based on the friendship of four third-grade students, all female, who at the time of the study were beginning their first year in a separate music-focused class (*musiikkiluokka*) within their comprehensive school. As the third-grade class had just been established, its composition was new: while two students in the group knew each other from the previous year, the other two were entering a new school environment. Two of the group members were also just beginning to learn their instruments. The following vignette captures one of the initial moments in our collaborative journey.

7.1.1. Can We Perform for Our Class?

*We gather in a small circle, occupying approximately one square metre of open space amid the densely packed furniture in the room. Located in the staff area of the comprehensive school and adjacent to storage rooms, the space is not used for regular classroom activities. We are fortunate that the school was able to allocate this modest room to us on a Monday afternoon, the busiest time of the week, as this is one of the few time slots when all four students can join the session and the school harp can also be accessed for our project. The harpist swiftly prepares her instrument, removing the cover from the school's harp, while the other students unpack their own instruments and deposit their coats and rucksacks wherever there is room. With evident enthusiasm, the harpist asks whether she might play a piece for the group. She begins to play the piece "Jumalan kämmenellä"⁴⁷, and the clarinetist joins in and sings with her. I take the opportunity to ask the students how they are familiar with the song and whether they would like to rehearse it together. Before anyone can respond, the saxophonist starts to play the theme from *The Godfather*, with the rest of the group remaining quiet for this impromptu performance. The other members of the group watch and giggle, both at the cameras and at each other. Once the piece concludes, the saxophonist immediately begins another tune, and her peers struggle to persuade her to stop. The harpist, undeterred, comments that*

⁴⁷ Jumalan kämmenellä (English translation: "In the palm of God") is a religious hymn.

she would like to perform another song, explaining that her earlier piece was too short. (Reflections on the videos, Researcher Journal)

Children's initiatives for joint action do not always proceed in the order that adults are used to. This was an observation made by Tuovila (2003), who studied children's music making in and out of the classroom in Finnish music schools and concluded that children's self-initiated, spontaneous music making often unfolded in a manner that diverged from adult conventions, rarely progressing one thing at a time. Accordingly, Tuovila argued that researchers needed to be attentive about how to define children's activities so that they did not lose their character. Trying to capture the feel of the situations and describe the ways in which the children in this study participated in the co-construction of the practices was not an easy task. The second meeting of Nuottitytöt, of which the preceding vignette offers a brief glimpse, began with the harpist's eager desire to perform one of her own pieces. What followed was a spontaneous sequence of performances, as each member of the group expressed a desire to share something with the others. This emergent performance setting, shaped by the students' own initiatives, created a unique opening for our project. Seizing this moment, I posed a question to the group: *"Could we perhaps rehearse some of the songs collaboratively?"*

The process within the Nuottitytöt group differed significantly from that of the ninth-grade students' project, in which the students established a clear plan for their collaborative work early in the intervention. In contrast, the extended duration of the Nuottitytöt project allowed for a more open-ended exploration of student-initiated ideas, free from the constraints of a rigid timeline. Although some sessions emerged organically, shaped by the student's initiatives and my efforts to support their realisation, I do not regard the sessions as without structure. Rather than following a predetermined script, the project was guided by a strategy marked by an ongoing effort to co-construct shared practices. This involved weaving together the group's initiatives and building coherence both within and across sessions. A key part of this approach involved making the process visible to the students: responding to their evolving thinking, directing the group's attention to emergent opportunities or challenges, and helping to clarify and resolve difficulties as they arose.

As the group members enthusiastically contributed ideas for potential collaborative projects, the situation offered me, as the teacher, the opportunity to take up the children's initiatives by following the rule of "Yes, and" (Johnstone, 1989; Sawyer, 2006). This principle, originally drawn from the context of devised theatre, encourages the acceptance of others' suggestions and the active building upon them through further elaboration. In devised theatre, the script emerges from the ensemble's collaborative and often improvisatory process, an approach that

resonated with my aims as a teacher in this setting. For me as a teacher, this approach meant integrating structuring elements into the sessions while trying to co-construct the overall plan with the group, concentrating on my part to ensure that decisions did not inadvertently foreclose creative opportunities (Johnstone, 1989).

By the second session, the Nuottitytöt group had already decided that they wished to perform a piece titled *Busy Bee* for their class the following week. This composition had emerged through collaborative improvisation and development during the first two sessions. At the conclusion of the second lesson, the students spontaneously invited the saxophonist's mother, who had arrived to collect her daughter, to listen to their performance of the piece. Although initially hesitant about these impromptu performances, I consciously resisted the instinctive thought, "*practice first, perform later*" (Researcher Journal). For the students, the boundaries between warm-ups, rehearsals, and performances appeared far more fluid and dynamic. Later I reflected on my own reaction, because, after all, the group was improvising the parts of their musical fairy tale, why the need to practice the improvisations to the extent that we did, why not consider these performances as practice opportunities as well? At the same time, I recognised that my initial hesitation also stemmed from a conversation with the saxophonist, who had expressed some anxiety about performing in front of the class. We agreed to perform in two weeks' time to give us more time to prepare.

The group's approach mirrored prior insights into children's musical engagement. Janet Mills (2005) observed that the relationship between rehearsal and performance was markedly more dynamic and organic when initiated by students themselves, compared to teacher-led performances. Similarly, Tuovila (2003), in her investigation of children's music-making practices, noted the inherently fluid and fast-paced nature of these activities. According to Tuovila, children's musical engagements often intertwined with play, movement, and the routines of daily life, making them difficult to isolate or categorise. As she observed, music frequently functioned as a seamless component of children's lived experience, to the extent that children may struggle to articulate what they "do" with music in a discrete or conventional sense.

In a similar vein, Glover (2000) argues that children's music-making often manifests as a continuous stream of activity, speech, and sound that defies strict genre classification. Music, she contends, cannot be "cut off" from other activities. Glover's findings align with those of Harwood and Marsh (2012), suggesting that children's self-initiated musical practices often exceed the technical and musical boundaries of teacher-assigned repertoire. These self-chosen songs frequently present greater challenges to instrumental technique than those set by educators (Glover, 2000). If children were encouraged to set and work

towards their own next level of challenge, Glover argues, teachers could gain access through listening to the way they understand their music and what they are capable of, both creatively and technically.

For the Nuottitytöt group, this enthusiasm for performing became a defining feature of the entire project. Over the course of the weekly sessions, the group engaged in improvisation, composition, and arrangement of their own material, while also collaboratively planning performances. During the project the group took part in seven concerts/performances, four of which took place at the end of the spring term when the group went on what they called a "concert tour" to the local nurseries and their school for a class of first and second graders. Additional performances included a fundraising concert for their third-grade class and performances at the clarinetist's instrumental examination and at the music school's open day concert.

7.1.2. Considering the Sociomaterial Conditions to Students' Initiatives

In the ninth-grade students' project I examined how the material dimensions of music making processes shaped and contributed to the development of social practices. Similarly to the ninth-grade students' project, one of the first issues to be considered with the third-grade group was the material dynamics of the project: finding the time and space to carry out the project along with other considerations such as the availability of musical instruments for the project. As the group's harpist was unable to bring her own harp to the school, for the group to continue with the project we needed to borrow the harp from the school. As there was only one harp available in the school, shared between the school orchestra and harp classes, the continuation of our project depended on aligning the instrument's availability with the schedules of all four participants and myself. After several discussions with the group, it became apparent that Monday afternoons constituted the only feasible time when both the students and the harp were available. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, we were fortunate to secure a small space within the school premises during this particularly busy time, albeit one located in a storage area and lacking a piano. While I would have preferred access to a piano, particularly for supporting beginner improvisation through simple harmonic loops, this compromise was necessary to keep the project moving forward.

Although these aspects of the students' projects may appear trivial, I consider it important to bring out how the availability of resources and the quality of classroom facilities also shaped the group's actions. From my perspective, the material conditions were integrally involved in both enabling and shaping the students' engagement and the outcomes of their project work. Adopting this more

situated perspective on the students' initiatives highlights the extent to which the materiality of music-making not only facilitates and informs their actions but also imposes certain constraints. This experience of the material conditions for action was perhaps heightened with the group of third-grade students, who, as they became familiar with their newly acquired instruments, began to develop their ability to communicate and coordinate their music-making with others using these instruments. In my view, the materiality of the instruments thus played a constitutive role in both the individual and collective dimensions of the students' learning and participation. There was also considerable variation in this between the different instruments: whilst it could often take a few weeks for the brass players to be able to produce sound from their instruments, others, such as this group's harpist, were able to produce sound from her instrument from the outset. This was also noticed by the students in the group and, for example, the saxophonist in the group was initially worried about not being able to produce the sounds she wanted to produce.

These material conditions, availability of space, time, instruments, and facilities, were thus not simply a backdrop to student activity, but actively shaped what was possible. It could be argued that the students' agency was largely dependent on their ability to manoeuvre and produce with their instruments. This observation was something that I acknowledged during the project: having skills with the instrument brought agentic opportunities, such as being accepted to perform in a school concert. At the time, I was still unfamiliar with the school's established music practices. When I contacted the school's music teacher to inquire whether the third-grade group could participate in a fundraising concert for guardians and families the group had expressed interest in, I discovered that participation was not open to all students; instead, performers were selected by the music teacher:

It struck me as somewhat funny when the music teacher responded to my email by stating that he would attend a session to evaluate whether the piece could be performed. The situation took on the feel of an audition. Following the group's first run-through, he told us that it was a great thing that the group wanted to perform, but that he couldn't ask paying customers to come and listen to something that wasn't ready. Consequently, we continued rehearsing. After a second run-through, his tone shifted slightly, and he remarked: "Well, perhaps this can be performed." (Researcher's Journal)

Although I initially found the music teacher's proposal to attend our session and assess the group's readiness to perform somewhat unusual, I felt that declining was not an option, as the concert clearly held significance for the students. While

the situation struck me as awkward, it later became apparent, particularly through my experiences with the fourth-grade group, that such practices might reflect individual teachers' differing approaches to concert participation in schools. Whereas the third-grade music teacher insisted on a form of audition before granting permission to perform, the fourth-grade teacher adopted a different stance, allowing all interested students to register for her class's fundraising concert. Ultimately, I chose to accompany the group on the piano during the performance to offer support and to help ensure that the presentation proceeded smoothly, because the third-grade teacher continued to remain somewhat hesitant about the group's performance.

Although I have drawn attention to certain socio-material conditions shaping the project, they were not given similar attention in our daily activities. Nonetheless, while being aware of the different demands that the group members' instruments made on them and the different lengths of time they had been playing their instruments, I tried to help as much as I could to support a positive atmosphere of exploration, rather than allowing the problems associated with the instruments to cause additional anxiety for the students. When students expressed concerns such as *I can't play with my bow yet or I should be getting the notes lower, but they're getting higher* (third-grade group session), I responded by emphasising the idea of musical development as an ongoing process, trying to support their self-belief in tackling the challenges. As I observed group members beginning to compare their own musical development with that of their peers, I sought to discourage such comparisons by emphasising that each instrument posed its own distinct set of challenges. From a practical standpoint, working with a group of students using diverse instruments required continuous adaptation. This included, for example, finding and purchasing a proper tuning key for the school's harp, resolving issues with stuck tuning pegs on the cello, and trying to help with the reeds and jammed keys on the clarinet and saxophone.

7.1.3. Exploring Improvisation as a Way for Music Making

As in the ninth-grade students' project, the third-grade friendship group represented a non-traditional ensemble in terms of instrumentation. The ensemble included two transposing instruments⁴⁸, an alto saxophone in Eb and a clarinet in

⁴⁸ For the transposing instruments music is written in staff notation at a pitch different from the pitch that actually sounds (concert pitch). A written middle C on a transposing instrument produces a pitch other than middle C, for example; a written C on a B $\flat$ -clarinet sounds a concert B $\flat$.

Bb, alongside a harp and a cello, both in C. This unique configuration presented particular challenges for arranging music, especially in selecting keys that would be accessible and practical for all instruments involved.

Given that some students had only just begun learning their instruments, and most had limited experience with ensemble playing, I encouraged the group to initially focus on active listening and on developing an embodied understanding of their instruments and the collective sound they could produce. Rather than emphasising the immediate reading of written notation, I prioritised fostering aural engagement and improvisational exploration. While music literacy is a central objective in many formal music education systems (see Campbell, 2004; Mellizo, 2020), as it is in Finnish music schools, I viewed this project setting as an opportunity to explore alternative approaches. Specifically, I sought to create a space in which musical creation was not bound by pre-determined scores or notational expectations or required ability to "decode" music from notation or recording.

Improvisation in this group's case meant not grounding it in a specific harmony or chord progression but rather allowing tonally free harmonies and melody lines to emerge, which could begin with any note, two notes, a rhythm, in whatever way the group members felt comfortable playing them with and through their instruments. Through this approach I tried to make the production of sound and music as accessible as possible, while simultaneously developing students' abilities to respond to one another and to synchronise their musical contributions within the group context. As my intention was to create an open and exploratory space in which the group's collaborative negotiation of musical direction could unfold, this openness meant that some improvisations evolved into more structured compositions, while others remained brief, ephemeral moments of free exploration.

In retrospect, engaging in music making through improvisation created valuable opportunities for the group to be present, to attune themselves to one another, and to explore the distinctive timbres and expressive possibilities of their instruments. The improvisational approach also removed a central parameter that typically governs the music making processes: the expectation of adhering to written notation and prescriptive frameworks, introducing a mode of music-making grounded in acceptance rather than correction. As composers of the works, the players in the group were thus always getting it "right", distancing them from the need to play "correctly" or to "aim" for certain specific things. Similarly to Glover's (2000) observation, I experienced that listening to the students' ideas and ways of discussing the music they were producing opened a window into their musical understanding that could be further explored together. Despite the pedagogical value and creative potential of improvisation, reflection

on the full eight-month project revealed that the group's musical preferences, evident through their own initiatives, were predominantly oriented toward playing existing repertoire rather than engaging in improvisation or composition. This observation was consistent with my previous experiences regarding children's engagement in instrumental music making; based on my prior experience, many music school students often found the practice and performance of existing pieces more meaningful and engaging than composing their own music or engaging in improvisation. In my experience, this preference was not significantly influenced by the students' age; while the older students' lack of interest in improvisation might be attributed to their limited prior exposure to such practices, I found that younger students likewise often preferred playing existing pieces over engaging in improvisation.

7.1.4. Engaging in Collaborative Decision-making

The students repeatedly asked me: "Do I play like this? Should I do it this way?" despite the underlying intention to do this collaboratively, by listening to others ... It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be, to listen and respond to others without making definitive plans of my own, creating closure for others about how certain things would go. It will be an interesting process to continue. (Researcher Journal)

Collaborative decision-making and working with others by listening to others' perspectives, articulating one's own ideas, and negotiating joint ways of moving forward is a capacity that can be nurtured and developed over time. This foundational belief that informed my initial approach to the project was occasionally challenged with the group of nine-year-olds, where dynamics of authority and dominance emerged; some students frequently assumed leadership roles in composing or arranging the group's music, directing others on what and when to play, speaking over one another, and at times raising their voices in an effort to assert their contributions. Like any ensemble, the Nuottitytöt group required deliberate practice in the interpersonal dimensions of collaboration: learning to wait for their turn to speak, articulating ideas constructively, responding to others' suggestions, and engaging in dialogue with others.

For the third-grade group, I felt that the initial start of the process was mainly about practising the basic dispositions of collaborative decision-making: not making decisions alone and excluding others, but listening to others' views and perspectives, and considering that situations often have more than one possible course of action to be considered together. While the practice of exchanging views and reaching consensus was not unfamiliar to these students, applying these skills

in a musical context, where they were tasked with deciding how to collectively shape and create music, added a further layer of complexity. Collaboration, working together, thus required the development of skills for interaction and cooperation as well as for making music together.

An additional challenge in the third-grade project was that many students were simultaneously learning to play their instruments for the first time while also learning how to function as a collaborative ensemble. As their instrumental skills were still developing, some students expressed a desire to rehearse their individual parts independently, which occasionally led to frustration among peers who were required to wait. My experience was that there were many of us in the classroom, the students and their instruments, and sometimes broken pegs or malfunctioning reeds introduced further delays and disruptions, reinforcing the need for patience within the group.

In seeking to support the collaborative co-construction of musical practices, I aimed to involve the students in as wide a range of decisions as possible. My intention as a teacher was to avoid imposing preconceived notions about how the project should unfold, and instead to remain open to the students' ideas, allowing the direction of the work to emerge organically. To facilitate this openness, I deliberately refrained from adhering rigidly to a predetermined plan, thereby leaving space for spontaneous, collective decision-making as the sessions progressed. While I introduced certain frameworks, such as improvisation and composition, as possible avenues for musical engagement, these were offered as flexible suggestions rather than fixed directives.

Although I encountered several challenges related to collaborative decision-making within the Nuottitytöt group, many of these difficulties appeared to stem less from resistance and more from the students' high levels of enthusiasm. Their eagerness to contribute ideas and move the project forward often resulted in a lack of patience when it came to listening attentively to one another or collaboratively developing each other's contributions. At times, the group's energy verged on overwhelming. Yet, the consistently positive feedback from the students and their apparent enjoyment of working together reinforced my commitment to this approach. Overall, the tone of group interactions was constructive; students did not dismiss or belittle each other's ideas, but rather occasionally failed to leave sufficient space for others to participate. My role as the teacher, therefore, was to act as a facilitator, ensuring that no single voice dominated and that all members had the opportunity to engage meaningfully in the collective creative process.

Despite the various challenges involved, I found that working in a group setting afforded opportunities for musical development that were not readily accessible in individual tuition. Research highlights that the nature of interaction in small group lessons differs significantly from one-to-one instruction, with

group settings affording students greater opportunities to participate actively in the evaluation and resolution of musical challenges, rather than simply responding to tasks assigned by the teacher (Daniel, 2006).

In my view, this collaborative approach was particularly valuable from the perspective of instrumental skill development, especially for string and wind players, as ensemble contexts offered rich opportunities for developing intonation and tonal precision that were unavailable in solitary practice, which lacked key musical elements such as harmony. More broadly, group playing fostered sensitivity to touch, dynamics, timbre, phrasing, and rhythmic accuracy. Playing in a group was also valuable in developing a sense of rhythm, as rhythmic vagueness or imprecision in playing together made it impossible to work. Playing with others required students to constantly listen to and adapt their playing to the environment and surrounding impulses, to negotiate interpretations, and ultimately to take individual responsibility for their part, responding creatively even in technically demanding passages. This necessity of coordinating with others required students to listen attentively and to adapt to their musical environment.

Although managing the group dynamics required a great deal of attention from me as a teacher, overall I felt that the social context provided many elements that supported student engagement in powerful ways. These observations were consistent with my previous experience of friendship duos or larger friendship groups, which I found often provided a space for students to share their thoughts. In my experience, students who were typically more reserved in one-to-one lessons sometimes became more willing to engage in group discussions, particularly when among peers they identified as friends (see also Tuovila, 2003). While encouraging students to participate and have a say in decisions that affect them requires a degree of social confidence and linguistic fluency that not all students have or feel they have, peer groups occasionally seemed to provide emotional support for those students who were less inclined to speak in individual settings.

This, of course, depended on the overall dynamics of the group, whether the students felt the space was respectful and emotionally safe enough to share their ideas. Recognising that each child brought different experiences to the group on different days, the group processes were also constantly in motion. Rather than assuming that peer groups automatically function as sources of solidarity and friendship, or that peer group work necessarily equates to collaborative work, I had to acknowledge that peer groups could also be sites of stereotyping and silencing. Whilst the emotional support of friends could lead to increased participation and an experience of inclusion, fear of social exclusion could also

make students reluctant to share their ideas if they thought they held a minority view.

This recognition demanded ongoing attentiveness in my role as teacher. I needed to observe closely the dynamics unfolding within the group to identify whether any patterns of exclusion or dominance were emerging. As discussed earlier in relation to the third-grade group, I generally perceived the interactions to be positive: students did not dismiss or belittle each other's ideas, and there was a shared ethos of respect. Nevertheless, as with all pedagogical work involving children, I found it essential to remain responsive to shifting social dynamics and to reinforce positive interaction through consistent, constructive feedback.

While friendship groups often served as a socio-emotional resource that supported participation, I had to further acknowledge that they did not, in and of themselves, guarantee effective collaboration. Developing collaborative competence still required explicit and sustained attention. As Kosonen (2001) observes in her study of adolescent piano students in Finnish music schools, peer groups can also present negative points of comparison. When students' self-expectations are unmet, particularly in the presence of more technically advanced peers, such comparisons may lead to diminished motivation and increased self-doubt. Thus, fostering a collaborative and inclusive learning environment necessitated a careful balance between recognising the strengths of peer-based support and addressing the potential vulnerabilities it could introduce.

7.2. Glitterstarat

Glitterstarat ("Glitterstars"), as the group came to call themselves, was a group based on the friendship of four fourth-grade students, all female, who were in their second year of a music-focused class (*musiikkiluokka*) within their comprehensive school. This group was the first to begin sessions in the autumn following the completion of the intervention's first phase. Comprising a clarinetist, a saxophonist, a violinist, and a violist, the ensemble met weekly throughout the eight-month duration of the project. Over the course of the intervention, the students contributed actively to various aspects of the project, offering concrete suggestions on repertoire selection, performance opportunities, and methods of approaching the learning process. Their proposals reflected diverse learning strategies, including learning by ear, using standard notation, and developing their own notation systems or video recordings to aid memorisation and rehearsal. During the project, one of the group's guardians also became involved in the project by suggesting a venue for the group to perform. The

following vignette captures a moment from the collaborative journey with Glitterstarat.

7.2.1. Arts Education Silos and the Infinity of Life

The saxophonist and the clarinetist are goofing around in front of the video camera. Perhaps I am wrong to categorize their activity as goofing around, because the endless funny faces they make in front of the video camera, along with the dancing and singing, look like a performance. We are supposed to be rehearsing for the pre-Christmas party today, but by the looks of it, the performance has already begun. The same pattern has repeated itself for many weeks. I can only see this in retrospect as I watch the videos of what happened as soon as I opened the video cameras. While I was busy making space in the classroom for our group, the sounds and movements in the room were constant. The flow of rapid interaction in music, dance, and drama is interrupted only by my "ok, let's start" (Reflections on the videos, Researcher Journal)

In music education contexts, it is conventionally assumed that the development of children's musical understanding begins within the formal environment of the music classroom. However, as Glover (2000) points out, it may be more accurate to conceive of educators as entering a stream of musical engagement that is already in motion. This perspective is echoed by Campbell (2010), who asserts that "music is in the possession of children before schooling or specialised training" (p. 5). Recognising that children's lives do not conform to neatly divided domains such as "home" and "school", but instead form a continuous, flowing experience, brings into sharper focus that children's lives do not start and stop at the threshold of the music classroom; the richness of the children's everyday lives, their emotions, histories, and relationships accompanies them into educational settings and informs their engagement in learning. In the fourth-grade group's interaction, the fast-paced, exploratory approach to music-making closely resembled what Pat Broadhead and Andy Burt (2012) describe as "open-ended play" (p. 7). Much like the third-grade group, these students frequently responded to music through spontaneous movement, singing, or instrumental play. Previous research has also suggested that body movement is an integral part of children's self-directed musical activity and is central to musical experience (Burnard, 1999; Harwood & Marsh, 2012). Upon reflecting on my own teaching practices through video recordings of the sessions and what I had at the time characterised as the students' "goofing off", I was reminded of the words of Glover (2000), who suggests that when children are left to play with instruments, they meticulously investigate the world of sounds offered. For adults, in Glover's view, this music

is often heard, if at all, as "off task" (p. 78). In retrospect, I believe that this was also the case with my experience of the fourth-grade group: it was only through careful review of the video footage that I became aware of the various moments of shared exploration in the group and began to recognise the richness of their shared exploratory moments. My experiences aligned with prior research (e.g., Campbell, 1998) that suggests that children's engagement with music frequently goes unrecognised by adults, as teachers may for example overlook children's musical expressions because these fall outside conventional, adult-oriented conceptions of music.

As with the Nuottitytöt group, the musical engagement and explorations of the fourth-grade ensemble extended well beyond conventional instrumental practice. In line with findings from Tuovila's (2003) study, I observed that the students' musical activities were often intrinsic to other activities, such as part of play or movement, and were at times spontaneous or seemingly random, inviting me to respond to their ability to live in the fast-paced now-moment. In my experience, the group's exploration, which I saw as a boundless exploration of the dimensions and boundaries of music-making, was enhanced by the safe atmosphere created by friends.

Much like in the ninth-grade students' project, I entered a setting in which the emotional tone and flow of activity were already in motion, established through the social bonds among the students. This sense of security and ease that came with the group's mutual friendship shaped the dynamics of our collaboration from the outset. The launch of the project was marked by a spontaneous encounter in the school corridor, when the group's saxophonist asked: *Can we play the Titanic?* followed quickly by: *What should we call you?* This fast pace of our introductions seemed like a warm-up, setting the pace for our project and showing the group's eagerness to get started.

As previously discussed, the existence of a friendship group did not, however, automatically equate to effective collaborative skills or cohesive group functioning. Similar to the third-grade ensemble, the fourth-grade students required time and guided experience to develop the interpersonal and musical competencies necessary for collaborative music-making. As the project evolved, I came to understand that the emotional security provided by existing friendships may also have lowered the threshold for open disagreement. As a result, I found myself increasingly occupied with mediating interpersonal tensions that emerged more freely once the group appeared to move beyond its initial phase of surface-level politeness, a developmental process I had anticipated, though not in this intensity. As the project continued, I thus became increasingly aware of the heightened demands placed on my role as a mediator in managing and resolving interpersonal conflicts. My pedagogical role in this project diverged from

previous experiences, requiring different strategies and a heightened sensitivity to the emotional dynamics within the group. Managing the affective climate became a central aspect of my work, as the emotional tone of this group appeared more volatile, possibly due to the complexity of existing social relationships within the friendship group.

Reflecting on the course of the project, I came to recognise that the students' musical engagement was profoundly shaped by their lived experiences in the present: rooted in friendships, social tensions, and personal events that unfolded over the duration of our work together. Only after the project concluded did I come to fully appreciate the extent to which the group had processed their emotional experiences through their musical compositions. The group's compositions, such as "Draamaa" ("Drama") and "Linnunpoika hädässä" ("Baby Bird in Distress") seemed to carry expressive weight that reflected relational and emotional struggles within the group. While this study did not explicitly investigate music as a form of emotional regulation, many moments during the project suggested that musical engagement functioned as a means of coping and resilience for the students. The group experienced a profoundly serious trauma during the project, one that was closely connected to their personal lives. Due to the deeply personal and sensitive nature of these experiences, I have chosen not to include specific data related to these events in this study. Nonetheless, their influence on the group's musical processes and interpersonal dynamics remains a significant dimension of the project's unfolding.

7.2.2. Breaking the Sequence with Student Initiations

In the projects undertaken by the fourth-grade group, the processes frequently began with tentative and loosely defined goals, leading to outcomes that were inherently emergent. The goals themselves often evolved throughout the duration of the projects, shaped through collective exploration, improvisation, and hands-on collaboration. While some of the students' initial proposals were linked to existing school repertoire or forthcoming concerts, others emerged organically, originating from improvisational compositions or from a shared desire to create something uplifting that would enhance the emotional tone and cohesion of the group. Within this context, my role as a teacher required sustained attentiveness to the unexpected opportunities that arose through the students' collaborative and exploratory approaches (see also Sawyer, 2018).

By actively involving students in decisions related to repertoire, I observed that their initiations for repertoire did not occur in a particular order or follow a sequence or a linear trajectory, thus breaking the more conventional ways of structuring the learning repertoire. Rather, these initiations occurred in a

seemingly non-sequential manner, challenging more conventional models of structured repertoire development. Although such nonlinearity may be expected in student-led work, it compelled me to reflect more deeply on how their initiatives were reshaping the learning process, and what implications this might hold for traditional conceptions of instrumental pedagogy. To better understand the underlying reasons for their choices, students' motives for selecting particular repertoire continued to be explored in subsequent interviews (see Section 7.7.3).

In my experience, pathways in instrumental learning are always emergent; it is not possible to predict the precise trajectory of each student's development, their evolving musical interests, or the direction their journey as musicians would take. Consequently, instrumental teachers have consistently faced the challenge of adapting learning pathways to the unique needs and progress of each individual student. When music learning pathways have been planned, for example in tutor books, they have often focused on sequential models of assumed development of instrumental technique, where musical learning was designed in sequence, from simple to complex, and the technical complexity levels of the repertoire were increased, with each successive piece learnt being more technically difficult than the one before.

Harwood and Marsh (2012) have observed that in music curricula the sequential nature of the curriculum is often seen as essential to building children's understanding from simple to complex levels, although such approaches – a perceived progression of skills from simple to complex – are rarely found when children organise activities themselves. For example, in out-of-school contexts, children may not necessarily teach or learn musically simple songs before more complex songs. In instrumental pedagogy, the sequentially structured discipline of instrumental learning is commonly supported (McPhail, 2013) and, according to some views, even seen as a necessity (Kennell, 2002). According to James M. Renwick and Gary E. McPherson (2002), while there is a need for balance between self-selected repertoire and practised repertoire, the structured assignment of repertoire remains essential for supporting the development of students' technical and musical skills. These views of instrumental learning are also forward-looking: the foundational techniques established in the early stages of learning serve to support and enable more advanced musical development later on (McPhail, 2013).

A systematic approach to musical learning and knowledge acquisition is also supported by the music curriculum framework developed by the Finnish Association of Music Schools for music schools (guidelines can be found on the Association's website www.musicedu.fi), a curriculum in which musical knowledge is conceptualised and structured in a stage model, as a gradual acquisition of skills and knowledge, which is also designed to support the conduct

of instrumental examinations and assessments. This stage model presents a clear conceptual progression of musical theoretical knowledge, together with musical works that are assigned to repertoire lists that follow a sequence and progress from a repertoire of limited scope to an ever-expanding one, with increasing levels of complexity in sound production, finger technique, and a range of other related issues.

Whilst I recognised that this strategy had often guided my pedagogical thinking in selecting repertoire for students, within the context of the formative intervention projects I actively sought to challenge this established strategy by creating space for students to contribute their own repertoire suggestions or other musical initiatives they deemed meaningful and worthy of pursuit. The benefits of self-selected repertoire have been well-documented in previous research, which suggests that students engage with music they enjoy in qualitatively different ways than with teacher-assigned pieces. When working with preferred repertoire, students tend to invest more time and apply a greater variety of practice strategies to improve their performance (McPhail, 2013; Renwick & McPherson, 2002). Research in music education has consistently demonstrated that autonomy, choice, and personal relevance are key factors in sustaining and enhancing students' motivation, with numerous studies reporting increased time-on-task when students are allowed to select pieces they are genuinely interested in learning (Lehmann et al., 2007; Renwick & McPherson, 2002).

A high level of motivation was also evident in the projects initiated by the fourth-grade group. Although their initial selection, the film theme "My Heart Will Go On" from the film *Titanic*, was technically challenging for them, the students devoted considerable individual time to rehearsal. By the third week, all members had learned their respective parts. In the following session, the group's clarinetist had taken the initiative to begin practising a new song, "Mamma Mia" by ABBA, which was soon adopted by the rest of the group. As previously discussed in relation to the third-grade project, the strong motivation evident in the fourth-grade group significantly influenced the entire process, prompting more consistent at-home practice.

In many ways, the co-constructed projects bore resemblance to the flipped classroom model (Bergmann & Sams, 2012), in which students prepare content outside of class, allowing in-class time to be used for deeper exploration. However, unlike the traditional flipped model where content is pre-selected by the teacher, the "flipping" in this project occurred as students chose repertoire independently, familiarised themselves with it by, for example, learning the melody of the song aurally beforehand, and brought their ideas into the classroom. This student-driven learning structure was further supported by pedagogical approaches grounded in adaptive structuring and on-demand scaffolding

(Seitamaa-Hakkarainen & Hakkarainen, 2019), which often seemed to stand in contrast to the more linear sequencing typical of instrumental instruction. Sawyer (2018) characterises this type of pedagogy as linear, because students work with predefined topics through scripted and predetermined procedures, methods, and outcomes.

While a foundational condition for learning to play an instrument is the student's willingness to commit time to individual practice (Hallam & Bautista, 2018), I found that student-initiated repertoire choices powerfully reinforced that commitment. In contrast to the sequential model, in which the teacher seeks to regulate the student's motivational state by offering optimally calibrated challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2000), my role in this process shifted toward one of building upon the students' pre-existing motivation, rather than attempting to redirect their attention toward the learning process. I was often surprised by the extent to which the students' sustained motivation enabled them to overcome the challenges inherent in their chosen repertoire.

In my view, this realignment of the learning process ultimately benefited the students; rather than me introducing the students to a particular repertoire with the hope that the students would be motivated to continue learning my assigned repertoire, the students' self-selected repertoire had their initial interest in pursuing the repertoire, allowing the processes to focus on finding the means to help the students pursue their enquiries. In the fourth-grade group, this process was further accelerated by the students' use of WhatsApp, which they used to share their practice progress through video messages. In one instance, a clarinetist reported playing one of the pieces under rehearsal 81 times before she felt satisfied enough to send her recording to the group. Between September and December approximately 310 messages were exchanged in the WhatsApp group, the majority consisting of video clips in which students showcased their at-home practice, for some of which I provided feedback and encouragement. One significant benefit of this asynchronous, time-shifted communication was that the learning process was no longer bound by the physical constraints of scheduled lesson times. Students could raise questions and receive support throughout the week, rather than waiting for the next session. The use of this media also allowed me to record classroom demonstrations and share them with students, enabling repeated review at their own pace. These recordings served as multimodal resources, capturing nuances that written notation could not convey. Initially, the idea of using video in this way was initiated by one of the group members who wanted to remember her improvised chords on the piano and asked me to make a video recording of her hands as she played the chords. The recordings were also used by other members of the group to help them remember certain parts that they were improvising or playing.

Research on music-making in out-of-school contexts has consistently demonstrated that repertoire acquisition often occurs through informal, aural/oral methods, particularly via observation, imitation, and engagement with musical wholes rather than through isolated or sequentially structured tasks (Harwood & Marsh, 2012). These findings challenge traditional models of instruction and support the view that children possess the capacity to engage in complex rhythmic behaviours (Marsh, 2008) and to perform sophisticated musical material at much earlier developmental stages than typically acknowledged in formal educational settings. Such insights call for a critical re-examination of the assumptions underpinning repertoire selection and the progression of learning in school-based music education. Importantly, these informal learning processes have been characterised as inherently non-linear, collaborative, and responsive, markedly different from the structured, hierarchical organisation of content commonly found in formal teaching environments (Campbell, 2001; Marsh, 2008; Marsh & Young, 2012). This body of research highlights the importance of recognising and valuing the musical competencies that children develop outside institutional contexts, and suggests the potential benefits of integrating more flexible, student-led approaches within formal music pedagogy.

In my prior experience with instrumental learners, I observed that the effort to synchronise the development of note-reading skills with the early stages of motor coordination often impeded students' progress, particularly when note-reading was prioritised to the extent that all musical outcomes should be produced solely through reading notation. Students tended to engage more fully and freely with dimensions such as rhythm and pitch when given opportunities to explore music without the constraints imposed by standard notation. In my view, an over-reliance on notation at early stages could thus restrict the sensory and creative dimensions of musical learning, particularly for beginners who were simultaneously developing foundational physical and aural skills. A further issue to consider was how the representational systems, such as conventional music notation, undeniably shape musical understanding, yet also possess inherent limitations in their ability to mediate the full complexity of musical information and musical experience (Bamberger, 1999, 2005).

Whilst it can also be argued that the widely held assumption favouring sequential skill development as the most appropriate pathway for acquiring technical and musical proficiency on an instrument is, in part, shaped by the material demands of the instruments themselves – as with any activity involving complex motor coordination, certain foundational skills, such as the gradual development of muscle strength and endurance, require sustained, long-term cultivation – my exploration to challenge this established strategy sought to identify the extent to which it could be expanded and what potential benefits such

an expansion might yield. It is important to note that whatever the decisions regarding the choices of repertoire, the physical demands of instrumental playing underscore the importance of attending to issues of music ergonomics. Supporting students in developing physically sustainable techniques, including posture, grip, and movement, is therefore not only a matter of health but also directly informs pedagogical decisions, such as repertoire selection. Selecting repertoire that exceeds a student's current physical and technical capacity, for example repertoire requiring advanced motor coordination or muscular endurance, at too early a stage may contribute to fatigue, frustration, or even long-term injury. Thoughtful alignment between physical development and musical challenge is therefore critical for both student well-being and meaningful musical growth. In decisions of repertoire, addressing these concerns is therefore essential to mitigate the potentially harmful compensatory strategies students may adopt when struggling to meet the technical requirements of their instruments in relation to the repertoire.

7.2.3. Aligning Objectives with Stakeholders

We spent most of the time trying to find the notes, which was challenging again. And I felt that was where the frustration was. But when we started to make the composition out of the notes, the clarinetist said it was the best ever, the best piece ever, this Draamaa. ... The end result was great, the group members were enthusiastic and wanted to stay longer and were sorry that we couldn't have a lesson the following week ... (Researcher Journal)

It was an unplanned turn of events that the key of our first group composition for the fourth-grade group was G minor. I began playing chords on top of the Glitterstar group's improvisations, and eventually the group decided to keep these initially improvised chords in the final arrangement of the song. Had I been aware of more accessible keys for the string players, I might have tried to avoid the minor key. In a subsequent discussion with the group's violin teacher, I learned that G minor posed significant challenges for the second-year violinist, as the low second fingers were not yet developed, making it difficult to play in a minor key. It was only after completing "Draamaa" in G minor that I discovered from the violin teacher that more accessible key signatures for the violinist would have been G major, D major, and A major, due to the open strings on the violin. The teacher further noted that songs requiring the use of the fourth finger would also be challenging for this student. He suggested that, for future compositions, we could limit the range to the fourth finger, using the open strings and the four notes forming a fifth.

Following the teacher's explanation of the violinist's situation and her Suzuki background, he emphasized the importance of teaching the student to read music during that year. Additionally, one of the goals they had set for her was to maintain proper posture. The teacher mentioned that he needed to always stand beside the violinist to ensure that she consistently upheld correct posture.

The teacher also suggested the possibility of involving other violinists in the project, though I was uncertain of his intent. My initial assumption was that he believed another student might be better suited for the project. However, when I clarified that the idea of the group was based on the friendship group, it seemed to be new information for him, as my initial explanation appeared to have caused some confusion. (Researcher Journal)

The conversation left me uncertain as to whether I had correctly understood the violin teacher's intentions, for example whether he expected me to ensure that the violinist maintained proper posture during our group lessons, and moreover whether he might have preferred the student to refrain from participating in the project altogether, given that they had other plans for the year. I concluded that this was an issue that required further discussion with the teacher. It became clear that our approach, centred around improvisation and playing largely by ear, may have been somewhat misaligned with the goals that the violin teacher had set for the student that semester. These discussions served as a reminder of the inherently multi-voiced nature of the project, where the alignment of goals was influenced not only by the perspectives of parents, students, and the institution, but also by those of the instrumental teachers.

While I found that the objectives of our project were generally aligned with the violin teacher's goal of supporting and advancing the students' instrumental skills and knowledge, the focus of our project extended beyond the development of individual technical skills on the instrument. The teacher's perspectives, however, introduced additional considerations regarding the overall direction and progression of the project. Throughout the project I reflected that perhaps in an ideal situation I would have had the opportunity to work in a team of teachers, with the possibility of discussing the different issues in the projects that required these on-demand ways of supporting students' initiatives.

Finding a common ground with the group's instruments, all of which suggested their own musical structures (Glover, 2000), was challenging. In retrospect, and as previously noted, the materials, particularly the acoustic instruments, were not merely passive elements or neutral backdrops to the students' activity; rather, they actively shaped the range of possibilities available within the projects. The extent of students' agency was, in many respects,

contingent upon their capacity and willingness to engage with the developmental demands of their respective instruments. Although the pathways for acquiring instrumental skills could be approached in varied ways, the process necessitated sustained individual effort and commitment to navigate the complexities of instrumental learning.

In her study on music students' motivation and learning challenges within the context of Finnish music schools, Hasu (2017) observes that many music teachers tend to prioritise mastery of simpler tasks before introducing more complex repertoire. In selecting repertoire, teachers typically draw on their professional expertise to determine both the appropriate material and the pedagogical strategies through which students should practise to achieve a desired level of competence. However, as Hasu argues, this approach may not always translate into student engagement. Even when a student feels confident in their ability to complete the assigned task, or experiences positive regard for the teacher's guidance and expresses a desire to please them, the student is unlikely to commit to the task if it fails to capture her genuine interest (p. 71). Hasu (2017) further argues that many teachers are reluctant to permit students to engage with more challenging repertoire until they have demonstrated sufficient mastery of simpler pieces or have reached what the teacher perceives as an appropriate "level" of competence. However, Hasu also notes that this pedagogical stance may be counterproductive, as practising easier pieces does not always inspire students. Consequently, a student's level of performance may remain equally low with simpler repertoire as it would with more complex material, if the task fails to stimulate interest and engagement. From Hasu's perspective, the emphasis should not necessarily be placed on selecting "easy" repertoire, but rather on identifying pieces that resonate with students and generate motivation. When students are assigned material perceived as overly simplistic or pedagogically prescriptive, they are often less inclined to practise it with the necessary commitment. It is detrimental to students' motivation if their technical and musical skills are sufficient to play difficult repertoire, but the teacher does not allow the student to play more difficult repertoire.

Hasu (2017) draws attention to the student's perceived autonomy, a term developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2000), referring to the extent to which a student feels she has the opportunity to make choices and influence decisions and solutions related to her own hobby. If a teacher does not adequately acknowledge or support students' need for autonomy, such as allowing them to propose musical material, select repertoire aligned with their interests, or determine aspects of their own practice routine, there is a risk that the students' motivation will decline. However, Hasu (2017) also emphasises the need for balance. Supporting autonomy alone is insufficient if the student does not

simultaneously experience a sense of competence. Focusing on the student's autonomy is therefore not enough if the repertoire the student plays does not develop the student's skills and disciplinary knowledge. While it is relatively easy to generate initial enthusiasm for a hobby, long-term engagement depends on the child's belief in their own competence. After the initial phase the child's self-competence beliefs are thus crucial: the more skilled and capable a child perceives herself to be, the more likely she is to remain committed to the activity over time. The cultivation of joy and a positive learning atmosphere plays an important role in sustaining motivation; yet, as both Hasu (2017) and Tikka (2017) point out, these alone are not enough. Without moments of enjoyment and a sense of progress, the motivation to practise and engage meaningfully with learning may diminish. Experiences of competence are therefore critical, as they contribute not only to sustained motivation but also to the development of self-confidence (Tikka, 2017; see also Lehmann et al., 2007).

7.2.4. The Dynamics in Groups – the Stages of Forming a Group

Tiia	<i>You're not the reason we are here.</i>
Ella	<i>I am.</i>
Tiia	<i>I'm sure you're not.</i>
Emilia	<i>She is. With her help we became a band.</i>

(WhatsApp discussion)

Group formation is widely understood to progress through multiple stages, often including a phase characterised by the decline of initial politeness and the emergence of interpersonal tensions or conflict (e.g., Tuckman, 1965). As previously discussed, the fact that the groups involved in this study were formed from pre-existing friendships may have influenced the emotional dynamics of the work. On the one hand, these relationships appeared to create a sense of security and ease, enabling collaborative engagement. On the other hand, they also seemed to lower the threshold for expressing negative emotions, even during the early stages of the project. This was particularly evident in the fourth-grade group, where moments of emotional turbulence frequently surfaced during negotiations about how the group should proceed, as well as in the ways students expressed expectations regarding each other's behaviour during lessons.

While exploring ideas collaboratively and articulating one's own views has been identified as beneficial to deepening individual understanding and enhancing musical creativity (Webster, 2003; Wiggins, 1999), I observed that engaging with differing or conflicting perspectives posed significant challenges

for some students in the fourth-grade group. By the fourth session, the group dynamic had become markedly boisterous. Group members consistently exhibited the confidence, and, at times, insistence, to question, challenge, and defend their ideas. The intensity of this interpersonal engagement echoed the mood of their newly composed song, aptly titled "Draamaa" ("Drama").

One such episode occurred after a student nearly missed a session due to illness. The prospect of the group continuing without her sparked a discussion about group membership and leadership, specifically, who was seen as the group's original initiator. Although I recognised my responsibility as the teacher to help mediate these tensions and guide the group toward a constructive resolution, it became apparent that the students themselves were also conscious of the need to improve their collaboration. They began voicing reminders to one another about focusing on the music and avoiding disruptive behaviour: *Our band doesn't work if we do this all the time. Can we just start now?* (group session).

I experienced that my role as a teacher differed significantly from my previous experiences. Beyond facilitating musical learning, I found myself tasked with regulating the group's emotional climate, encouraging reconciliation, and creating space for both positive and negative emotions to be expressed. I came to understand that some of these emotional tensions were also channelled into the group's musical processes, shaping both the content and energy of their compositions.

Throughout our discussions, it became clear that students placed considerable value on equitable participation. When group members felt that their musical contributions were marginalized, such as being assigned a less demanding part, they expressed a desire for a more balanced role. For example, one student voiced dissatisfaction with playing pizzicato while another played with the bow. These negotiations raised pedagogical questions for me, particularly around the balance between process and product; I became self-conscious about whether time spent discussing roles and responsibilities was detracting from time spent playing. One of the more surprising aspects of being able to watch the videotaped group sessions after the project was that, in my view, the videos sometimes showed a very different kind of interaction from what I had experienced myself at the time of the session. For example, if I felt that I had talked too much in class, the video showed the opposite.

Despite the sometimes-turbulent group dynamics, there was also a strong desire among the students to make music collaboratively and to invent new things for the group. In late September, following a classroom discussion about performing, the group's violinist initiated a conversation via messaging about a potential performance opportunity. This quickly developed into an enthusiastic dialogue about organising a "concert tour" and producing an "album", a

compilation of the material created throughout the project. Students began discussing potential venues for release, the structure of the album, and the titles of the included compositions. One of their improvisations had already evolved into a more structured piece, prompting the need to assign it a formal title:

Tuulia *Can we think of a name for this?*
 Tiia *...some happy... mm...*
 Ella *...Happy...*
 Emilia *...I thought it sounded like wedding music.*
 Tiia *Weddings do not belong to our album at all.*
 Tuulia *Could we come up with a word that could have both of*
 those meanings in it?
 Tiia/ Ella *Happy wedding!*

In my experience, the establishment of shared goals, such as the group's collective decision to rehearse and record a selection of songs by the end of the semester, played a significant role in fostering social cohesion, particularly during periods of heightened interpersonal disagreement. One of their song projects, "The Cup Song", was a project that I experienced as strengthening the bond of the group.

7.2.5. Can We Do the Cup Song?

The music circulating in children's playgrounds and school corridors - such as "The Cup Song", introduced to the group by one of its members – likely would not have reached such diverse contemporary audiences without its mediation through various platforms such as radio, records, YouTube⁴⁹, and Reddit, and its appropriation by successive generations, ultimately including the students in this study and their school community. There was an interesting sense of history as I became aware of the song's background⁵⁰ originally titled "When I'm Gone",

⁴⁹ In 2020, on a google search for "Cup Song", out of the 954 million search results, 125 million were videos. On a search in YouTube, there were over 57 million tutorials on how to do the Cup Song and another 76 million videos on how to do the Cup Song without a cup. In 2022, a google search for "Cup Song" yielded 2480 million search results.

⁵⁰ The composition "When I'm Gone" traces its origins to A.P. Carter (1891-1960), an American traveling salesman renowned for collecting and synthesizing musical works, particularly through collaborations with Appalachian musicians. The song was recorded by the Carter Family, a seminal American folk ensemble, in 1931. The cup percussion technique itself has been attributed to Rich Mullins, who incorporated the technique into his musical compositions in 1987. In 2009, British duo Lulu and the Lampshades (Luisa Gerstein and Héloïse Tunstall-Behrens) combined the Carter Family song with the cup game in a YouTube performance. Anna Burden's 2011 cover went viral on Reddit, which Anna Kendrick later learned and

composed in the early 1930s, and how its creators had inspired past and present generations, inspiration that had also led to the song's reworkings as it became a viral sensation, with millions of covers of the song posted on YouTube, as part of a blockbuster film, and finally as part of our group's classroom performance. Given the nature of the piece with its rhythmic clapping and percussive cup pattern, I doubt the song would have entered the instrumental classroom, where literacy-based traditions predominated, without the initiative of the students themselves.

Although the suggestion to play "The Cup Song" initially caused tension, as some of the group members were reluctant to change the carefully planned programme for the upcoming concert, which already had a tight schedule, in order to avoid a possible argument among the group members I suggested that the others could at least listen to the group member share her idea and then we would decide as a group if we wanted to go ahead with it. At that point, I was unfamiliar with the song and asked if someone could sing a few lines. Only later, while reviewing a video recording, did I notice that one student had already introduced the song through rhythmic clapping on the table while suggesting that we play it. Students described how the song had been performed for months by many classrooms together in the school canteen. One student recounted hearing it at an evening party at a folk music camp in Kaustinen, a town known for its annual folk music festival. I later realised that "The Cup Song" was also associated with *Pitch Perfect*, the same film that had inspired the ninth-grade group in the first phase of the intervention. Once it became clear that the group was enthusiastic about the idea of "The Cup Song", we began discussing how the piece might be adapted for performance.

Ironically, this new direction helped resolve a challenge in our concert planning. While "My Heart Will Go On" and the group's original composition "Happy Häät" ("Happy Wedding") had already been selected for the concert, I had proposed a third piece, "Joulu on taas" ("Christmas is Here Again"), believing a Finnish Christmas song would suit the seasonal context. However, when I consulted the parent organising the event, she gently suggested a different approach, indicating that a non-Christmas theme focused on family or friendship would be more appropriate. The Pikkujoulut event (a Finnish pre-Christmas celebration), as I learned, was being organised for adoptive families and drew on the cultural traditions of the children's countries of origin. This prompted me to

performed in the 2012 film *Pitch Perfect*, bringing the song to mainstream popularity ("Cups song", 2025).

reflect on my own assumptions about the repertoire and the nature of the event, with my assumptions shaped by conventional Finnish pre-Christmas celebrations.

Once "The Cup Song" was selected, the group's enthusiasm spread as the group members began to share their ideas for the project, which eventually, and somewhat unexpectedly, led the group to create an interdisciplinary project:

Emilia *What if it would be like a play, so we would somehow
make our own play out of it and then start to play The
Cup Song?*

Through their initiative, I also experienced a shift in our roles as the students took the lead in the project, sharing their ideas and making suggestions for the project. With the group fully engaged in the project, I found there was less need to regulate their activities as the group members were eager to participate in decisions about the outcome and eventually invested a lot of their time in working on the project, even in their spare time.

"The Cup Song" became a project that combined music, movement, narrative, and rhythm, retelling the narrative of "The Cup Song" music video, but with their own modifications. Their version featured two groups of friends, who, after a conflict, parted ways, with one group expressing that the others would miss them when they were gone. This reinterpretation of the song's themes through play and performance demonstrated an interplay of text, gesture, sound, and collaborative storytelling.

As the project unfolded, I experienced a further shift in relational dynamics. With the group's eagerness to continue with the project, I experienced that I was no longer the one with knowledge about the issues related to the song, which contributed to the students taking ownership of the project and, I sensed, a certain pride in being able to tell me what I needed to do in the project. A playful exchange of roles also continued as part of our play, as the group wanted me to join in the play as the story's restaurant manager and we continued to explore these different ways of relating to each other.

The openness of the process, and the absence of a single leader directing the outcome, aligned with Sawyer's (1999) concept of collaborative emergence, where creative activity arises from the interactions of group members in ways that are unpredictable and contextually contingent. Each contribution builds on the previous one, with the meaning and impact of individual actions continually reshaped by subsequent responses. Campbell (2010) similarly describes children's musical expression as open-ended and fluid, with beginnings and endings shaped by spontaneous, playful engagement. "The Cup Song" project exemplified this kind of emergent, improvisational process, continuing right up

to the final performance, where some of the group members, inspired by the other performances, continued to suggest elaborations of the project.

The students' engagement in this project also bore strong resemblance to what Marsh and Young (2012) term *musical play*: self-initiated, intrinsically motivated, and child-led musical activity. A key feature of such play, according to their research, is its multimodal character: the reworking and transformation of musical material through elaboration, often blending song, movement, drama, and improvisation (see also Campbell, 2010). In the fourth-grade group, these elements were evident not only in "The Cup Song" project but in subsequent initiatives as well. What became increasingly clear was that students drew their musical ideas from a wide array of everyday experiences, both within and beyond the classroom. Their musical creativity was informed by familial and peer influences, formal instruction in both music school and general education settings, and the music they encountered through digital and social media platforms.

What I identified as common, shared music in the students' own communities was music they had been exposed to at school, either through projects they had been involved in or music they had been introduced to by attending a concert where another class had performed. My awareness of this 'school canon' was somewhat serendipitous, as I happened to attend some of the students' school concerts during the school projects and identified some of the repertoire that they wanted to play in the group lessons from the school repertoire. The school canon thus seemed to have a strong influence on the students' musical choices (see also Tuovila, 2003), which I was not aware of. Many of the songs were based on the school music books or other repertoire provided by the school music teachers.

7.3. The Fifth-Grade Trio and the Eighth- /Ninth-Grade Duo

Of the four student groups formed for the second phase of the formative intervention, two were established as short-term ensembles during the spring semester: a trio of fifth-grade students consisting of a flutist, violist, and cellist, and a duo comprising an eighth-grade pianist and a ninth-grade clarinetist. The members of the trio were in their third year of participation in a *musiikkiluokka* (music-focused class) within their comprehensive school and were concurrently enrolled in the local music school. The duo, by contrast, was composed of two students who also attended the music school but came from separate general education schools. This pairing was facilitated by instrumental teachers, as the participating students wished to engage in the project but did not have peers

available to form a group. Notably, the duo was the only group in the study in which the participants were previously unacquainted.

In retrospect, it became clear that the trio and the duo functioned quite differently from the third- and fourth-grade groups. While the younger groups often grappled with group dynamics and the complexities of learning to collaborate, the trio and duo encountered fewer interpersonal challenges. However, it is also my view that both of the spring-term groups might have benefited from additional time to develop stronger interpersonal connections and foster a greater sense of cohesion. This contrast was also reflected in small, symbolic differences; for instance, neither the trio nor the duo selected a name for their group, a gesture that, although seemingly minor, appeared to reflect a lower degree of group identity and emotional closeness compared to the younger groups. Overall, whether due to the abbreviated six-week timeframe or the more externally constructed nature of their formation, the trio and duo did not develop the same depth of interpersonal relationships observed in the third- and fourth-grade projects.

Overall, both groups actively contributed to shaping the content of the sessions, offering suggestions on how they wanted to use the joint time, identifying approaches they found most engaging and meaningful to pursue collaboratively. In the case of the fifth-grade group, most of the group sessions were dedicated to arranging their selected piece, "A Time for Us", by composer Nino Rota, in preparation for one of the members' upcoming instrumental examinations. The remaining time was used to arrange additional pieces for the trio, with sessions alternating between individual part rehearsals and ensemble practice. Reflecting on the overall structure of the project, it became apparent that the combination of a condensed project timeline and the external demands of instrumental assessments afforded the group limited flexibility to explore alternative directions or engage in more open-ended musical inquiry. This constraint was also echoed in the students' reflections during the final interviews. When asked whether they felt they had influenced the direction or outcomes of the project beyond the initial repertoire selection, I felt this was also reflected in their responses to the project when I asked them whether they felt they could influence the outcome of the project in any way other than the choice of repertoire:

- Aaron *Well this group work differs from orchestra in that you are always given the piece of music in orchestra and in your instrumental lesson as well...*
- Lilia *...from some book*
- Aaron *But here we have been able to decide for ourselves,*

like choose...

Lilia *...or a little bit of adjustment...*

Aaron *...that music and through that we have been able to
influence that music.*

Compared to the third- and fourth-grade groups, the students in the fifth-grade trio had slightly more experience with music-making, both within and beyond the contexts of music school and comprehensive school. This broader musical background enabled them to reflect more critically on the working methods employed in the study project, drawing comparisons with their prior learning experiences in formal music education settings. In my view, these longer-term engagements with music were also evident in how the group approached repertoire selection, a topic that remained a recurring point of discussion throughout our sessions. A distinct dimension in the fifth-grade group's repertoire choices emerged in the students' desire to select music that was unique or differentiated from the repertoire commonly played by their peers. While this emphasis on distinctiveness was less explicitly articulated in the duo's work, the two students also demonstrated strong preferences regarding both the repertoire they wished to explore and their overall approach to music-making. Although both were highly skilled in improvisation and even performed an improvised piece during the final concert, using visual imagery projected onto the concert hall wall as a stimulus, they ultimately chose to focus on other musical forms. Over the course of the project, they decided to centre their efforts on developing a composition previously written by the clarinetist, with improvisation taking on a more peripheral role in the final outcome.

This issue was further explored during the final interview with the other member of the duo. While I had assumed that the student might wish to develop his musicianship through a focus on improvisation and creative music-making, given what I perceived to be his strong improvisational ability, he clarified that his primary musical interests lay in the domain of classical music rather than in popular or jazz traditions. This moment prompted critical reflection on my own assumptions; I concluded that perhaps I had assumed that the student's preferences were different and found myself once again caught up in the common assumption that children and young people might be drawn to, for example, popular music rather than classical music. The conversation also highlighted a limitation in my own framing of the students' musical engagement. I had approached their participation primarily through the lens of individual musical development and the cultivation of expertise. However, this perspective had not fully accounted for the socio-spatial and relational dimensions of their musical lives. The pianist in the duo, for example, expressed a desire to develop skills in

free accompaniment, not for formal performance contexts, but in order to participate more comfortably in informal family gatherings and other social occasions. This underscored the importance of acknowledging how students' musical goals may be shaped by broader social and cultural contexts, and not solely by trajectories of formal artistic development.

7.4. Students' Agentic Possibilities

In this subsection, I will move from the examination of the individual student groups to the discussions with the students, to examine what kind of issues the students raised in the discussions in relation to their studies at the music school. The examination draws on the discussions in the group lessons as well as the group interviews that took place either midway through or at the conclusion of each project. In these discussions, the students also shared their experiences of their music education in the comprehensive school. This may be attributable to the fact that many participants in the second phase of the intervention were enrolled in music-focused classes (*musiikkiluokka*), contributing to their experiences being shaped by the interplay of both institutional contexts. The aim of this analysis is thus to illustrate dimensions of the students' music school studies that also contribute to the students' agentic possibilities, and the issues that they themselves highlight as important for their participation.

7.4.1. Contingency in Participation

Today we had the fourth- graders' concert at the pre-Christmas party. The girls were very excited. It turned out to be the saxophonist's first solo performance. In fact, overall, it was her third performance. She had only performed twice before, having been invited to play with her clarinettist friend at the clarinettist's concerts. The saxophonist had never played in a group before. Big things happened today. (Researcher Journal)

Allowing the student projects to emerge from student interactions and initiatives meant that their outcomes could not be predetermined. The outcomes of the student projects were simultaneously emergent and goal-oriented, shaped through collaborative engagement and influenced by a range of actors beyond the immediate learning environment, including parents and comprehensive school teachers who facilitated or proposed performance opportunities. As in the ninth-grade students' project, the third- and fourth-grade groups demonstrated a strong interest in performing, both within their own schools and in other external venues.

When the fourth-grade saxophonist told me on the way to the pre-Christmas concert that the vocal performance was her first solo singing performance, I realised that this was a topic I had not actually discussed with the student before the concert, nor had I recognised any signs of inexperience. As she seemed very confident at the event, I had not considered that she had never performed before. As the projects progressed, discussions with the students revealed a notable diversity in their pathways through the music school system. Despite the formal emphasis in the Basic Arts Education policy on ensemble participation and performance as core components of music study (FNAE, 2002, 2017a), many students described these opportunities as sporadic or coincidental. Rather than experiencing ensemble playing and performance as integrated elements of their curriculum, students encountered them in an unstructured manner. Access to such experiences appeared to be contingent upon the practices, priorities, and resources of individual teachers and their position within the music school.

A sense of contingency was thus a recurring theme: whether students had access to key learning experiences, such as collaborative music-making or public performance, was not consistently guaranteed for the students participating in the study. For several students involved in the intervention projects, these activities represented entirely new opportunities, despite years of prior enrolment in music school. For instance, like the fourth-grade saxophonist, the third-grade saxophonist had never participated in a performance or ensemble activity during her two years of formal study. These experiences of music school studies were brought up in the discussions about the project:

- Tuulia *How would you describe this project overall?*
 Roosa *Nice. Loud* [smirks]
 Tuulia *Can you be more specific about what you've enjoyed?*
 Roosa *Well, performances and new songs. Because with my own teacher I would not necessarily be there yet.*
 Tuulia *Have you had the chance to perform with the saxophone? Has your saxophone teacher suggested any upcoming performance opportunities?*
 Roosa [Shakes her head]
 Tuulia *Has he suggested that there still would be something coming up this spring?*
 Roosa [Shakes her head]
 Tuulia *Oh really, no?*
 Roosa [Shakes her head]. *This is already my second year.*
 Tuulia *Ok. So you didn't perform last year either?*
 Roosa *Mm. No I didn't.*
 Tuulia *Not even once?*
 Roosa *Mm-mm. I had a different teacher.*

In reflecting on her experiences, the third-grade saxophonist described a sense of "not being there yet" in relation to the performances and repertoire selected for the project. Her phrasing suggested that she perceived these musical experiences as aspirational, something situated in the anticipated future of her music studies rather than within her current capabilities. Through discussions with the students, it appeared that for some of the students playing with others and taking part in performances had been part of their studies, whereas for others, such as the saxophonists, such opportunities had been notably absent. This disparity aligned with findings from Tuovila's (2003) study, which reported that nearly half of the 66 participating children in the study had never played in an ensemble during their time in music school.

As the conversation with the third-grade saxophonist progressed, it became apparent that her relationship with performance was shaped not only by access but also by interpersonal dynamics with her former teacher. She recounted that, in the words of this teacher, she had "wrapped the teacher around her little finger". Seeking to understand what she meant by this, we continued to discuss her experiences of performance:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| Tuulia | <i>Would you have wanted to perform last year?</i> |
| Roosa | [Shakes her head] |
| Tuulia | <i>I see. So is that why you said you wrapped the teacher around your little finger, because you didn't want to perform?</i> |
| Roosa | <i>He didn't even ask about a Christmas concert, or anything.</i> |
| Tuulia | <i>Ok.</i> |
| Roosa | <i>We just played in the lessons, nothing else.</i> |
| Tuulia | <i>Do you find performing enjoyable?</i> |
| Roosa | <i>Yes, but not alone.</i> |
| Tuulia | <i>So like nicer in a group?</i> |
| Roosa | [Nods] |

For the saxophonist, participating in performances appeared to be an exciting and affirming experience, with ensemble settings offering a more comfortable and less intimidating context than solo performance, similar to the experiences of students observed in other studies (Lehmann et al., 2007; Penttinen, 2010; Suni, 2006; Tuovila, 2003). Within the context of our project, the group environment seemed to lower the student's threshold for performance participation because she had the opportunity to perform with others.

In this regard, I would argue that the intangible, yet powerful non-material resource of peer support played a critical role in enabling the student's participation. Facilitating access to this type of support required that the student would have opportunities for such collaborative engagement. Ensemble playing, in my view, served as an effective pedagogical approach for developing performance skills, particularly for students who may otherwise lack the confidence to perform independently. For the third-grade saxophonist, it is likely that the emotional and social support embedded in group performance was instrumental in enabling her participation; the student may not have had the courage to participate in the performances without the intangible support of the others. This interpretation resonates with Tuovila's (2003) findings, which emphasise that group settings not only provide a safe and encouraging space for musical participation but also offer students important social reference points. When music learning occurs exclusively through individual instruction, students may be deprived of opportunities to share experiences, receive emotional support, and recognise the common challenges faced by their peers. Thus, ensemble participation can play a vital role not only in musical development but also in fostering a sense of belonging, empathy, and mutual understanding within the learning environment.

Overall, however, it is worth pointing that it is not self-evident that music school teachers are consistently able to organise student concerts or to facilitate the forms of peer support that, in this study, appeared particularly beneficial for the saxophonist. When examining the underlying causes of the contingency in students' participation, such as access to performances, collaborative projects, or opportunities to play in ensembles, it became evident in this study that multiple structural factors were at play. Many of these factors lay beyond the control of individual instrumental teachers, including their employment status (e.g., full-time versus part-time), access to institutional resources, and scheduling constraints. This issue was also highlighted in Tuovila's (2003) study, which noted that the organisation of additional student concerts or ensemble activities often depended on whether teachers were allocated sufficient resources and working hours by the music school.

For example, in cases where instrumental teachers worked across multiple institutions or supplemented part-time teaching roles with freelance performance work – which is particularly common among wind instrument instructors, for whom full-time positions are less frequent – organising extracurricular performances or ensemble activities is often not feasible. Consequently, students' opportunities to engage in collaborative music-making or public performances are frequently limited by the structural conditions of their teachers' employment and by the discretionary nature of resource allocation for ensemble instruction.

This scarcity of resources also has direct implications for the role of ensemble playing within music school curricula. As noted by Timo Klemettinen (2016), in 2016 ensemble instruction accounted for only 6.6% of all teaching in member institutions of the Finnish Association of Music Schools. Earlier studies had similarly reported that ensemble playing tends to be concentrated in the early stages of instrumental instruction, after which it gradually disappears from the core curriculum (Pohjannoro, 2010a). A review of music school curricula further reveals a predominant emphasis on individual expertise, with chamber music only formally introduced as an assessable subject in 2002. As the resources for group teaching and chamber music are discretionary – in other words, teachers are allocated resources for ensemble teaching on a variable basis – ensemble opportunities are not standard or guaranteed for all students.

This finding was echoed by many students in the present study. For instance, the pianist in the ninth-grade duo reflected that, over the course of his music school studies, he had had few, if any, opportunities to engage in chamber music:

- Tuulia *As part of your music school studies, have you played a lot of chamber music?*
- Onni *Well, in the early years I played some pieces for two pianos, and for my second exam I accompanied a clarinettist... And then we have our "family band" [uses air quotes] – my mum plays something, and then I join in.*
- Tuulia *On bass guitar?*
- Onni *Yes.*
- Tuulia *So in the music school there hasn't been an ensemble every year?*
- Onni *No.*
- Tuulia *Would it be nice if there was one?*
- Onni *Yes!*
- Tuulia *Has your teacher ever suggested participating in one?*
- Onni *Well, I brought it up once, but the idea kind of just faded away.*

In discussions with students, both the ninth-grade pianist and the fifth-grade violist raised the possibility of participating in an ensemble playing outside the formal structures of the music school.

- Tuulia *Have you played chamber music before?*
- Lilia *Well, in a small ensemble, with a few violins and then cello, sometimes a couple of cellos.*

- Tuulia *Ok, so primarily string instruments?*
 Lilia *And then some flutes and oboe.*
 Tuulia *Ok. Do you remember who organised this?*
 Lilia *Well, my teacher from the previous school. So yeah, I am still part of this.*

The fifth-grade violist had participated in an ensemble organised by her former school. This experience of playing with others outside the music school was not shared by the other students. When asked about musical engagement within their families, most students reported having relatives who played an instrument. Despite this, they noted that ensemble playing with family members was rarely encouraged or facilitated by the music school. These reflections suggest that while familial musical resources were present, they remained largely untapped within the formal music education framework.

7.4.2. Opportunities for Participation in Instrumental Lessons

In exploring students' perceptions of participation and their capacity to influence the direction of their instrumental lessons, for instance by suggesting or selecting repertoire, a range of experiences emerged. Students reported varying degrees of involvement in decision-making processes during their lessons. For many, the structure of the lesson appeared to be shaped, at least in part, by predetermined repertoire or tutor books. The third-grade saxophonist raised the issue of time as a constraint on participation, noting that there was "no time" to influence decisions, because there was something else planned.

- Tuulia *Do you get to influence your saxophone lessons, as to what pieces you would like to play, and do you in general consider this as something that you would like to do? Or does your teacher give you really nice pieces to work on?*
 Roosa *Well, I don't have time to influence what I would like to do, because first he gives me a piece and then when we have practiced that, then I like know the piece somewhat well, and if I need to practice it a little bit more, then we already go on to the next piece.*
 Tuulia *Ok.*
 Roosa *Or something like that.*
 Tuulia *So he always suggests them?*
 Roosa *Yeah.*
 Tuulia *Well, are they nice pieces? Because it looks like you have nice pieces?*
 Roosa *Well, one of them was Yesterday, but it wasn't the one, that, I can't remember, but it was soft, and when he*

gave me the piece one time, he played it, and the lesson was over, or the half an hour, then I tried at home, but then the next time we looked into some scales and then it was forgotten completely.

In the reflections shared by the third-grade saxophonist, it became evident that the pacing of her instrumental lessons was largely paced by the repertoire. A new piece would only be introduced once the previous one had been sufficiently mastered. This observation of a linear, repertoire-driven approach to lesson structure resonates with the findings from Tikka's (2017) study on teacher-student interaction in violin instruction, where lessons typically followed a fixed sequence: an initial discussion about the student's week, followed by the teacher tuning the instrument, after which scales or études were practiced, and finally work on repertoire. Tikka observed that some instrumental teachers were so focused and efficient in their delivery that students had minimal opportunities to reflect, pose questions, or engage more actively in shaping the lesson.

The theme of structured progression also emerged in discussions with the fourth-grade violist, who described how her sense of progress in viola lessons was mediated by the tutor book in use. She assessed her advancement by comparing her position in the book with that of her peers:

- Tuulia *Have you ever suggested any pieces to play?*
Lilia *No, because she wouldn't go along with it - we already have so many other things to do. I'm actually ahead of Maria... I mean, I'm not behind; I'm ahead of the others who started last autumn.*
- Tuulia *How did you figure out that you are ahead of others?*
Lilia *We have a viola book, it is this thick, so it has names of songs and Maria is my friend, and sometimes she tells me where she is in the book, she's quite a bit behind me. And if you think about it, she even got the book at least three weeks before I did.*
- Lilia *In the lessons, I don't get to choose which pieces we play.*
Tuulia *Would you like to be able to choose?*
Lilia *Yes, I'd like to decide, for example, which piece I play in a concert. But when my mother is in the lesson, then the teacher lets me decide. When I'm there alone, she doesn't. My mum has been in my viola lesson twice.*

From the student's perspective, the opportunity to suggest repertoire was constrained by the perception that there were so many other things to do during the lesson. The instructional material used was primarily repertoire books, and it appeared to structure not only the pacing of the lessons but also the student's conceptualisation of her own learning in relation to others. The tutor book served as a framework through which she assessed her progress and competence, often by comparing her position in the book to that of her peers. The student also noted that the presence of her mother during lessons occasionally influenced the way the lesson unfolded, although it is difficult to determine precisely how or why this shift occurred and what the situation in the lesson was, based solely on her account. Nonetheless, her experiences echoed those of the violist and cellist in the fifth-grade group, who similarly described how repertoire selection and lesson progression were shaped by the sequential order of pieces in the instructional books.

Lilia *Usually my teacher chooses the pieces, but they're quite nice pieces that we play. I have around three books, and we typically choose one piece from each.*

...

Aaron *I play from a like book or like a booklet, where there are pieces... It is some kind of French book, they are usually quite short, but then we make them longer for concerts with repetitions and such.*

Tuulia *So overall, you're fairly content with this arrangement? You haven't felt the need to suggest repertoire yourself? And if you did, do you think your teacher would be open to it, would she say, "Yes, let's play that"?*

Aaron *I don't know. I have never tried that.*

In discussions concerning repertoire selection, it became apparent that the fifth-grade cellist had not considered proposing repertoire within the context of his one-to-one instrumental lessons. He appeared relatively content with the teacher-led structure of his instruction. Notably, he had once requested assistance from his cello teacher with orchestral pieces assigned in his comprehensive school, but the teacher declined, indicating a reluctance to allocate lesson time to material not directly linked to the music school curriculum.

Aaron *I'm not entirely sure, but my friend, who also plays the cello, has told me she's had the same experience. We both had a substitute teacher for a while, and that teacher was happy to go through the school orchestra parts with me. I had just joined the orchestra*

and didn't know what to do at all, so we worked on the pieces together. The substitute had also heard that my regular teacher wasn't willing to look at the school repertoire.

I was deeply disheartened to learn of the student's experience, in which his cello teacher expressed unwillingness to rehearse orchestral repertoire assigned by his comprehensive school. Drawing on my own experience, where school conductors occasionally assign students repertoire that is highly demanding, I sought to understand whether the teacher's reluctance stemmed from concerns about the technical difficulty or appropriateness of the school-assigned material within the context of individual instruction.

Tuulia *I wonder why he didn't want to go over the orchestra pieces?*

Aaron *[Shrugs]*

Tuulia *Do you think he might have thought they were too difficult? Sometimes the orchestral parts for clarinet can be quite demanding.*

Aaron *They're not difficult. But once, when I asked if we could go over a piece together, he first said it was somehow illegal to look at it. Then he explained that it would take time away from my individual lesson. But then, my friend had another teacher, and she asked if I could come along to her lesson so we could leave together afterwards. I went, and I don't know the name of the teacher, but he told my friend that the lesson is hers, and that she gets to decide what happens during it. He said, "If you want something included, it's your lesson-the teacher is paid to teach you."*

In reflecting on the cellist's account, it became evident that he had sought to make sense of the situation by discussing it with his friend's instrumental teacher, in an effort to gain clarity and understanding. Based on the data gathered in this study, it is not possible to determine how widespread it is for instrumental teachers to strictly adhere to a predetermined curriculum and to exclude repertoire not originally planned for the student's one-to-one lessons. Without access to the specific rationale behind the teacher's decision, it is difficult to draw conclusions. It is plausible, however, that the teacher had some expectations about the development of the student's instrumental skills, a planned developmental trajectory wherein time spent on school repertoire was perceived as a diversion, either because the pieces were judged too challenging or were not seen as contributing meaningfully to the student's technical or musical progress.

While the cello teacher's approach might appear to represent an isolated case, the student's experience highlights a broader theme within this study: the contingency and variability of students' music school experiences, shaped in large part by individual teachers' approaches to instrumental teaching and learning. The student himself recognised this variability, having raised the matter with another instrumental teacher, suggesting a developing awareness of the differing practices across teachers.

I found the situation personally troubling, particularly the student's inability to receive support in preparing repertoire required for his school orchestra, which in turn limited his capacity to participate fully in those activities. Given his limited agency to resolve the issue independently, this lack of support had a significant impact on his learning. Later in the project, I learned that he had turned to his friend's older sister for help with specific technical challenges related to the repertoire chosen by the group. This incident raises broader questions about the alignment, or lack thereof, between music instruction across institutional settings, and the extent to which students' diverse musical commitments are supported in their formal lessons.

7.5. *We Are Already in the Fifth Grade*

In the projects covered in this study, the students' self-selected repertoire frequently presented greater technical and musical challenges than those typically found in conventional tutor books or in the repertoire in some of their school projects, as reported by the participants. During one of the interviews, a fifth-grade student reflected on her school choir experiences, noting that although she and her peers felt capable of tackling more demanding material, their teacher had selected what she perceived as overly simplistic repertoire. She provided an example from her school orchestra, expressing reluctance to play a piece titled "Telefooni Afrikassa"⁵¹, which she described as too easy and somewhat naïve, adding that they were *already in the fifth grade* (student interview).

This perception pointed to a recurring theme in the students' reflections across the study: the need to engage with repertoire and roles that offer an appropriate level of challenge. Students articulated a desire for tasks that not only matched their developing abilities but also enabled them to feel respected and musically engaged, whether in self-initiated group projects or teacher-led school ensembles.

⁵¹ The song Telefooni Afrikassa (English translation: A telephone in Africa) is a song composed in 1913 in which the lyrics of the story describe monkeys using their tale as a telephone.

Within the co-constructed practices of this study, this was evident in students' reluctance to perform overly simplistic parts, such as snapping fingers, playing open strings, or sustaining long notes, particularly when more challenging roles could be pursued. When students perceived tasks as insufficiently demanding or lacking meaning, some expressed feelings of boredom and disengagement.

The fifth-grade student's comments suggested that she interpreted the teacher's repertoire choices as a misjudgement of her abilities, an underestimation that she resisted. I also sensed that beneath this response there was also a discernible resistance to being positioned as a "child" and being seen as wanting to play music composed for young children. This theme also surfaced in other students' reflections. For instance, the third-grade cellist was concerned that her classmate, whom she viewed as more advanced, might perceive her as less competent if she only played pizzicato on open strings in the group's compositions. Earlier, she had confided feelings of embarrassment about her own competence in relation to others, describing how she felt ashamed that she could *only play children's songs* (group session).

When I asked the third-grade students what kind of music they typically listened to, their responses revealed that they rarely listened to repertoire classified as "children's music". Rather, their listening habits aligned more closely with those of older students, such as the secondary school peers in this study. When I followed up and asked when they had begun listening to this kind of music, they offered the following responses:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Viivi | <i>I started listening to that...</i> |
| Fiia | <i>...yeah that one</i> [begins to sing] |
| Tuulia | <i>At what age?</i> |
| Viivi | <i>Well, I started listening to it when we had this computer, and I was playing all sorts of songs, mostly Christmas songs, because it was around Christmas. I think I was about five years old, and from then on, I started listening to more music...</i> |
| Fiia | [Sings] <i>Joulupuu on nakerrettu</i> [a program in the radio] |
| Vivian | <i>Same here.</i> |
| Tuulia | <i>So the same as for Viivi, you started around the age of five?</i> |
| Vivian | <i>Yeah, when I was little, I used to listen to all the children's songs and stuff. But then at some point I was like</i> [taps the armrest] <i>I can't stand this anymore - I need to listen to something other than children's songs!</i> |

I found the statement made by the nine-year-old girl somewhat amusing: she had realised at the age of five that she should listen to something other than children's

songs. In the students' responses I sensed a certain resistance to being pushed into the identity of "the child", although it was unclear to me whether this was more to do with a resistance to being treated in a certain way or, in the case of the 5th grade student, also a desire for the teacher to raise the level of expectations. The discussion of students wanting teachers to expect more of them and to provide support so that they can achieve at high levels has also been identified in other studies (e.g., Mitra, 2008).

The desire for teachers to raise the level of expectations came up in our discussions when I asked students whether they thought it was important to be able to influence the repertoire at school.

- Tuulia *Do you think it is important that in school you have the opportunity to influence the selection of choir pieces?*
- Lilia *Well, it might have been nice to have some influence, because some of the songs we sang weren't really ones you wanted to sing [laughs]. Some of them were just really boring.*
- Tuulia *Can you give an example?*
- Aaron *I don't know, Tigershark, for instance, that one we sang over and over for such a long time. And then there were others like "Minun kultani kaunis on", which we sang as a canon. They're the kind of songs everyone already knows. It gets frustrating when we keep repeating those, especially when we could be singing something more challenging. Those kinds of pieces could just as well be done in regular classroom lessons. In music-focused class, we should be able to sing something more advanced.*
- Tuulia *What would you consider more advanced?*
- Aaron *Well our class has sung, we sing in four parts and everything, but then when we sing with the fourth graders, we're only doing two-part pieces.*

The repertoire choices made by school music teachers, both for rehearsals and performances, were likely influenced by the (limited) instructional resources and time constraints, which may have resulted in teachers relying on the repeated use of the same repertoire across multiple school events to meet demanding schedules. From the students' perspective, this repetition was perceived as monotonous with students expressing frustration for example with multiple performances of the song "Tiikerihai"⁵² even though the students had suggested other songs to be practiced. During our projects, we also encountered instances

⁵² The song "Tiikerihai" ("Tiger shark") was originally composed by Peter Basil Hodgkinson. The Finnish version with lyrics by Reino Helismaa was first recorded by Juha Eirto in 1955 (SecondHandSongs, n.d.)

where school music teachers appeared to underestimate students' capabilities in relation to self-selected repertoire. One such example occurred when the fourth-grade group chose to perform the song "Let It Go" in English at their class's fundraising concert. Although the students were highly motivated to sing the song in its original language, the school music teacher advised them to use the Finnish translation instead, expressing concern that the English version would be too challenging for them to master. Given that English had only recently been introduced as a subject in the fourth-grade curriculum, the task of learning the lyrics in a foreign language was indeed perceived as demanding.

Despite their class teacher's recommendation, the group demonstrated notable determination in learning the English lyrics of the song "Let It Go" within just a few weeks. Their commitment was evident in the way they rehearsed the lyrics sentence-by-sentence and actively sought support from their parents to master the pronunciation. While this specific occasion revealed that adult preconceptions, such as the music teacher's potentially limited expectations regarding the students' capacity to manage a self-initiated project, did not necessarily inhibit student achievement; the students' persistence and resourcefulness played a decisive role in enabling them to meet the challenge. This finding underscores the importance of recognising how students may exceed externally imposed limitations when given the opportunity to take ownership of the process. It also highlights how teachers' limited beliefs about student capabilities can inadvertently constrain students' learning opportunities (see also Rainio & Hofmann, 2021).

Within the student projects undertaken in this study, I noted that students' motivation in self-initiated work frequently surpassed the expectations held by adults, including their music teachers. In several instances the students demonstrated capacities that exceeded what had been anticipated of them. This observation aligns with Glover's (2000) assertion that adults often lack a clear understanding of the processes through which children engage with creative work, resulting in a significant underestimation of their potential and, consequently, underachievement. Similarly, Harwood and Marsh (2012) have emphasised that the musical and kinaesthetic complexity inherent in children's play is often considerably more advanced than adults assume. Their findings suggest a discrepancy between children's and adults' perceptions of difficulty: children may engage comfortably with material that adults regard as advanced. This highlights the need for educators to re-evaluate and elevate their expectations regarding children's creative and performative capacities. Rather than offering simplified or diluted versions of music – what Harwood and Marsh describe as "watered down 'music for children'" – educators should provide opportunities for

students to work with richer, more challenging material that better reflects their actual capabilities.

It is also worth noting that the breadth of musical exposure available to students at the time of conducting the study was shaped by a confluence of factors, not least their access to the same digital technologies as adults. As a result, many children are no longer confined to music explicitly designed for their assumed developmental stage or marketed to them as members of a distinct social category. This shift reflects broader debates concerning the social construction of childhood and, more specifically, the theorised "disappearance of childhood" as articulated already in the 1980s by Neil Postman (1982), who argued that an erosion of boundaries and distinctions between adulthood and childhood was taking place.

Within music education contexts, it is further arguable that adult-centred perspectives on childhood actively shape the social construction of what it means to be a child, including the expected forms of children's musical engagement in educational settings, such as understandings of children's capacities and, by extension, the repertoire deemed appropriate for them in educational settings. Campbell (2010) notes that adults often define songs suitable for children as rhythmically simple, limited in pitch range, and characterized by whimsical or pictorial lyrics, typically referencing animals and means of transport, trains, boats, and planes. This adult-driven moderation of content thus also manifests in music education, where students are often positioned through the lens of their age category and repertoires are filtered accordingly. Yet, as Henry Jenkins (1998) has argued, children's culture, produced by adults for children, is not innocent from adult political, economic, or moral concerns. Since the 1950s, children have been increasingly recognised as a consumer demographic, positioning children's media and culture not as neutral artefacts but as constructions shaped, and constrained, by adult interests. In more recent decades, however, new actors, such as global technology companies and digital platforms, have entered this space, redefining children's cultural environments in ways that differ from earlier, adult-curated models. The pervasive presence of digital media in children's lives has led to what some scholars describe as the digital colonization of childhood, whereby commercial and technological interests increasingly shape children's cultural spaces, behaviours, and identities (Livingstone & Third, 2017).

Coming back to Hasu's (2017) assertion that educators should not necessarily prioritise simplicity when selecting repertoire, but rather focus on students' enjoyment and intrinsic motivation, my experiences in this study echo this position: when students in this study were given the opportunity to pursue self-initiated projects and remain committed to their own ideas, their motivation markedly increased. This heightened engagement led students to invest time and effort in learning technically or conceptually challenging material: challenges

they were more willing to confront because the repertoire held personal meaning. In several of the projects, a virtuous cycle was observed: successful engagement in self-initiated learning enhanced students' beliefs in their own competence, which in turn increased their confidence and motivation for subsequent tasks. Hasu also notes the critical role of self-efficacy, observing that students who harbour doubts about their abilities are more likely to withdraw when confronted with difficulty. These findings reinforce the importance of positioning students not solely through categorical notions of childhood, but as capable agents whose motivation and resilience can be significantly enhanced when their interests and perspectives are valued in decision-making.

7.6. Recognition and Access to Non-Material Resources

In the discussions with the students, they also shared their experiences of their music education in the comprehensive school. The contingency of student participation and access to the social processes and resources available within the school community, such as involvement in concerts and ensemble projects, paralleled the patterns observed in the music school context. When students themselves initiated participation in events, such as school concerts, the extent to which these efforts were supported varied according to the decisions and practices of individual school music teachers. These teachers played a significant role in mediating students' access to performance opportunities within school projects. Reflecting the students' responses of their experiences in the comprehensive school, it appeared that even within a single comprehensive school there was no unified culture of student inclusion in musical activities. Rather, students' opportunities to engage in various music-making projects and performances were shaped by the pedagogical orientations and discretionary decisions of their music teachers. One illustrative example emerged when students from one class were required to audition for their own class fundraising concert, while students from another class within the same school were simply invited to participate through an open sign-up process. These contrasting approaches highlight the differentiated ways in which music teachers allocated opportunities, ultimately influencing students' participation opportunities.

These contingencies of student participation were also noted in Tuovila's (2003) study, where in some of the comprehensive schools' music classes the whole class participated in performances, while in others only those who were considered the best were invited to perform. In Tuovila's study, parents also experienced some of the music lessons as discriminatory, when the teacher focused only on those who were considered the most capable of performing.

Although the present study cannot clarify reasons to determine the specific causes underlying the divergent practices in this study's comprehensive schools, the student accounts suggest considerable variation in how the roles were allocated within school music activities. One plausible explanation for these differences lies in the constraints imposed by predetermined repertoire selections or the structural demands of ensemble configurations. For example, in choral settings, music teachers may have made selective role assignments to maintain a balance between vocal and instrumental parts, thereby limiting the number of students able to play instruments: a role many expressed strong interest in. This allocation of roles prompted critical discussion among students, some of whom expressed dissatisfaction with the recurring pattern of the same individuals being chosen to participate in school concerts, further highlighting the uneven distribution of opportunities within the school music programme.

- Lilia *Usually they are the same people [singing] like in those that are playing ...*
 Aaron *But usually the same students raise their hands.*
 Lilia *But then there are others, too.*
 Aaron *Yeah.*
 Lilia *For example, when it comes to playing, there are actually many students who want the chance to perform. For instance, [smiles at the cellist], you get to play a lot.*
 Aaron *I dunno.*
 Lilia *Sofia gets to play a lot, too.*
 Aaron *I really don't know why the teacher always selects me, I dunno.*
 Lilia *You're the best! [Cellist laughs]*

Although the exchange between the two students appeared friendly on the surface, interpreting their underlying experiences proved more complex. The class teacher's decisions regarding the allocation of roles in school music projects had the effect of excluding certain students from active participation, thereby denying them valuable opportunities for learning, skill development, and performance practice, as well as to practice such situations to become better at dealing with them.

From the students' perspective, these roles appeared to be relatively fixed, with little possibility for reassessment. For instance, one fifth-grade student expressed a wish to demonstrate her improved abilities to the teacher and proposed that a new audition be held to reassess her abilities. She noted that her only previous audition had taken place in the third grade, implying that her current skills were no longer accurately reflected in the teacher's earlier judgment, thus

resulting in wanting to *show her skills again* (student interview) to the teacher. Some of the students' responses reflected a deep-rooted deficit approach to students' abilities, which severely limited students' experiences of participating in different projects and their possibility to receive more demanding roles. The situation of not being able to "show their talent" to the teacher was also noted by the cellist and the violist:

- Aaron *There are five of them, like clarinets, they could rotate a little bit more, I dunno, Selena has never played in anything.*
- Aaron *...the teacher usually selects two.*
- Lilia *Two...*
- Aaron *...and it's typically like Pia, no, I mean...*
- Lilia *...Sofia and...*
- Aaron *Sofia and Anni, because they've played the most. But in reality, Selena is at the same level, even though she's only been playing for a year or two less. She's improved a lot, but the teacher never asks anyone except Sofia and Anni. So no one else ever gets the opportunity to show what they can do.*

As the fifth-grade students recounted their experiences, I sensed that they shared a similar understanding of the classroom dynamics, being aware of the unequal distribution of opportunities to participate in school music projects. Without knowing the details of the situation and the class teacher's views on the matter, the discussion left me wondering about the reasons behind the teachers' practices and why the opportunities for students' participation were not equally distributed: whether these practices stemmed from a certain kind of habitual script, where participation decisions were made without deliberate attention to equity, or whether they were shaped by practical constraints, such as time pressures that led music teachers to consistently rely on the same students - students who might have been able to manage the projects autonomously with minimal help from the class teacher.

In reflecting on the possible reasons behind such differential treatment, it is also plausible that teachers were influenced by an internalised need to deliver high-quality performances (e.g., Haning, 2021). This perceived pressure may have stemmed from expectations held by school leadership, parents, or broader audiences, prompting the teacher to prioritise reliability and performance standards over inclusivity. Harwood and Marsh (2012) suggest that the emphasis on performance in some music education programmes has led to a choice between inclusion and quality, with teachers having to choose between providing musical

experiences for as many students as possible and limiting participation to the most skilled performers (see also Draisey-Collishaw, 2007; Freer, 2011). Quality, in their view, is related to the sound produced, which more experienced performers are expected to demonstrate better. The theme of performance quality also emerged in discussions with fourth-grade students, who recounted an incident where a choir performance was nearly cancelled due to the anticipated absence of a student regarded by the teacher as a "strong singer". These accounts pointed to an underlying issue of misrecognition. The students who were not selected or who were routinely overlooked in performance contexts expressed feeling as though they were viewed as inadequate or below the teacher's expectations, thereby limiting their opportunities for engagement and personal growth in school music projects.

Elmgren (2019) has critically examined processes of student positioning and merit-based exclusion within music schools, highlighting how both implicit and explicit hierarchies shape student experiences. Her analysis suggests that students are frequently aware of their placement within these hierarchical structures. Echoing these findings, discussions with the fifth-grade group revealed that students were also attuned to the positioning of their peers within the perceived hierarchies of the music school. Experiences of misrecognition, such as being underestimated, overlooked, or subject to differential treatment, have similarly been reported in broader extracurricular contexts where such experiences, including belittlement or unequal access to instruction, have been among the reasons for students to discontinue their hobbies (Tarvainen et al., 2022). While these issues have been found to be particularly prevalent in sports, reports depict that one in five young people aged 10–29 have also encountered inappropriate treatment in cultural, artistic, and media-related activities (Salasuo et al., 2021).

When considering student participation within the context of this study, it is worth noting that many of this study's participating students reported feeling satisfied with their studies and expressed no particular desire to influence the course of their lessons. The student interviews further suggested that practices surrounding music participation varied significantly across schools. For instance, the ninth-grade student attending a general (non-music-emphasised) class described limited access to music-related school projects, noting that opportunities were often contingent upon the specific composition and dynamics of the student group:

Tuulia *How are the music lessons at your school? Do you play band instruments or something like that?*

Antti *Well a little bit, it is not that amazingly good, because the same people always play and then we don't really have*

singers and then if we go through some theory stuff or learn to play bass, no one really participates. So it ends up being the same few students playing every time, and no one sings.

The student's account suggests the existence of fixed roles within the music classroom, though without further contextual information it is difficult to determine the precise factors contributing to the limited participation and narrowing of musical roles described. Several studies have highlighted systemic challenges in school music education, including reduced instructional time for music, a shortage of qualified music educators, and inconsistencies in the provision of music education across schools (Pohjannoro, 2010a; Juntunen & Anttila, 2019). Compounding these issues, pre-service teacher education programmes often lack sufficient resources to adequately prepare future music educators to meet the demands of the national curriculum (Suomi, 2019). Consequently, students' opportunities for meaningful engagement and success in school music education are frequently enhanced when they have access to music instruction outside the comprehensive school system (Laitinen et al., 2011).

The role of the teacher, whether in the context of the music school or the comprehensive school, emerges as central in facilitating or constraining students' access to participation. More broadly, the ability of individuals to engage as full participants in social interactions depends on their access to economic, cultural, and social resources. In the context of this study, these resources include both material and non-material opportunities afforded to students within their local music schools and comprehensive schools. Once such access is granted, the ability to exercise choice becomes a further critical dimension of meaningful engagement. This study revealed substantial variation and contingency in students' possibilities for representation across different educational settings. For example, in discussions about students' influence over repertoire selection in school music classes, one third-grade student observed that decisions were predominantly made by the teacher. While the student described the teacher as generally open to a variety of ideas during regular lessons, she noted a perceptible shift in the teacher's approach when leading the choir, suggesting a more directive and less participatory model in that context:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Tuulia | <i>Your teacher, does he let you influence the on what you are singing in your class? Would you like to be able to influence those decisions?</i> |
| Roosa | <i>Yes, that would be nice.</i> |
| Tuulia | <i>Does he let you influence the decisions?</i> |
| Roosa | <i>No. It is just him and the other teacher.</i> |

- Tuulia *Do you think he would take in your suggestions if you asked him?*
- Roosa *No.*
- Tuulia *Ok. Hmm. Would he take the suggestions at a later time? I wonder why he wouldn't?*
- Roosa *I feel that he doesn't listen to us when we are in choir. Or like... he just takes his and the other teacher's ideas, not the children's.*

The student's perception that the teacher did not "listen" to the students during choir rehearsals prompted further reflection on the nature of listening. While the teacher was undoubtedly engaging with the students in a literal, auditory sense, hearing their voices and directing the choir, Roosa's comment draws attention to a deeper issue: the absence of dialogic listening and participatory responsiveness. The distinction here lies in the teacher's willingness (or lack thereof) to consider students' contributions as meaningful input to the decision-making processes, particularly regarding repertoire choices. This highlights a significant contradiction: the teacher engages with students as performers yet does not engage with them as co-constructors of the musical experience, thereby limiting their agency in shaping the educational process.

7.7. Students' Experiences and Perspectives on Music Making

A series of meetings were held with the students during the midpoints and at the conclusion of the projects to explore their perceptions and experiences related to the collaborative process. These discussions aimed to facilitate reflection on the co-construction of the projects and to deepen understanding of the diverse meanings students ascribed to their participation and broader experiences of music-making. While one aim was to further develop conversations initiated during the group sessions, I also introduced specific thematic prompts to guide the discussions (see Appendix H). These themes were designed to elicit students' reflections on what aspects of music engaged and motivated them, for instance how they selected particular repertoire and what significance they attributed to those choices.

Although many of the students' responses revealed overlapping themes, for the purposes of analytical clarity and readability I have organised the findings into subsections. This categorisation draws on the initial thematic groupings used to structure the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). However, this approach does not preclude the inclusion of what MacLure (2013, p. 661) refers to as "glowing"

data: fragments of dialogue and insight that resisted categorisation yet held particular affective or interpretive significance. Such data, which stand out for their capacity to disrupt uniformity, were also integral to the analytical process.

7.7.1. Here You Play in a Group so It Becomes More Music

Viivi *Especially that we get to play and that we have our own compositions ... There is just one harp in this school. ... Here you play in a group so it becomes more music I think.*

Students' reflections on the co-constructed projects frequently centred on the enjoyment they derived from collaborative music-making. When asked to describe what they appreciated most about the project, many students linked their sense of satisfaction to what they were able to produce together. As previously discussed, the intervention projects often represented the first opportunity for many students to engage in ensemble playing, an experience notably absent from their prior music education. For the third-grade harpist cited earlier, the act of making music with others contributed to what she described as the experience of "making more music".

Upon considering this and similar sentiments expressed by other participants, I became increasingly aware of a dynamic I had previously overlooked: many music school students typically engaged only in isolated parts of larger musical wholes in individual lessons. While it is evident that instruments afford different musical possibilities in terms of timbre, pitch, and dynamic range (Glover, 2000), given that monophonic and polyphonic instruments offered different possibilities for making music, the rich textures and sonic depth achievable through ensemble playing, especially in contrast to solo practice, seemed to profoundly shape students' experiences. This collective music making appeared to foster deeper musical engagement, as has also been observed in prior research (Suni, 2006; Penttinen, 2010).

The significance of experiential dimensions (*elämykset*) in musical engagement was also underscored in Kosonen's (2001) study of young adolescent piano students. Her findings revealed that the most meaningful motivations for playing were rooted in the emotional and aesthetic experiences generated through music itself, specifically the feelings of mastery and the affective responses evoked by the act of playing. This emphasis on the intrinsic value of musical experience was similarly identified by Hasu (2017), who highlighted the importance of such experiential elements in relation to repertoire selection within instrumental instruction. The centrality of experientiality (*elämyksellisyys*) was

also highlighted in the Finnish Youth Barometer (Myllyniemi, 2009), which surveyed 15–29-year-olds and found that key motivators for youth participation in the arts included joy, experiential richness, and a sense of competence.

More broadly, the value of affective and experiential engagement has been recognised in the field of cultural participation (Pirnes & Tiihonen, 2010). Within the context of this study, participants frequently associated musical enjoyment with the collaborative dimension of music-making: the act of creating something collectively. This connection between social collaboration and musical pleasure was articulated by the ninth-grade pianist, whose reflections underscored the relational aspect of musical fulfilment:

Tuulia *What do you think about playing in a group or with someone compared to having individual lessons?*

Onni *I think it is a lot nicer.*

Tuulia *In what way?*

Onni *Well, when you're playing alone, the advantage is that you can interpret the piece freely - you can really make it your own. But when you play in a group and it works, when that collaboration happens, it's really rewarding to create something together with someone else. And usually, it sounds much better when there are more players involved.*

Tuulia *What is challenging about it? Are there any aspects that are easier or more difficult?*

Onni *Well, that depends on the background of the players, what kind of experiences they have with ensemble playing. You have to find a shared understanding of how to play together, that common ground.*

The student's positive reflections on the experience of collaboratively producing enjoyable music suggest that the pleasure derived from ensemble playing stemmed not only from engaging with the music itself but also from the interpersonal communication it facilitated among group members. However, in discussing the reasons for students' choices of repertoire, the need for the music produced to sound enjoyable also repeatedly emerged as a factor in students' decision-making processes regarding repertoire selection. For instance, a third-grade saxophonist expressed a desire to perform Howard Shore's "In Dreams" from "The Lord of the Rings", yet hesitated because she felt the piece would not achieve the desired musical effect if performed alone:

Roosa *Because with the saxophone it doesn't work, it's because my brother has played it in the orchestra, and that's where I got the piece in my mind, but I can't really play it like*

that... it just doesn't fit.

Tuulia *Mm, but you could still play the melody, right? Why not?*

Roosa *It just doesn't fit, I would want it to sound like the original version.*

Tuulia *What do you mean by the original? Have you seen the movie?*

Roosa *No, but like my brother has performed it.*

Tuulia *So you mean that version as the original for you?*

Roosa *Yes, or the version I have saved on my phone, the one where the boy sings it.*

Tuulia *So you would want it to sound like that version?*

Roosa *Yes, because it is so great.*

Tuulia *I see.*

Roosa *It really annoys me that they've made a computer version of it. It doesn't sound nearly as good as the version with real violins, cellos, bass, everything.*

Tuulia *So you would like it to be that kind of orchestral version?*

Roosa *Yes.*

In exploring students' repertoire aspirations, it became clear that many of their preferences were shaped by their immediate social environments. A significant number of repertoire initiatives appeared to be inspired by the musical activities of peers or family members, particularly siblings. This is illustrated in the following exchange:

Tuulia *What pieces would you like to play on the saxophone?*

Roosa *Well, right now I want to play Minun ystäväni. My mum printed the piano music, and I'll take it to my teacher so he can write it out for the saxophone.*

Tuulia *So you chose that one yourself?*

Roosa *[Nods]*

Tuulia *Is that the song that goes "minun ystäväni on kuin villasukka" [singing]?*

Roosa *Yes, I heard that one of our group members could play it, and then I started wanting to play it too.*

Tuulia *Are there any other songs you would like to play?*

Roosa *Well, there are a few that the fifth graders performed at the concert, the music class concert, last week. Can You Feel the Love... I can already play that one a little bit. I really like all the*

the *Disney songs.*

This example illustrates how the student's musical aspirations were not only individually motivated but also socially situated. Similar to students enrolled in music-emphasised classes, Roosa's repertoire interests were influenced by her school environment, both through direct exposure to peer performances and through her broader engagement with the school's musical culture. The comprehensive school thus functioned not only as a source of inspiration but also as a social space that enabled musical participation and reinforced peer-connected participation opportunities.

7.7.2. When I Play in a Group, I Don't Feel Like an Outsider

Pia *When it's just our group, it feels easy and... in own individual lesson, you have to play alone, and I don't like playing alone that much. When I play in a group, I don't feel like an outsider.*

In this study, most student groups were formed based on existing friendships, which inevitably foregrounded the role of peer relationships and the social dimensions of music-making among children and young people, an aspect previously highlighted in the literature (Green, 2001, 2008; Moore et al., 2003; Pitts, 2005; Sloboda, 2005). These peer-based groups created opportunities for participants to engage in music-making alongside their friends, aligning with earlier findings that underscore the significance of spending time with peers as a key component of meaningful leisure for children and adolescents (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017a), and, in some cases, as the primary reason for participating in extracurricular activities (Myllyniemi & Berg, 2013). When describing her experience in the project, for instance, a fourth-grade violist shared her experience of group music-making as one in which she did not feel like an "outsider". The value of social belonging also emerged in other students' reflections, such as that of a fourth-grade saxophonist, who expressed the joy of being able to participate in the project with a close friend:

Emilia *I think individual lessons are more boring, because you cannot be with your friend!*

According to a comprehensive study on the leisure activities of Finnish youth, based on 1,205 interviews with participants aged 7 to 29, children form close-knit friendship groups at increasingly younger ages (Myllyniemi & Berg, 2013). The significance of social networks as both facilitators and outcomes of extracurricular participation has also been documented in earlier research (Berg,

2015). Given that children and adolescents often navigate multiple, diverse peer groups, these social affiliations may either encourage or discourage individual engagement in new hobbies (Berg, 2015).

The sense of social connectedness and the experience of belonging emerged as a central theme in many of the students' reflections during this study:

Tuulia	<i>How did you feel about the project?</i>
Aaron	<i>Well I thought it was nice that we were able to choose what to play and could play as a group.</i>

For the ninth-grade student, opportunities to engage in ensemble playing, whether in the context of the music school or comprehensive school, had been notably limited. Reflecting on how students in this study consistently emphasised the significance of social relationships, the findings suggest that interpersonal connectedness played a central role in their motivation and experience of musical participation.

Among the studies that have similarly highlighted the importance of community relations for young people in their cultural activities is the research project of the Finnish Youth Research Society (Myrsky-nuorisohanke 2008–2011), which examined the arts experiences of 13–17-year-olds and concluded that social factors, such as peer relationships and group cohesion, were among the most prominent motivators for participation in artistic activities (Kotilainen et al., 2011). While skill development and feedback from instructors were also valued, the relational aspects of participation often took precedence.

The centrality of social interaction in music-making has also been highlighted by Young (1999, 2005), who conceptualises music as an expressive medium for making and maintaining relationships, a medium for relating oneself to others (see also Dissanayake, 2000). The importance of music in building community relationships has also been emphasised in other studies that highlight the value that children and young people place on the social connections initiated and created through participation in music (Countryman, 2009; Joseph & Southcott, 2018). These observations transcend academic disciplines: research within self-determination theory identifies relatedness as one of the fundamental human psychological needs, along with autonomy (sense of volition) and competence (sense of self-efficacy) (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that the social dimensions of music-making were not only meaningful to the participants but also constituted a core component of what they sought in their musical engagement.

7.7.3. *On My Dad's Fiftieth Birthday*

In conversations with the students who participated in the study, one area of focus was their aspirations regarding repertoire they wished to perform. These discussions aimed to deepen my understanding of the motivations behind their repertoire selections and to explore the sources of inspiration that informed their musical choices. While observations conducted during the projects revealed the influence of both the school canon and peer networks on students' musical preferences (see also Tuovila, 2003), the students' responses to questions about future repertoire also frequently referenced familial contexts. For instance, one third-grade saxophonist highlighted a desire to perform music associated with a family event, suggesting that personal and social environments beyond the classroom played a significant role in shaping students' repertoire interests:

- Roosa *Poirot!*
Tuulia *Hercule Poirot?*
Roosa [Nods] *I will. For my dad's fiftieth birthday.*
Tuulia *Where did that idea come from?*
Roosa *My dad told me.*
Tuulia *That the song exists or...? You have probably not watched the TV-series?*
Roosa *I have.*
Tuulia *Oh, you have?*
Roosa *My mum and dad have watched the whole series.*

The third-grade harpist shared a similar experience of spending time with a parent watching films, expressing a desire to learn the James Bond Theme by Monty Norman, a piece she had become familiar with through watching the James Bond films with her father:

- Viivi *I would like to play this [sings a melody]*
Roosa *From 007.*
Viivi *Yes, that one exactly.*
...
Fiia *Let's do James Bond!*
Tuulia *Where did that idea come from, Viivi?*
Viivi *Well, dad and I like to watch Bonds, so I would like to play the theme. For my dad's birthday. And my mum's.*

Without definitive knowledge of whether the idea to prepare musical performances for family occasions originated solely with the third-grade

saxophonist or was jointly conceived by both students, the conversation nonetheless illustrated how repertoire often circulated within peer groups. Students appeared to draw inspiration from one another's musical engagements, encountered in various contexts, and collaboratively expanded upon these ideas. In the third-grade group in particular, this dynamic fostered a generative cycle of mutual influence: students introduced each other to new pieces and motivated their peers to learn songs they had already explored.

In many instances, the repertoire students aspired to play was not introduced through formal instruction but instead acquired via informal channels such as social media platforms (e.g., YouTube), or through exposure to music in films and other media sources:

- Tuulia *What about the ABBA song? Where have you heard that? It's, well, not really from my generation, but more like my parents' generation of music?*
- Lilia *From Mamma Mia!*

Several of the songs that students expressed interest in learning, such as Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther Theme" and Howard Blake's "Walking in the Air" from the animated film "The Snowman", traditionally broadcast on Finnish television on Christmas Eve morning, had entered their musical awareness through popular media. Across many of the student-led projects in this study, participants actively recontextualised elements of popular culture, drawing inspiration from media, familial influences, and peer networks.

In addition to selections from popular culture, students frequently referenced repertoire encountered in their school environments. Common examples included "The Finlandia Hymn" by Jean Sibelius and "Suvivirsi", the traditional Swedish hymn sung at Finnish school spring festivals. In her study, Tuovila (2003) noted that music school students often reported playing pieces found in school music books.

In the story of a fifth-grade violist, she recalled how a particular piece of repertoire held emotional significance due to its association with a collaborative project involving her family and close family friends:

- Tuulia *What do you think influences you the most when deciding what music you'd like to play?*
- Lilia *Well, for example, if you've seen certain films, then it's really nice to play the tunes from them. Like, I and two of classmates have been really into Harry Potter because my older sister used to read the books sometimes, and before I*

even started at this school, back in third grade, we visited the Harry Potter film studios, and like, because it has been mostly that my big sister has been first of all like that, and one of my mum's friends made us the gowns and all, it has influenced that a lot.

Aaron *But your sister doesn't really like Harry Potter anymore.*

Lilia *Yes, she lies about this, but no, now she isn't into it as much as she used to be - but then, I am more!*

In seeking to better understand the underlying motivations behind students' repertoire choices, a recurring theme in many of the students' responses was how the music enabled them to foster social connections. The students' musical aspirations were frequently situated within interpersonal contexts, preparing songs for family events such as birthdays or engaging in shared experiences with friends or classmates, highlighting music's role in cultivating relational ties.

In terms of the students' initiatives and motivations, I experienced that in many of their responses the students described music as part of an event, as part of something, for example in relation to their friends, family, or school community. Their initiatives to learn particular pieces were frequently driven by the prospect of contributing meaningfully to communal events, underscoring the significance of music as a vehicle for social participation and shared experience, rather than solely for technical or artistic mastery. These findings suggest a shift from viewing students' motivations in purely individualistic terms to recognising them as emerging within assemblages of social relations. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) conceptualization of desire, as conceptualised not as a lack but as an emergent force within relational networks, students' musical choices can be understood to be desired in an assemblage of relations (Olsson, 2009, p. 148), embedded in a web of communal, affective, and cultural relations. This challenges deficit-based framings of learners and instead calls for an understanding of students' aspirations in a broader, relational perspective, as socially situated, motivated not only by personal interests but by their desire to participate meaningfully in the life of their communities.

By viewing students as social beings embedded in diverse group affiliations, each with its own shared knowledge, values, norms, and practices (McKenna & Quinn, 2020), this shift would therefore recognise students not only as individuals but also as members of extended social circles (see also Abril, 2013). This relational perspective underscores the importance of acknowledging students' participation in peer groups as formative in shaping their decisions regarding participation. Päivi Berg (2015) has articulated this dynamic through the metaphor of "social feet", illustrating how children and adolescents often make

collective decisions within peer groups, particularly concerning their use of leisure time. Social motivations for participation in leisure activities, rather than purely individual or instructional ones, have been highlighted in her work and other prior research (Myllyniemi & Berg, 2013).

While the student-initiated repertoire in this study frequently reflected these social affiliations and interests, it raises a broader question regarding the balance between honouring student agency and maintaining the educator's responsibility to expand students' musical exposure and foster deeper engagement with diverse musical practices and traditions. A recurring concern that has been raised in relation to the student-driven processes is related to the potential narrowing of musical experiences if students' preferences are followed without broader educational framing. The problems of an openly formulated curriculum have been reported, for example, by Eva Georgii-Hemming and Maria Westvall (2010), who, in their investigation of Swedish comprehensive schools, found that informal learning strategies, particularly those which prioritised student choice in repertoire, often resulted in a restricted repertoire and limited educational scope. Although their findings stem from general music education in comprehensive schools, they highlight the risks of curricula that overly rely on student choice without intentional scaffolding. This discussion also intersects with wider debates on the question of whether adults should allow children to make their art in dialogue with popular culture, which is often something that adults actively discourage, preferring innocent representations of "real" life (Park, 2019; Sakr, 2022).

Anne Haas Dyson (2003) offers an alternative reframing of children's engagement with popular culture, arguing that such media experiences constitute a central and meaningful aspect of childhood, rather than representing an external threat. In Dyson's study, the participating children's appropriation and recontextualization of popular media functioned as important cultural practices that shaped their access to school literacy.

Similarly, in this study, the issue of access emerged in student reflections on repertoire selection. One participant emphasised that having the opportunity to choose familiar repertoire was important, explaining that songs already known were easier to learn:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| Tuulia | <i>Do you think it was important that you got to choose the pieces?</i> |
| Roosa | [Nods] |
| Tuulia | <i>Why was it important?</i> |
| Roosa | <i>Well, it's like easy, when you know the tune already, and like... Except, Titanic, I had heard from the harpist, even though I had not seen the movie, and James Bond is so</i> |

*familiar. Because mom and dad have watched it.
And I have too.*

Having worked closely with the third-grade saxophonist over the course of the eight-month project, I came to share her view that familiarity with the repertoire had played a significant role in supporting her learning. From the beginning, she had expressed her struggles with rhythm, an issue I had also observed consistently during our group sessions. She frequently found it challenging to maintain synchrony with the ensemble, often shifting rhythms unpredictably. Despite my various efforts to help her with the rhythms, for instance through clapping exercises and aural reinforcement, her difficulties persisted. A notable breakthrough occurred when she described her strategy of *singing the lyrics of the song in her head* (student interview) while playing, which enabled her to stabilise the rhythms more effectively. Importantly, this student-initiated strategy not only addressed a core technical challenge but also fostered a sense of competence and achievement, which in turn enhanced her motivation to continue learning. This experience led me to reflect on the pedagogical value of familiar, student-selected repertoire across the project. Such repertoire appeared to support sustained musical engagement by providing accessible points of entry into music-making - through their pre-existing auditory imagery and embodied experiences with the music - particularly for students who may have struggled with traditional notation. In this way, familiarity functioned as an informal scaffold, facilitating participation, reinforcing confidence, and supporting the continuity of learning.

7.7.4. If You Screw Up, You Don't Screw Up Alone

In discussing the students' experiences of the projects and the dynamics within their groups, one recurring theme was the role of peer support in both instrumental learning and emotional regulation, for example during performance situations. As previously noted, for some students, including the third-grade saxophonist, participating in concerts elicited performance anxiety. However, performing as part of a group was perceived as a more enjoyable and less intimidating experience. During conversations with the third-grade group, students reflected on the value of group membership in performance contexts, highlighting the emotional reassurance and sense of solidarity that came from being supported by their peers:

Fiia	<i>If you screw up, you don't screw up alone.</i>
Roosa	<i>Me the same.</i>

When reflecting on their experiences of performing as a group, in contrast to individual performances, several students described how peer support played a meaningful role in alleviating performance anxiety. The shared nature of group performance appeared to offer emotional reassurance and a sense of collective responsibility that helped ease individual pressure. Moreover, in discussing performance anxiety more broadly, a distinction emerged in how students perceived performing their own compositions versus pre-existing repertoire. Performing their own musical creations was often experienced as more personal and emotionally resonant, which, for some students, either intensified the pressure or, conversely, fostered a greater sense of ownership and confidence in performance:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| Tuulia | <i>Did you feel more excited when we performed our own song?</i> |
| Fiia | <i>Yes.</i> |
| Vivian | <i>No.</i> |
| Fiia | <i>Yeah well no, I wasn't because if you screw up no one knows that you screw up because they haven't heard it before.</i> |

In examining the issues raised by the students, it is notable that one particularly salient theme was raised, namely, the students' concern about "messing up" during performances, featured prominently in their reflections, an issue which however had not been explicitly addressed during the group lessons. Overall, I felt that the opportunity to discuss the issues with peers experiencing similar challenges was valuable. It is worth noting that while supportive peer relationships are widely acknowledged as contributing to student well-being, relatively little research has explored how the quality of these interpersonal relationships and their connection to well-being impact learning outcomes in the Finnish comprehensive school system (Kiuru et al., 2020), and even less so in the context of music school education. Given that developing technical proficiency and expressive interpretation on an instrument can be a formidable task, the availability of non-material resources, such as emotional support from peers, emerges as a crucial component of students' instrumental learning. Previous studies have highlighted the role of social support in fostering musical achievement (e.g., Creech & Hallam, 2003; Green, 2001; Hallam, 2012; Moore et al., 2003). For instance, rather than excluding the third-grade saxophonist from performance opportunities due to her anxiety, participation in ensemble work provided a supportive environment through which she could gradually develop her performance skills. Addressing her performance anxiety not only facilitated her musical growth but

also opened up further pedagogical conversations, including her preferences for repertoire.

7.7.5. *Something That's Well-Known, That Everyone Recognizes, or Songs That Make People Think, Wow, They Can Play That*

When asked about the type of repertoire the third-grade saxophonist would like to learn in the following term, she expressed a desire to work on well-known pieces that would not only be recognisable to others but would also serve as a demonstration of the group's musical competence:

Tuulia *Which songs would you like to rehearse next?*

Roosa *I am not sure, maybe something that's well-known, that everyone recognizes, or songs that make people think, wow, they can play that.*

Tuulia *This is something we talked about with others, is it nice if the audience knows the songs you are performing?*

Roosa *Yes. Or like... wow, they are competent, like, it feels good when others admire what you can do.*

As previously discussed, the role of performance in music education has been examined from multiple perspectives, including its function within educational programmes and the potential risks associated with an overemphasis on performance. Concerns include selective student practices and the narrowing of curricular content (Draisey-Collishaw, 2007; Freer, 2011; Harwood & Marsh, 2012). Previous studies have also explored the short- and long-term impacts of performance anxiety on both musical outcomes and musicians' broader well-being (Mazzarolo et al., 2023). Tikka's (2017) study depicted instrumental teachers' perspectives on performance, revealing that for many educators, repertoire was selected with upcoming performances in mind, serving both as a motivational tool and as a means to develop students' technical and expressive skills.

Research examining students' expectations and motivations regarding performance has highlighted that public musical achievements often hold personal value for students, offering them both tangible outcomes and external validation (Haning, 2021). This study similarly recognized the need to foreground student voices in performance-related discourse, acknowledging that such discussions have traditionally privileged adult viewpoints while systematically marginalizing learners' experiential knowledge and subjective evaluations of these practices.

In this study, the experiences of the third-grade saxophonist underscored the importance of identifying performance as a space for recognition. For her, the performance represented an opportunity to present her and the group's competence. Notably, this marked a significant shift from her initial reluctance to perform at the start of the project; by the end of the semester, she was actively envisioning future performance opportunities. Her reflections suggested a dual motivation: a desire for social belonging and the aspiration to be publicly recognised. In her responses, I sensed both a desire to belong and to find a more recognised position; she desired for her actions to have resonance in the community (see also Custodero, 2011).

A comparable theme emerged in discussions with the fourth-grade group, where one student expressed the importance of performing music that the audience would recognise, suggesting that familiarity enhanced the perceived value of the performance. Another student emphasised the motivational dimension of repertoire selection, stating that enjoying the music personally was essential because it encouraged continued engagement and practice:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| Tuulia | <i>What makes you choose a particular song to play?</i> |
| Ella | <i>Well, when you have chosen a piece yourself, then you like it. Then you like playing it.</i> |
| Tiia | <i>That they are well-known and good. That people know them when you perform them, so that they are not completely lost.</i> |

The students' responses underscore the importance of music being socially meaningful: relevant not only to themselves but also to their immediate communities. Throughout the intervention, discussions concerning concert programme selection surfaced repeatedly across various projects. For the third-grade group, one such instance emerged during preparations for performances at a local kindergarten and their own school. These planning processes prompted the students to reflect on repertoire choices in relation to the audience's preferences and experiences. Notably, concert opportunities, such as the one initiated by a parent of a participating student, invited students to take part in planning performances with an awareness of the audience's perspective. In doing so, the concerts offered students a sense of purpose that extended beyond self-expression, allowing them to use their musical skills to bring enjoyment to others. This aspect of contributing to the well-being of others appeared to be a particularly meaningful and valued dimension of the performance experience.

7.7.6. *Perhaps a Bit More Complicated*

Across all student groups, decision-making unfolded through ongoing negotiation. Students regularly interrupted each other, proposed alternatives, and required time to reach consensus about repertoire and performance plans. In reflecting on their experiences within the fourth-grade project, students articulated both the benefits and challenges of this collaborative approach. While many expressed positive sentiments about shared responsibility and mutual contribution, others noted that working together in this manner could also be complex and demanding, requiring negotiation, compromise, and coordination among group members.

Tuulia *As we have been working like this in the autumn, that we have been in a group and you have had your friends' band, how has this kind of instrumental learning felt for you?*

Tiia *I think it has been really nice and... mmm.*

Tuulia *What aspects have you especially enjoyed?*

Tiia *Well, probably that we get to play together, sing the same time, and just be with each other. Everything.*

Tuulia *Is this different compared to going into individual lessons?*

Tiia *Yes, because this is like, when you are in an individual lesson, then you just play by yourself and now when there are a lot of people, well, a lot and a lot, then like, it is nice to play with others and not just by yourself.*

Tuulia *What about you, Ella?*

Ella *I don't want to contradict anyone's opinion, but I've felt kind of the same.*

Tuulia *Ok. In what way has it been the same?*

Ella *Or perhaps a bit more complicated [smirks].*

Tuulia *Could you elaborate on that?*

Ella *Well, because, because when there are many people, then you can't comment, at the same time, when you play alone, you are the only one who can comment.*

Tuulia *Mm.*

Ella *So there are a loooooooooot of commentators.*

As previously discussed in relation to the dynamics of group work, there were many challenges to being part of a group and working collaboratively. When decision-making within the group was structured around the principle that all members could contribute their ideas and participate in negotiating shared interpretations and musical directions, the process became significantly more complex than when decisions were made individually. As one student succinctly

observed, such complexities were absent in individual lessons, where there was no opportunity to argue with others:

Pia *Compared to the individual lessons, the orchestra is somewhat nicer because you get to play together with others, and also this band we have is nice, but what is stupid about this band is that you get to argue with others and in individual lessons you can't.*

What emerged through our work together confirmed the student's assessment that group processes were more complex than individual lessons. Group sessions required constant facilitation of turn-taking, conflict resolution, and consensus-building that was largely absent in one-to-one instruction. Playing in an ensemble setting necessitated continuous attentiveness to others, negotiating interpretations, and keeping with the flow of the music even when one was struggling in one's own passages. Moreover, the conflicts that emerged within the groups were not limited to musical coordination; they often revolved around differing perspectives on roles within the project, ideas for performance, and the direction the group should take. This process of deliberation, evaluating multiple viewpoints, exploring alternatives, and negotiating shared decisions, was in my experience challenging, whether in individual or group contexts. The crucial difference, as one student aptly observed, lay in the multiplicity of voices involved in group work, which inevitably broadened the spectrum of considerations and required greater negotiation.

Following the discussion in the ninth-grade students' project, I initiated a discussion with the students about whether they would have preferred a different approach to the project: specifically, whether using pre-arranged parts might have been in their view more desirable than collaboratively arranging the songs throughout the duration of the project:

Lilia *Well, what made it nicer was that it was different from what we usually do. Or like, it also reflected what we wanted to make it - in a different kind of way. ... If there was something nice or if you came up with an idea, then you could incorporate it into the music, like say, "Let's do this."*

In the fifth-grade students' project, the group primarily concentrated on arranging repertoire collaboratively. From my perspective, the limited duration of the project, coupled with the clarinetist's upcoming instrumental examination, constrained the group's flexibility to explore alternative directions as freely as

some of the other groups. Whether due to the condensed timeframe or the interpersonal dynamics within the group, the fifth graders maintained a consistently fluid and focused mode of interaction throughout the project. By contrast, the third-grade group commented on the challenges they encountered in maintaining a calm and orderly working environment, attributing this to their collective enthusiasm and eagerness to contribute ideas:

- Vivian *Nice. Sometimes there's been a little bit of a ruckus (mekkala) [looks at the harpist laughing] Ruckus. [laughing] Sometimes it has been quite noisy.*
- Fiia *We have a good team, we have a good team.*

In response to my question regarding what they felt they had learned through the process, one of the group members reflected that they had developed greater attentiveness toward others in the ensemble, learning to prioritise not just your own playing:

- Tuulia *In your own opinion, what have you learned during the project?*
- Vivian *You need to take into consideration others, not just your own playing.*

In my assessment, the third-grade group demonstrated noticeable progress in their interactional skills over the course of the term. During our midterm discussion, the students had identified challenges in ensuring that all voices were heard equally, noting that certain group members tended to dominate discussions. Upon revisiting this issue later in the term, my role as the teacher continued to be regarded as significant in facilitating equitable participation and maintaining a balanced group dynamic:

- Tuulia *Has this, in your opinion, become easier now, or has it remained as challenging as before?*
- Tiia *Well, if it wasn't for you, it would be a lot more difficult. ...I doubt that if you weren't there, then someone would try to... boss us around.*

The fourth-grade group similarly expressed the importance of my presence as a teacher in helping them navigate interpersonal disagreements within the group. In our discussions reflecting on the overall project and the students' own perceptions of what they had learned, they highlighted the development of interpersonal skills as a key outcome. Specifically, they noted that working together on the project

had supported their ability to engage constructively with others, manage differing perspectives, and collaborate more effectively in group settings:

- Tuulia *If you think about this project as a whole, what are your thoughts about the project?*
- Viivi *It's been nice. I would like to continue, but we can't.*
- Tuulia *What specifically have you enjoyed?*
- Viivi *Being together, and that we have argued with each other. Well, it is not nice that we have argued with each other, but you can't say that it was boring either, because then you learn to understand the other better.*
- Pia *I think it has been really nice, and we could continue because we don't argue so much anymore, and then it is really nice that we get to play music together, and we have this common friendship.*
- ...
- Roosa *I think it has been really nice and you have learned that others play just like me, and when we have argued, you have learned something, I don't know what, but something... Collaboration!*

The group setting created opportunities for students to share insights that were not similarly available in individual lessons. Students regularly explained their thinking to peers, questioned each other's approaches, and built on each other's musical ideas. Research suggests that the exchange of ideas and experiences among students represents a shift from independent to interdependent learning, wherein learners gain insight both by articulating their ideas to others and by reassessing their own assumptions (Boud, 2001). In my experience these peer discussions not only enriched the group's collaborative learning but also offered me valuable access to their evolving musical thinking, an access point we could explore together (see also Glover, 2000).

When I asked the students what they thought I had learned throughout the project, they suggested that I had gained insight not only into their instruments but also into who they were as individuals:

- Tuulia *What do you think I have learned during this project?*
- Viivi *About how to play the harp – and to understand us, even when we speak in slang.*
- Tuulia *So, to understand you as individuals?*
- Viivi *Mm.*
- ...
- Pia *You've learned what the life of a fourth-grader is like.
[laughter] You've also learned about our arguments.*

...
Roosa *And what kind of chatterboxes we are.*

One of the students also remarked that she believed I had learned how the students behave around their friends. The friendship-based groupings produced different dynamics in student interactions compared to my previous experiences with other groupings. While similar levels of openness and trust could certainly emerge in other types of group configurations, the friendship groups seemed to establish this atmosphere more readily from the outset of the projects. In my observation, these pre-existing peer relationships offered the students a sense of security, enabling them to voice differing opinions and express themselves, sometimes surprisingly candidly, without apparent self-censorship. Although interpersonal dynamics naturally varied across the different groups, this perception of a “safe space” allowed students to navigate disagreements and conflicts while maintaining an overall collegial and supportive atmosphere. It is important to acknowledge that this interpretation represents my perspective as a teacher and researcher, and I may not have been fully attuned to all of the underlying tensions within the groups. Nevertheless, the experience highlighted for me a previously unexamined distinction in student behaviour: how students present themselves in one-to-one lessons compared to their behaviour in small group contexts. Though this distinction may seem self-evident in hindsight, I had not given it sufficient consideration before engaging in these projects.

7.7.7. We Have Been Here. There Hasn't Been a Need to Go Anywhere

Roosa *It has been nicer when there are friends and mmm... [thinking for a long time] I dunno. We have been here. There hasn't been a need to go anywhere.*

When discussing the differences between the project-based group work and students' prior experiences with instrumental learning, a recurring theme in many responses was the accessibility of the group lessons. Unlike their individual lessons at the music school, which were often held at the music school's facilities, the group sessions in this study took place within the familiar environment of the students' own comprehensive school. Initially, I had not fully attended to the significance of this logistical aspect. However, as themes related to accessibility and the practicalities of instrumental transport continued to surface in students' reflections, I began to consider more carefully why these issues mattered to them. One such instance arose during a conversation with a fourth-grade violinist, who highlighted the difficulty of transporting her instrument to lessons, bringing a

tangible, everyday concern into the broader discussion about participation and learning environments:

- Tuulia *How did this way of working differ from your individual lessons?*
- Tiia *In individual lessons, we always play from notation. Here, we improvise and compose our own songs, which is really nice. And then here, there are others, too, but then also my own teacher organises group lessons with her students, though. I wouldn't want to change my instrument - except when I need to go somewhere by bike – then there's the violin!*

Similarly, the fourth-grade saxophonist commented on the practical challenge posed by her instrument:

- Tuulia *How have you felt about the project?*
- Emilia *Nice.*
- Tuulia *What in your opinion has been nice?*
- Emilia *Everything!*
- Tuulia *Ok. Well, has there been something that has felt difficult?*
- Emilia [Ponders a moment and replies with a big smile]
 Carrying the saxophone! [laughter]

The material conditions of music-making, such as the physical weight or portability of an instrument, emerged as considerations in students' reflections on their choice of instrument. Although such factors are often overlooked or deemed peripheral within the broader discourse of musical hobbies, discussions with students highlighted their importance. These physical and logistical aspects influenced students' capacity to participate in musical activities, particularly when independent transport or handling of instruments was difficult. The students' ability to participate without being hindered by physical constraints was, therefore, an essential element of equitable access. Moreover, these seemingly minor practicalities were largely beyond the students' control and required adult assistance. In line with previous national surveys on participation in Basic Arts Education, proximity and logistical convenience have been identified as decisive factors influencing enrolment decisions (Kanerva et al., 2023; Vismanen et al., 2016).

When asked how they might want to alter the project if it were to continue into the next semester, students generally found it difficult to propose specific changes. However, one recurring suggestion from the fourth-grade group

concerned the scheduling of the group sessions, particularly the timing of the lessons:

- Tuulia *What would you change in our way of working if we continued next year?*
- Ella *That we would begin a quarter past. So that we wouldn't be in rush all the time.*
- Tiia *We could change it so that we begin a little bit later, because we're always in a hurry. But I wouldn't want to change anything else. I think this is perfect as it is.*

My impression that students placed significant emphasis on the accessibility of instrumental lessons – while offering relatively few suggestions concerning other aspects of our project – was further reinforced during our discussions about their music school experiences and potential avenues for developing pedagogical practice.

7.8. Students' Visions for Future Music School Practices

Formative interventions are conceptualised as collaborative sites to produce possibility knowledge: in other words, knowledge concerning what might be possible in terms of new forms and patterns of objects and phenomena in people's life worlds and their social institutions (Engeström, 2007; Sannino & Engeström, 2017). By analysing historically situated practices, formative interventions aim not only to articulate a vision for the future of those practices (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005), but also to illuminate what might be possible to identify the options ahead and the next possible stages of development of the activity (Engeström, 2004a). While the student-led projects within this study broadly sought to explore alternative forms of interaction and collaboration in the context of music schools, the concluding discussions in the second phase of the intervention were designed to elicit students' reflections on the future of music school practice more explicitly. One of the key questions posed to students asked how they would reform or reimagine the music school if given the opportunity. This final section of this chapter focuses on the students' responses to these reflective discussions. It also serves as a point of self-reflection, considering what understandings regarding student participation and representation in institutional decision-making emerged through the second phase of the intervention.

7.8.1. *And I'm Not in an Orchestra Yet, so I Don't Know What It's Like*

Although I had become increasingly aware over the course of the project that many students had limited opportunities to engage in ensemble playing, this issue remained prominent in my reflections until the final stages of the intervention. It was during this time that I asked students about their experiences with ensemble and individual learning, only to be reminded, much like in the case of the fourth-grade saxophonist, that many students were unable to articulate differences simply because they had not yet experienced ensemble participation as part of their music school studies.

Students' responses to questions about changing music school practices were notably brief compared to their detailed answers about other topics. In retrospect, I began to question whether my inquiries about developing music school practices may have appeared somewhat unfamiliar or even irrelevant to the students. Despite the long-standing involvement of some participants in music school education, the topic did not seem to elicit the level of engagement I had anticipated. Overall, students offered few suggestions for curricular or pedagogical development. This led me to consider whether students had previously been invited to reflect on such matters in any structured way. It was not until the 2017 curriculum reform that music schools were officially encouraged to include students, and their guardians, in discussions concerning the aims and evolution of music education.

The students' limited engagement with future-oriented thinking may, in part, reflect a lack of familiarity with the kind of imaginative exercise I was prompting. The ability to envision change depends on the capacity to imagine that things could be different, yet knowledge about the possibilities of participation and viable alternatives is not innately passed from one generation to the next (Kiilakoski & Gretschel, 2012). In environments largely shaped by adults, children often require guidance and support to identify avenues for their own agency. The notion of inclusive participation is therefore intimately tied to access to information and transparency in service processes (Sihvo et al., 2018).

Forming opinions necessitates the provision of adequate and accessible information (Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006; Thomas, 2002). This is particularly relevant in music education, where students need opportunities to experience the breadth of study options before they can meaningfully participate in decisions about curricular development. In this study, some students, such as the aforementioned fourth-grade saxophonist, struggled to form opinions because they had not yet had access to certain learning experiences. However, even those with more extensive experience appeared to find it difficult to articulate proposals for future development.

Similar findings have been reported elsewhere: students in her study expressed few desires for institutional change, which she attributed to their perception of the conservatoire as a fixed and immutable structure (Tikka, 2017). In situations where there is only one teacher for a specific instrument, as is often the case in smaller municipalities, students may not even perceive the possibility of requesting change. Hierarchical structures in schools can lead children to feel disempowered and disengaged from decisions that affect them (Thomas, 2002). In the Finnish context, comprehensive schools do not always foster democratic engagement, instead conveying the impression that existing systems do not require change (Gellin et al., 2012).

Reflecting on this, I realised that my original expectations for student engagement in envisioning the future may have been misaligned with their lived realities. I had hoped students would be able to take a wider, systemic view of their music school experiences, but this proved difficult for them to grasp. When I shifted the focus to more immediate and relatable topics, such as their relationships with instrumental teachers, students found it easier to share their experiences of their instrumental teachers and the qualities they considered important in a teacher:

- Emilia *A perfect instrumental teacher would be one who doesn't shout - well, they usually don't shout- but one who doesn't get angry if you make a mistake. And someone who is really-really-really good at playing the instrument.*
- Tuulia *Why do you think it is important that the teacher can play really well?*
- Emilia *Because I don't want to learn wrong things from him.*

This emphasis on the quality of interaction between teacher and student was echoed throughout the discussions. Consistent with prior research (Hasu, 2017; Tikka, 2017), students expressed a strong desire for relational warmth and understanding from their teachers:

- Pia *A perfect teacher is someone I can talk to. If I make a mistake, they'd just say, "That was fine, try again," like my piano teacher. ... Not someone who's always like, "Now play! We're in a rush!"*
- Tuulia *What would you like to talk about with the teacher?*
- Pia *Well, like if something bothers you, even if it doesn't have to do with the lesson, you can tell about it, so she's not immediately like: "Now play, we are busy!" [speaking with a strict voice].*

Continuing the discussion about how the student felt about her current teacher, she replied:

Pia *She [the teacher] can be nice, but often she laughs at things, and when I laugh, she doesn't.*

These examples illustrate the importance that students place on relational attunement and a sense of mutual respect: an observation that aligns with Tikka's (2017) findings, which emphasise belonging as a motivating factor in music education. Hasu (2017) also stresses the importance of teachers meeting students in their current life situations, echoing similar findings by Tuovila (2003).

Despite some students expressing critical views of their instrumental teachers, many of them conveyed overall satisfaction with their learning experiences and teacher relationships:

Pia *I wouldn't add or take anything out from my teacher because I have just that understanding, we talk sometimes but not just talking, nice and good teacher.*

Similar to the discussions we had with the students before this topic, the students' responses to how they would develop the music school revolved around the theme of accessibility and proximity of lessons:

Tuulia *Imagine if you got to change the way you learn to play instruments. What would be the perfect music school? You can come up with any ideas...*

Fiia *For me or for others?*

Tuulia *In any way that you would like to?*

Fiia *Maybe I would think about it from other people's point of view as well, even myself, I would like to have instrument lessons at school. In every instrument because my lessons cannot be held at the school.*

At the time of the study, only certain instruments were taught at the students' comprehensive school. For others, accessing lessons involved significant travel: an issue students repeatedly raised:

Tuulia *In the music school of the future, is there anything that you would change?*

Ella *No.*

Tiia *No.*

Ella *Except if I lived a little bit closer so that I wouldn't have to take the bus.*

...

Tuulia *Well what about learning to play instruments, is there something that you would change? What would for example help you to learn to play better?*

Fiia *Mmm... a lesson twice a week. ... And that it would be easier to go there, closer.*

Across the students' suggestions, the vast majority focused on logistical and accessibility-related issues, such as lesson proximity and the physical burden of transporting instruments. In addition to proximity, students also expressed a desire to have a lesson twice a week and expanded curriculum offerings. Students in music-emphasised classes wished these programmes could begin earlier. Among the suggestions put forward was that of the ninth-grade pianist, who advocated for increased opportunities for ensemble playing, more homework, and a stronger emphasis on developing skills in free piano accompaniment: an area he had only explored in preparation for instrumental examinations. He reasoned that enhancing his competence in this domain would better equip him to accompany others in various musical contexts. A particularly interesting proposal came from a third grader, who had introduced her harp at a preschool concert: she recommended beginner-friendly lessons and peer mentoring systems, where older students could support younger ones. She also proposed a new type of musical notation that could make learning easier, an idea born from her own experience with notation challenges.

7.8.2. *I Think the Music School Is Good Enough Already*

Emilia *And then the music school [ponders for a long while]. I think the music school is good enough already.*

As previously discussed, many of the students' aspirations for developing music school practices centred on everyday practicalities, such as easier access to instrumental lessons at their comprehensive school or closer to home, and logistical concerns like carrying heavy instruments. The significance of a positive relationship with the instrumental teacher was also a recurring theme in students' responses. These findings align with existing literature and policy evaluations, which indicate that children often prioritise the ability to influence practical,

everyday aspects of their lives (Finnish Government, 2019; Kiilakoski et al., 2012).

One notable issue that emerged in discussions about students' sense of initiative was the need for accessible information about the various opportunities available in the music school. This was illustrated in my discussion with a fourth-grade saxophonist who, despite expressing satisfaction with her current studies, had not yet been given the opportunity to participate in ensemble playing, music school orchestras, or teacher-led performances. Her limited experience appeared to stem not from a lack of interest, but from a lack of access or awareness of these possibilities.

By considering that agency involves the individual's ability to form a judgement about alternatives for action (Klemenčič, 2015), and thus to make choices and act on those choices in ways that make a difference to the individual's life and the lives of others (Martin, 2004), and even to imagine alternatives and possible futures (Edwards, 2023; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), the situation raises the question of the extent to which this student had agency in the situation due to a lack of information and opportunities to participate. In this context, the saxophonist's lack of information may have constrained her ability to imagine alternatives, thereby diminishing her potential to act agentically. Her situation also illustrates that exercising choice is often predicated on knowing that alternatives exist even if one ultimately chooses not to pursue them.

In my view, this issue was highlighted, for example, in the discussion with one of the participants in the study – the fourth-grade saxophonist from whose discussion the above quote is taken – who responded to my question about how she would change her music school or influence her music school studies in the following way. Although at the time of our discussion I did not consider whether her response included an evaluation of our group project, which she had expressed positive feelings about, when I spoke to her about her experience of her studies, she nevertheless seemed satisfied with her current studies, despite the fact that she had not yet been offered the same opportunities as others. For example, at the time of the study, she had not yet participated in the music school's orchestras or in any of the performances or ensembles arranged by her teacher.

Reflecting more broadly, it became evident that many students and their parents were not potentially fully aware of the complete range of study opportunities and resources available through the music school. This may be partially explained by the fact that most students in this study were enrolled only in individual lessons and thus lacked exposure to the broader scope of music school offerings. For example, it is possible that some students were unaware of orchestral or ensemble opportunities simply because they were never invited to participate, potentially due to teacher oversight or logistical constraints. In the

case of the saxophonist, it may have just been a coincidence that some of her friends who also played the saxophone had been invited to join the orchestra and she had missed out for some reason.

The process of inviting students to envision the future of music school practice revealed challenges consistent with findings from earlier studies on student participation in institutional decision-making. Research consistently highlights that meaningful participation requires more than simply soliciting students' opinions; rather, it necessitates access to information, as well as time, space, and encouragement for students to reflect on, deliberate, and articulate their views (Kiilakoski & Gretschel, 2012; Lansdown, 2009; Lundy, 2007). These enabling conditions not only enhance the quality of participation but also contribute to students' developing sense of competence and their recognition as valuable contributors to society. In the present study, many students had limited exposure to ensemble playing and public performances – activities which, for some, were either inaccessible or unknown. The student accounts revealed that access to opportunities varied considerably, depending on individual teacher practices and structural conditions within their schools, highlighting the uneven nature of students' educational experiences.

8. Students' Relational Agency in Processes of Co-Construction in Music School Education

Rather than examining student agency in one-to-one instrumental lessons, this study created a distinct space for collaborative co-construction processes with student groups. Within this space, I examined the negotiation processes and potential for student agency through initiative and participation, paying particular attention to what students themselves identified as meaningful as they imagined and enacted their ideas (Edwards, 2017). In Chapters 6 and 7, I focused on events that represented the potential for student agency: students' attempts to participate and engage, and practices that affected their opportunities and choices for action. I will next synthesise insights gained from these co-construction processes to further analyse the dynamics and democratic possibilities inherent in collaboratively shaping music school education with students. This process is situated within the study's broader diffractive methodology (Barad, 2007, 2011), whereby the empirical material is diffracted through multiple theoretical perspectives and systemic policy considerations.

8.1. Co-Construction as a Dynamic, Relational Process: the Social Embeddedness of Students' Initiatives

The co-construction processes explored in this study were characterised as dynamic and relational, shaped by multiple converging factors and influences. While my initial intention as practitioner-researcher was to introduce the student groups to various ways of working without adherence to any particular approach, thereby establishing emergence and non-linearity as foundational principles for collaborative work, student initiatives contributed significantly to non-linear ways of co-constructing practices. Rather than adhering to predetermined outcomes, projects were characterised by an openness to student-led goal

formation and continuous refinement of those goals through collaborative dialogue and shared action. This flexibility enabled the projects to develop in unanticipated directions, including the integration of other art forms into the students' musical explorations. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of several projects, I found it challenging to categorise the students' actions strictly within established artistic domains. For some participants, particularly those in the third and fourth grades, music-making functioned as a form of playful, exploratory activity that extended into a broader realm of creative expression. Through these explorations, students transcended the boundaries of traditional instrumental music practice, engaging in interdisciplinary "meshes" that combined sound with movement, narrative, and visual elements. Such multimodal creativity reflects what research has documented as children's tendency to draw on diverse expressive resources (e.g., Campbell, 1998; Harwood & Marsh, 2012; O'Neill, 2014; O'Neill & Senyshyn, 2012; Pitts, 2005). Prior research similarly indicates that children's musical activity often coexists and resonates with other meaningful pursuits, such as dance (Capponi-Savolainen, 2025; Marsh, 2017; Rimmer, 2018; Young, 2006). Contemporary scholarship further underscores the need to attend to forms of musical literacy in the multimodal and digital age (see also Rowsell, 2013), including the visual dimensions of musical experience (Rimmer, 2018).

Despite this emergent quality, students' initiatives could not be characterised as accidental or isolated; rather, they appeared intrinsic to their everyday lives, unfolding through joint actions that drew connections across diverse social environments. Attending to activities that students found meaningful and pleasurable required recognising the inherently fluid and dynamic nature of their engagement with music. Students' initiatives, whether exploring particular repertoire or performing for others, frequently emerged impromptu, capitalizing on moments and offerings from surrounding communities at school, home or beyond. Music making provided multiple pathways for students to engage with peers, family members, and wider networks. Music making not only drew inspiration from others and created vitality through social interaction, but also built and sustained connections through making new connections and working with others' creations and ideas. Rather than functioning solely as skill acquisition, the projects served as collaborative acts of curating, reframing, sampling, and remixing existing musical material encountered across various contexts, from family celebrations and school canteens to folk music camps and digital platforms. The emergent nature of the processes meant that working methods developed along the way during the intervention. Students drew inspiration and recycled and transformed ideas from diverse sources: accounts of music-making encountered in different venues (e.g., the Kaustinen folk music camp), through media (e.g., the film *Pitch Perfect*), or from their previous

collaborative experiences (e.g., the ninth-grade students' project). When groups' approaches allowed for experimentation rather than pursuing predetermined goals, I observed processes that involved considerable iteration, unpredictable directional shifts, and openness to new possibilities such as unexpected concert opportunities (e.g., the concert projects initiated by the fourth-grade group). A continuous generative source of shared ideas were the different ways of making music that students had encountered on different occasions at school or music school.

A defining feature documented throughout the projects was their porous quality. Students' social worlds frequently "leaked" into projects through families' shared hobbies, or around particular repertoire or musical preferences in peer networks. Simultaneously, the projects themselves extended outward into students' broader lives, manifesting as initiatives to participate in school events or activities within their wider networks. Through their projects, the participating students demonstrated spontaneous and frequent attempts to reconnect with valued adults and peers in their lives and wider social communities. These included initiations to learn particular repertoire for family events, such as performances for parents' birthdays (Nuottitytöt group), or the prospect of playing in a family orchestra (eight-grade pianist). Additionally, participating in school-organised events proved central with ninth-graders seeking to perform at their spring festival and the younger students wanting to participate in class concerts. These initiatives underscored the need to recognise the relational element in the students' music making: their willingness to create and maintain social bonds in and out of the classroom through initiatives that enabled them to derive connectedness. The ways in which the participating students approached collaborative music-making as a means for interpersonal connection align with previous studies identifying music as an expressive medium for creating and sustaining relationships (Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Young, 1999) and connecting with others (Marsh, 2017). While experiences of connectedness are often explored by focusing on students' peer relationships within classroom groups, the students in this study demonstrated that music-making fostered connectedness across multiple relational contexts. My role as a teacher was important in recognizing and acting upon student-initiated moments of connection-building.

Through observing and documenting student interactions, I came to acknowledge students not as isolated learners but as actors whose personal development is deeply interconnected with their relational contexts, including peers, family, and broader social networks. Learning certain musical repertoires was directed by social purposes, transcending purposes beyond purely musical, individualistic, and technical concerns. Music-making emerged as a relational practice: a way of participating in and nurturing meaningful social connections.

For instance, the ninth graders' initiative to engage in a final collaborative performance to mark their friendship and the conclusion of their comprehensive school education illustrated one such relational approach to music-making, which extended beyond technical skill development to encompass emotional and social dimensions of learning.

The findings revealed patterns that contrasted with individualistic assumptions about student learning. Although students' participation in decision-making is often problematised by the assumption that they adopt short-term perspectives and prioritise immediate self-interests over longer-term institutional goals (Klemenčič, 2021), the processes observed in this study suggest that the tendency to understand children as egocentric subjects acting according to individualistic intentions and interests needs reconsidering in favour of a broader, relational view of their actions. By contrast, the students' initiatives emerged not as isolated expressions of self-interest, but as actions situated within and oriented toward their communities. Rather than reflecting self-centredness, these initiatives demonstrated interdependence and responsiveness, bridging connections between students' educational experiences and broader community practices.

The insights thus achieved invite a critical re-evaluation of prevailing assumptions in music school education, calling for an exploration of the perspectives that open up when learning, understood as the acquisition of individual musical skills and knowledge, is not seen as the primary reason for students' engagement and participation. Such considerations draw attention to perspectives that remain unobserved in processes of social decontextualisation resulting from not perceiving individuals as part of their social contexts (see also Kauppi, 2021; Westerlund, 2002), for example by focusing exclusively on the needs of an individual child as a "learner", or on musical repertoires seen from the perspective of educational milestones that individuals have "reached" or have "yet to reach". Addressing these limitations, in this study a key shift in thinking occurred from phase 1 to phase 2 of the intervention (see Section 6.9.3), where the research consciously sought to move toward reconceptualizing student participation beyond decontextualized views of learners as autonomous individuals progressing along fixed developmental trajectories, instead acknowledging their immersion in diverse social contexts. In considering how to engage differently with the students, this study's focus gradually shifted from trying to identify essential qualities in students or their learning, to viewing students as part of their social contexts, how they acted in relation to each other and the shared common world, and how music making related to their developing capacity to connect with and contribute to their world. While I recognized that, as an educator and researcher, I could never be a full member of the children's

community and fully understand the world from a child's point of view (see also Punch, 2002), the endeavour to interpret meanings that students attributed to their music-making and the purposes underlying their agentic choices remained essential. This interpretive task enabled me to consider what mattered to students themselves (Edwards, 2016): what they identified as meaningful, relevant, and significant within their practices and interactions.

Recognising the dynamic nature of music students' learning processes further highlighted a need to recognise that listening to students' views in the "here and now" about relevant issues that resonate most meaningfully with them was situational and relational. This required a robust response to the specificity of students' complex, interrelated and changing needs (Fraser, 2008), moving away from assumptions about the "needs" of a particular, reified group of "children", or assuming that children's desires were automatically derived from their backgrounds. One documented occasion that prompted a critical reconsideration of my assumptions occurred when I presumed a student would favour jazz improvisation, based on his demonstrated skills, only to discover through our final interview his explicit preference for classical music (see Section 7.3). This example illustrates the importance of acknowledging students' experiences as socially situated, with their musical participation requiring attention to nuanced, contextualized meaning-making in their lives.

For me as a teacher, the processes revealed that discerning potential trajectories for different projects required genuine attentiveness to situational nuances. As demonstrated in the student interactions, students' lives beyond the classroom did not simply "flow" into the instrumental lesson space; rather, working together demanded recognition of the subtle and often tacit nature of these processes. My invitations for students to share their ideas remained invitations, not obligations. I observed that students maintained decision-making power over whether and how to bridge their social worlds within the formal classroom context, including decisions about what they wanted to share within formal learning spaces. This required sensitivity to moments when students might choose privacy, not necessarily due to lack of psychological safety, but from personal preference. Working responsively and resourcefully required agile responses from me as a teacher to the uncertainty of individual developmental trajectories (Edwards, 2010, 2012, 2017). Building on this recognition of situated experiences, I view the attempts to create shared knowledge of "what mattered" (Edwards, 2017, p. 4) in each project as a crucial resource for acknowledging and moving toward more horizontal connections to students' lives.

8.2. Contingencies in Redistribution: the Arbitrariness of Students' Participation Opportunities

A key aspect of participatory parity – the participation of individuals as full partners in social interaction – is access to resources (Fraser, 1990, 2001, 2008). In investigating students' agentic orientations through their initiatives and shared experiences during the formative intervention, a key finding emerged: despite the uniform structure of music school studies, students' access to resources and participation opportunities varied significantly. The study identified considerable variability in how students' study paths unfolded within music schools, as many students had not previously participated in certain areas considered central to studies, such as performing or playing with others (FNAE, 2002, p. 9; FNAE, 2017a, pp. 48–49). This variability highlighted the need to attend to the situational nature of policy processes when examining students' participation opportunities. Among student participants who reported an absence of collaborative opportunities prior to the study were the third- and fourth-grade saxophonists, while the ninth-grade violinist's guardian similarly indicated that their child had experienced a deficiency in performance opportunities. This contingency manifested in both music schools and comprehensive schools, where participation opportunities in activities such as performances and ensemble playing appeared to depend on various situational factors. Although this study does not definitively establish the causes of such contingencies, several plausible explanations emerged. These include the student's chosen instrument – some instruments may be for example less frequently incorporated into ensemble settings – as well as structural factors such as the teacher's employment status. For example, part-time teachers or those employed across multiple music schools may have fewer resources or time to organise additional ensemble opportunities or concerts. Moreover, ensemble activities are often institutionally dependent, with the allocation of resources for group music-making left to the music school's discretion, further contributing to unequal access to these core educational experiences.

The element of contingency was also identified in opportunities for students to participate in social processes offered by the comprehensive schools, where participatory practices in school projects (e.g., school concerts) were not uniform, but rather depended on how class teachers distributed opportunities (e.g., whether students had to audition for concerts, such as with the third-grade teacher, or merely sign up, such as with the fourth-grade teacher). In two of the comprehensive schools, where most of the students in this study were enrolled, opportunities for students to participate in different events and to pursue their initiations were thus co-influenced by their teachers, whose differing approaches

to distributing opportunities influenced the degree and nature of student participation. According to the 5th grade students' accounts, the school music teacher employed a pattern of preferential selection, repeatedly assigning particular roles to the same students while denying others the opportunity to "show their talent", thus restricting their potential advancement to more significant roles in school projects. While this study cannot offer definitive explanations for the varying opportunities for participation in the comprehensive school, several contributing factors can be inferred. One likely explanation is the performance-related pressure experienced by school music teachers, who may be required to prepare concert-ready performances within limited timeframes. This may lead to repeated selection of students perceived as capable of managing tasks independently, thus reinforcing unequal access. Furthermore, because music programs in Finnish comprehensive schools typically provide only limited instrumental instruction, often restricted to rock band instruments, students must seek more advanced tuition from external music schools. While access to music school education may enhance students' skills and therefore their eligibility for school performances, such access is not equally available to all. As a result, students with greater external support may be overrepresented in school projects, contributing to inequities in participation.

Overall, these insights underscore the central role of teachers in shaping students' educational opportunities, a theme also highlighted in previous research concerning public schools (e.g., Rainio & Hofmann, 2021). Teachers' decisions exert a substantial influence on students' access to educational resources, both material and non-material, such as encouragement and support. This pattern of contingent access also challenged assumptions about students' interests and needs. Early in the study, particularly during the planning phase of the student projects, it became apparent that students' experiences must be situated within their specific educational and social contexts. Contrary to my initial assumptions that alternatives to performance-based practices, such as improvisation and composition, would be necessary to support student engagement (Appendix A), many participants expressed a strong desire to participate in public performances organised by the music school, the comprehensive school, or other external venues. As the project progressed, it became increasingly evident that there was considerable variation in how students' music studies had unfolded and whether performance had featured prominently in their prior learning experiences. These variations, as reflected in students' responses, underscored the need to closely examine local practices and the implementation of music education policy.

From a practitioner-researcher perspective, recognising the existing dimensions of student participation required a critical re-examination of my own preconceptions, including the extent to which established critiques of

performance-centred pedagogy in music education research were applicable in this context. Reflecting on planning of student group projects, I recognised that my initial assumptions, shaped by critical perspectives in the literature on performance-oriented music education (e.g., Regelski, 2014; Reimer, 2003, 2004; Swanwick, 1999), may not have fully accounted for the situated realities of the students in this study. For many students, the opportunity to perform had not been a routine aspect of their studies, suggesting a need to critically examine potential disconnects between policy intentions and educational reality.

Influenced by critiques of narrow curricula focused on performance proficiency at the expense of broader musical and educational aims (see Freer, 2011), I had introduced elements such as improvisation and composition into the pedagogical framework, assuming these would enrich students' musical experiences. However, analysis of the processes that took place across the participating student groups revealed a strong preference for rehearsing existing repertoire over engaging in more exploratory approaches such as improvisation or composition. While some variability was observed between groups, with younger participants appearing more receptive to diverse musical activities, overall, playing existing repertoire was important to all groups. Equally significant was the opportunity to perform for others, whether for peers within the student groups, family members, schoolmates, or broader audiences within the music school and local community.

These observations align with findings from research on music educators' experiences with student motivation and performance, where similar patterns were identified (Haning, 2021). Educators participating in this research reported that students placed considerable value on musical achievement through public performance, conceptualizing it as both a tangible milestone and a mechanism for securing recognition from others. From the pedagogical perspectives documented in this research, these motivational dynamics directly informed curricular decision-making: performance opportunities were frequently positioned as essential for sustaining students' interest and engagement, particularly in efforts to cultivate technical or interpretive competencies. The participating educators noted difficulty in maintaining students' commitment to musical development and practice in the absence of performance prospects.

While pedagogical approaches such as improvisation and composition are frequently promoted as progressive alternatives to performance-based pedagogy, the experiences from this study's student projects challenge the assumption that specific forms of musical engagement lead directly and universally to particular educational benefits (see also Odendaal & Hodges, 2021; Westerlund, 2002). In light of this, improvisation and composition should be recognised as valuable pedagogical resources, particularly for students who demonstrate and develop an

interest in them, rather than being positioned as universally preferable or pedagogically superior. The critical issue lies in examining whether particular approaches genuinely align with students' values and motivations, or whether they impose further assumptions about students' needs and aspirations without providing sufficient space for students to have a voice in shaping their own learning processes. Regarding improvisation and composition, this prompts a critical reconsideration of whether these so-called creative approaches risk becoming a new canon, shaped not by students' interests, but by adult-imposed and prescriptive educational ideals. Overall, this study does not seek to establish universalist propositions about the preferences of the social category of "children" but rather advocates for sustained situational dialogue with children within each specific context, rather than relying on predetermined assumptions about their educational needs and aspirations.

8.3. A View Beyond the Stage: Rethinking Performance in Music Education Through Achievement, Validation and Social Contribution

In considering the broader discourse on performance-based music education, the experiences within the student projects emphasize the importance of exploring the social and communal dimensions of performance, along with the diverse meanings it holds for students. This perspective aligns with observations, that despite considerable scholarly attention to performance in music education, the voices of key stakeholders, particularly students, have often remained underrepresented (Haning, 2021). The insights gained from the student projects suggest that future examinations of performance in educational contexts would benefit from more systematically including students' perspectives, and potentially those of their parents as well. Although this study did not directly investigate families' views, there were indications that musical performances held significance for them too. Based on students' reflections on performance in the context of their projects, this study suggests that performance opportunities provided more than just personal satisfaction and goal attainment; they also fostered a shared sense of group accomplishment and offered students recognition from peers, educators, and significant others, serving as an affirmation of their musical competence and contributions.

Particular instances within the student projects (e.g., the Nuottitytöt-project in Chapter 7, Section 7.7.5) demonstrated that receiving recognition and acceptance from significant others, including parents, teachers, and peers, influenced students' valuations of their activities and their own abilities. Research examining

children's valuations of instrumental learning has demonstrated how parents can predispose children to adopt certain attitudes towards musical activities and thus influence how children perceive the value of their activities, particularly through the validation or non-validation of children's musical participation (Rimmer, 2018). This pattern was similarly evident in the current study, where validation from important figures in students' lives appeared to play a role in shaping the students' perceptions of their musical experiences and capabilities. One notable manifestation of this dynamic became evident, for example, when the third-grade saxophone player explicitly expressed her desire to perform well-known repertoire, indicating that familiar pieces would enhance appreciation of the group's musical achievement and skill demonstration. Similarly, the fifth-grade students articulated a preference for performing more challenging choral repertoire rather than adhering to the teacher's predetermined choices, indicating their desire to engage with more demanding musical material that would provide opportunities to demonstrate their advanced vocal capabilities and receive corresponding recognition.

The need for recognition from others, understood as a validation and valuing of students' skills and abilities (Fraser, 2008), emerged in this study as something that could be conferred not only by teachers, but also as something that students actively sought and received from their peers and wider social communities. This recognition was often made possible through meaningful opportunities, such as being entrusted with responsible roles in school projects or showcasing their competencies in performances. These moments served as important avenues through which students could gain recognition from others. The significance of peers has been emphasised in prior research on children's engagement in leisure activities (Berg, 2015; Harinen, 2005; Lehmuskallio, 2011; Merimaa, 2015), which highlights that children value activities that are acknowledged and appreciated not only by adults, but equally by their peers. In conversations with one of the guardians at the outset of this study, it was noted that performances offered important moments for families to share and celebrate the sustained effort and progress of their children.

As outlined in Chapter 7, the relationship between rehearsal and performance proved to be more dynamic than I had initially anticipated, particularly among the younger participants such as the third-grade student group. This was illustrated by their spontaneous performances for parents and peers. The students' enthusiasm for performing invites further inquiry into the layered meanings of these experiences, not solely as opportunities for skill development or recognition of musical competence, but also as avenues for contributing to others' well-being (see also Pulkkinen, 2022). This responsive orientation toward performance was evident in the third-grade group's active involvement in planning concert

programmes with specific audiences in mind, including kindergarten children and their own school community, considering the preferences of their audiences and tailoring the repertoire accordingly. Expanding the interpretation of performance to include its broader communal significance highlights the ways in which these opportunities allowed the students opportunities to contribute positively to their communities, in other words, using their capacities and skills for the benefit of others, an aspect highlighted in studies that have examined the meanings of cultural pursuits in the lives of hobbyists, such as adult wind orchestra members (Pulkkinen, 2022).

Despite highlighting positive aspects related to performances, this study does not overlook the well-documented challenges, particularly performance anxiety, which research has demonstrated can cause excessive emotional distress for some students (e.g., Matei & Ginsborg, 2017). Some students participating in the study also reported experiencing performance anxiety, which had affected their motivation to participate in performances. Engaging with music students' experiences of performances could provide a more nuanced understanding of the reasons why students experience performance anxiety, as well as what kind of non-material support would potentially support participation in musical performances. For some students in this study, having the opportunity to participate in group performances created supportive environments that lowered participation thresholds. Having multiple opportunities to perform in many different venues and locations may have also served to reduce the threshold for performance for some students, as these performances were not approached as additional components to the projects, but rather as an integral component of their daily musical activities (see Section 7.1 and the performance of "Busy Bee"). In light of the fact that student assessment in the Finnish music school system occurs within the context of performance situations, including concerts, there is a need for further consideration of the social impacts of this assessment approach and the ways in which the integration of student assessment in public performances contributes to their overall outlook on performing and whether exploring other assessment approaches, such as ongoing formative assessment as part of instrumental lessons (from multiple teachers), could yield more sustainable outcomes.

8.4. Beyond Linear Progression: Relational and Emergent Approaches to Musical Learning

The following subsections document how the student-initiated projects differed from traditional linear models of instrumental learning, showing evidence of more

complex, relationally embedded approaches to musical development. The section begins by depicting how I experienced my role as a teacher, expanding beyond knowledge delivery to include collaborative facilitation and the adaptive orchestration of emergent learning processes. It then portrays the distinctive nature of individual agency in instrumental music-making, where personal proficiency serves as both the foundation of and prerequisite for meaningful collaborative participation, before presenting observations that contrasted with conventional developmental frameworks.

8.4.1. A Shifting Teacher's Role in the Co-Constructed Practices

Engaging with students' perspectives and valuing the co-constructed nature of the projects challenged me, as a teacher, to critically reflect on my own assumptions about music-making and musical learning. This reflection extended to institutional notions of musical development that conceptualise learning as a linear progression through predefined stages of skill and knowledge acquisition (FNAE, 2002; Finnish Association of Music Schools, 2005). By maintaining an open-ended structure and allowing student-led projects to evolve through shared ideas and elaboration (Sawyer, 2004, 2011), students' musical initiatives, such as choices around repertoire, often unfolded in non-linear ways, resisting predetermined curricular sequences. This required me to continually negotiate the balance between providing structural support and remaining responsive to the emergent ideas and creative directions shaped by the students themselves.

In the effort to co-construct the practices, I experienced an expansion of my role as a teacher, beyond providing disciplinary knowledge and expertise, to include facilitating collaborative engagement and nurturing equitable participation, and to ensure that all students' voices were genuinely heard and meaningfully considered. This aspect of collaboration was also explicitly valued by the students; for instance, as discussed previously, one fourth-grade participant remarked that, in her view, the group's interaction would have been imbalanced - that is, dominated by a few voices, had I not been present to support and mediate the collaborative process. Simultaneously, my role entailed adaptively structuring the projects and offering responsive, on-demand support aligned with the unique goals of each group. Managing the evolving communal processes of the student groups involved maintaining constructive social dynamics and fostering a positive and confident atmosphere. This also required making group processes visible to the students by verbalising shared goals, clarifying potential directions, and scaffolding collective decision-making (see also Lahti & Davies, 2021; Viilo et al., 2018).

Supporting students in recognising and navigating available pathways within their projects involved more than procedural guidance; it also included the provision of non-material resources such as encouragement and positive feedback. These were crucial in reinforcing students' resilience and confidence in the face of challenges, such as when students struggled with difficult passages, encountered technical obstacles, or felt overwhelmed by the complexity of ensemble coordination. Nevertheless, I continually faced the challenge of calibrating my involvement: offering sufficient support while keeping enough distance to support the co-constructed processes. This required a conscious effort to resist providing ready-made solutions and instead cultivate an environment of trust in the students' capabilities to pursue and refine their projects autonomously, even amid difficulties (see also Härkki et al., 2020).

Through these changes, I experienced that the processes between self-practice and instrumental lessons were in many occasions realigned not only in terms of classroom time, but also in terms of the process and decisions related to content, so that it bore similarities to the so-called non-linear maker pedagogies (e.g., Härkki et al., 2020, 2023; Seitamaa-Hakkarainen & Hakkarainen, 2019; Viilo et al., 2018). In addition to the fact that some students used more time at home for practicing, thus freeing up classroom time for more in-depth exploration of different topics – which I considered to be a general goal in instrumental teaching overall – I considered that in the projects of the study the content was no longer "pushed" by me, as is characteristic of so-called linear pedagogy (Seitamaa-Hakkarainen & Hakkarainen, 2019). Rather, students' ideas and interests became the focus of the enquiries and work processes in the classroom. Thus, instead of hoping to engage and motivate the students to learn specific repertoire or instrumental techniques or by implementing predetermined steps (Sawyer, 2004, 2011; Seitamaa-Hakkarainen & Hakkarainen, 2019; Viilo et al., 2018), the students brought their own interests and inquiries into the classroom and, for example, sought information on specific technical questions "on demand", at times when the questions were relevant to them in the course of their projects (such as when the fifth-grade cellist needed to learn certain position shifts for his group's chosen piece).

In the absence of a pre-defined order or sequence, I experienced my role as a teacher to be focused on dealing with the processes' uncertainty through adaptive orchestration and the partly ill-defined and emergent goals and solutions. It is also worth acknowledging that in the projects, students' interests in pursuing particular repertoires or different roles in their projects did not automatically translate into students' ability to balance the level of demands of, for example, their chosen repertoires and their developing abilities to pursue them. In this regard, my experiences with the co-constructed processes resonate with earlier research that

highlights the crucial role of the teacher in supporting students' ability to achieve their goals (Seitamaa-Hakkarainen & Hakkarainen, 2019). I understood my role as central in scaffolding the processes to accommodate students' evolving interests, while ensuring that the repertoire they selected remained accessible. This dynamic orchestration demanded a comprehensive perspective, one which might be described as a bird's-eye view of the multiple layers of classroom activity: attending simultaneously to individual development, peer relationships, and group-level dynamics, and to how each student engaged both musically and socially within their learning environment.

8.4.2. The Specific Character of Individual Agency in Instrumental Music Making: Personal Skill as a Prerequisite for Collaborative Practice

In contrast to the above-mentioned non-linear maker pedagogies (e.g., Härkki et al., 2020, 2023; Seitamaa-Hakkarainen & Hakkarainen, 2019; Viilo et al., 2018), where students are viewed as working together in groups rather than individually (e.g., Härkki et al., 2023), it is worth noting a crucial difference: the development of individual capacity for collective action in instrumental music making is predicated on personal proficiency with a specific instrument(s). Unlike instruments such as the piano or percussion ensembles, where multiple performers can engage with shared instrumental resources, the mastery of single-line acoustic instruments requires the student to cultivate a specific set of individual technical competencies independently before meaningful ensemble participation becomes possible. While these perspectives may be perceived as rather evident, they underscore a particular dimension of agency in instrumental music making and learning: specifically, the development of students' individual skills on a specific instrument (or voice) is pivotal in facilitating the students' capabilities to engage in collaborative musical activities. It is worth noting that this assertion does not suggest that students must possess highly advanced individual skills to engage in ensemble playing – as this study demonstrated, some students began playing together almost immediately after receiving their instruments (see Section 7.1, the third-grade group Nuottitytöt) – rather, it underscores that within the context of collaborative instrumental music-making, the role of individual development remains indispensable and cannot be overlooked.

It is worth noting that, in contrast to other artifact-based disciplines where skills developed with one tool or medium may be transferable to another, instrumental music making typically does not allow for such transferability. Student agency in instrumental music making is thus constructed around a

particular instrument(s), and while certain skills may provide support across instruments, technical proficiency on one instrument does not automatically translate to another. As such, achieving agency in instrumental music making necessitates sustained and targeted commitment to mastering the distinct technical and expressive demands of each chosen instrument. While this may be self-evident within the field of music education, it may be less obvious to those working in other artistic disciplines. Unlike other collaborative art forms, instrumental ensemble work places particular demands on synchronisation, requiring the quick integration of sensory feedback with motor commands in temporal coordination with others (Zamm et al., 2015). This sets collaborative music-making apart from collaborative forms of visual arts (except perhaps in spontaneously created forms of live community art) because it requires individuals to coordinate the timing of their actions with others.

As students' capabilities in instrumental music making, and thus their agentic possibilities, are expanded through developing their competence on their specific instrument (voice), consequently, in order for students to participate in collective music making, instrumental music education must address two interconnected processes: the cultivation of a student's individual proficiency and the development of the collaborative skills necessary for ensemble participation. Meaningful engagement in group music-making therefore presupposes a level of personal musicianship, making the advancement of individual skill not merely a secondary goal but a critical prerequisite for participation in collective musical contexts. As illustrated in the project with the third-grade group Nuottitytöt, among the approaches explored in this study to support engagement and participation across varying proficiency levels was improvisation (see Section 7.1), as it alleviated, in my view, some of the challenges related to temporal coordination in ensemble music-making. At the time of the formative intervention, students' development of individual competencies was further supported by their concurrent participation in one-to-one instrumental lessons, in addition to the group sessions organised through the study.

This distinctive nature of the potential for individual agency in instrumental music making draws attention to the reasons why it may appear important to support students' sense of competence and self-efficacy in their pursuit of instrumental learning. This includes providing learning opportunities, constructive feedback, and encouragement, elements that reinforce students' belief in their capabilities to develop skills on their chosen instrument. Conceptualising agency as a dynamic interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) highlights how past experiences and social interactions shape students' aspirations and inform their present actions. Within this framework, positive experiences of achievement and social

affirmation can play a critical role in fostering resilience and long-term commitment in music learning. This issue is particularly salient considering several doctoral studies that have documented declining motivation and reduced commitment to sustained engagement in music school education among children and young people in Finland (Hasu, 2017; Tikka, 2017; Tuomela, 2017).

8.4.3. Challenging Linear Learning Models

Although the student projects implemented during the intervention were limited in duration and consequently offered only a brief window into non-linear progression and co-constructive practices, the empirical findings nonetheless underscore the need to critically re-examine the assumptions that underpin prevailing conceptions of musical learning. In particular, the findings highlight the importance of reconsidering how prescribed learning pathways may constrain or enable opportunities for co-construction within institutional frameworks, for example the extent to which linear construction models for instrumental learning help to structure and promote the learning of skills and the acquisition of knowledge, and the extent to which they impose rigidity and norms, portraying musical learning as a one-way movement from incompetence to competence, constituting a ready-made set of "next steps" through which individual developmental milestones, achieved or not, are "ticked off". In such cases, curricula are typically designed to ensure that students cover a certain repertoire that is considered "basic" or essential to the development of instrumental (or vocal) skills, thus portraying the individual as incompetent and therefore in need of prescriptive curricula to ensure upskilling.

In this study, allowing the students to stay with their ideas and to have their efforts taken seriously to pursue their own projects, rather than, for example, proceeding with music that was structured and simplified in stages, exceeded the expectations and assumptions about their abilities, both for me as a teacher and for some of the students' music teachers at school who had made predictions about the students' abilities to, for example, learn certain repertoire. Yet, the students' self-initiated projects did not diminish their need for support; rather, the processes highlighted the role of the teachers in providing encouragement and trust in the students' abilities to overcome the potential obstacles in the projects.

Overall, I contend that the student projects undertaken during the formative intervention required both the students and me as a teacher to embrace a degree of uncertainty, accepting that neither the phases of the process nor the eventual outcomes of the inquiries could be fully predetermined (see also Littleton et al., 2012; Viilo et al., 2018). This necessitated a collective tolerance for the inherent unpredictability and ambiguity that characterises non-linear, emergent learning

processes (Härkki et al., 2023). In these projects, the possibilities of living in the moment had to be accepted as a legitimate form of action. These experiences drew attention to the extent to which students, as a whole, have opportunities to engage in the learning decisions in the here and now, rather than focusing their attention on prospects in the distant future. Based on my experience with these student projects, I suggest that the children's ability to live their musical lives in the present, also observed in previous studies (Tuovila, 2003; Young & Ilari, 2019), should not be misunderstood as an arbitrariness or a lack of ability to engage in sustained learning, where the children's own immediate self-interests take precedence over long-term goals. Rather, it highlights the inseparability of the children's musical lives from their lives outside the music classroom, thus drawing attention to the students' existential questions, their being in the world (Biesta, 2021). Attempts to understand the basis of children's valuing therefore require respecting their commitment to making music not as an enclave, but as a way of life (see also Tuovila, 2003). This also brings into focus how learning skills and musical disciplinary knowledge is meaningful when it is part of valued relationships.

8.4.4. Rethinking Music Education Frameworks through Post-developmental Approaches

Traditional models of musical learning frequently conceptualize musical learning as a linear progression from incompetence to competence, with prescribed developmental milestones. However, the insights generated through this study invite a more expansive reconceptualization of children's music-making, one that moves beyond normative assumptions that artistic development follows identifiable traditions or predetermined stages (see also Sakr & Osgood, 2019). Such rethinking necessitates a critical examination of universal models of musical development, which risk marginalizing those children whose artistic inquiries do not align with standardized expectations. To fully acknowledge the richness and variability of children's music-making practices would, according to the observations from this study, require that educators and institutions reconsider their expectations that children's creative pursuits must be situated within, or strive toward, established artistic traditions. Developing post-developmental approaches to childhood art (Sakr & Osgood, 2019) that do not rely on tracking children's growth against normative benchmarks therefore requires a fundamental reorientation of musical practices, which also entails a rethinking of prevailing categorizations and assumptions about children and their engagement with music, as well as a critical reconsideration of dominant conceptualizations of musical learning.

The projects that emerged from the students' own initiatives demonstrated a departure from the standardised, linear models commonly associated with instrumental learning pathways. The experiences gained from these projects invite critical reflection on the extent to which widely accepted notions of universality and developmental necessity are in fact shaped by discursive practices and entrenched assumptions, rather than by the intrinsic physiological and motor demands of specific instruments. While some developmental trajectories may indeed reflect instrument-specific imperatives, many prevailing models risk naturalising these trajectories, claiming universality and normative accounts of children's approaches to music-making (Kanellopoulos, 2010, 2019). More critical examination is required to assess how such frameworks, often perceived as self-evident or essential, may inadvertently marginalise children whose practices or development diverge from these constructed norms (Burman, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Sakr & Osgood, 2019).

Rather than conceiving student progression in music education as linear movement from ignorance to competence, dismantling the "explicative order" (Rancière, 1991, p. 4) invites a shift toward viewing music education as a process that unfolds uniquely in each child's life. This challenges models that delineate development according to fixed stages, which differentiate between what is considered "normal" and "abnormal" (see also Sakr & Osgood, 2019). Advancing a holistic, pluralist orientation to music education that understands music as embodied situational experience and, further, musical learning as a process that takes place in and through social contexts, challenges music educators to consider how music education could be approached as situational and contextual; in other words, as something that starts from the horizon of the actual educational context and student experience, rather than from fixed (aesthetic or praxial) principles (Westerlund, 2002). The working processes of the student projects in this study demonstrate that this requires viewing music education as something that emerges through social processes rather than something that follows predetermined teleological pathways from minimal starting points toward fixed endpoints (see also Young, 2021). From this perspective, music education is framed as an ongoing, relational process of co-construction, emergent and responsive, rather than as a delivery of pre-formed content shaped by consensus without student input (Biesta, 2010a; Wright, 2015).

It is further important to emphasise that conceptualising music education as an emergent, co-constructed process unique to each student does not necessitate a hyperindividualised approach to music learning. It is the view of this study that bringing forth a more socially and communally concerned, context-sensitive music education requires identifying frameworks of music education that manifest individualism and undermine the social context of music education.

Such an orientation foregrounds the relational, embodied, and experiential nature of musical engagement, and resists abstract, decontextualised frameworks that neglect the lived perspective of the student, and the concrete social realities of learning (see also Westerlund, 2002). Instead of seeking essentialist qualities within individual students, this study thus advocates for a shift in focus toward understanding how children engage musically in relation to one another and within their specific social contexts. Approaching music education as context-sensitive and socially grounded thus challenges educators to reimagine pedagogical practices in ways that are responsive to students' lived realities and communal affiliations.

Recognising music learning as a relationally embedded process foregrounds the importance of social context, particularly peer relationships, in shaping musical engagement. In this study, the formation of friendship groups for music-making offered an alternative to traditional ability-based ensembles, privileging social connection as the basis for collaboration over predetermined skill levels. It is worth noting that in this study, the students' ability to engage in co-constructed projects was significantly supported by their existing social networks of peer musicians, particularly through their participation in music-focused classes within comprehensive schools. These connections provided the students not only with socio-emotional resources but also with contexts for sharing musical interests with peers, illustrating the value of educational structures that actively foster such networks. The presence of a school community in which students had peers who played instruments was also instrumental in enabling the formation of the friendship-based groups also for this study. It is likely that, without these relational infrastructures, the creation of such a peer-driven learning environment would have been far less feasible.

8.5. Children's Distinctive Position in Exercising Agency in Education

Student-initiated projects, for example the ninth-grade students' project as part of the first phase of the intervention, showed students exhibiting varying degrees of willingness and readiness to take the initiative. While some students displayed a readiness to act and contribute, others required more encouragement. In considering the ways in which the students' approaches to taking the initiative differed between the participants in the five student groups, the findings align with previous studies which suggest that seeing oneself as an agent whose actions count requires experience, learning and development (e.g., Rainio, 2010). Children may not inherently assume the right to participate or experience

themselves as agentic subjects (see also Davies, 1990; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). By acknowledging that children may thus not automatically assume the position of an actor or have a sense of agency – a belief that one has the capacity to act and take action in an educational setting – I needed to acknowledge as a teacher that within educational contexts, some children required explicit permission from adults to voice opinions and participate in decision-making (Kiilakoski & Gretscher, 2012). Due to the presence of power imbalances in educational situations, information and understanding of the possibility to act did not thus automatically transfer to children; in other words, children did not inherently possess the same level of awareness and understanding of their right to act (in comparison to, for example, adults).

As evidenced in the student projects, students' sustained engagement in both individual and collective pursuits was also influenced by my active commitment as a teacher to recognise and legitimise the co-constructed practices as a valid and meaningful form of participation. Often, I found that the most meaningful contribution I could make as a teacher, at least initially, was simply to support students in persisting with the pursuits they found intrinsically motivating. This experience made me acutely aware that, in my position as a teacher, I also held the capacity, whether consciously or not, to either diminish or nurture students' motivation. For instance, expressing doubt about a student's ability to master a particular skill could easily have extinguished their enthusiasm and initiative. Conversely, I also had the opportunity to encourage them and affirm their potential. This pedagogical stance resonates with the previously discussed "Yes, and..." principle by Sawyer (2006), which suggests that creative collaboration is fostered not by negating or redirecting contributions, but by building upon them. In this spirit, I sought to approach students' ideas with an attitude of affirmation and possibility, aiming to reinforce a learning environment in which students' efforts were not only acknowledged but actively supported.

Based on the experiences gained as part of the student projects, the investigation indicated that teachers occupy a pivotal role in both affirming students' initiatives and supporting the development and maintenance of their perceived competence. As demonstrated in the ways in which the students' opportunities varied based upon the different approaches of their classroom teachers at school, students' agentic orientations were closely intertwined with the extent to which their capabilities were acknowledged, affirmed, and substantively supported within the learning environment. Conversely, students shared experiences of situations where adults underestimated their abilities, positioning them as less capable and offering them less demanding roles. This misrecognition had direct impacts on their agentic possibilities, as it restricted their opportunities

for participation, demonstrating how children's capacity to act is also contingent on how they are recognized by others.

By considering that agency emerges as a dynamic interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), where past experiences guided future projections and current actions, the student-initiated projects demonstrated how experiences of success in learning contributed to students' further explorations, underscoring the importance of supporting competence and self-efficacy through opportunities, feedback, and encouragement. As evidenced across the student projects, successful learning experiences often served as catalysts for further exploration, prompting students to take initiative in extending their skill sets and musical understanding. In the fourth-grade group, for example, the students' aspirations to learn new repertoire generated new learning objectives, the pursuit of which prompted further student-initiated actions that drew upon skills previously acquired. Similarly, in the fifth-grade group, the cellist recognised the need to master a position shift in order to perform the ensemble's chosen piece. Demonstrating initiative and resourcefulness, he sought guidance from his sister's friend, also a cellist, and subsequently began working on this technique during his individual lessons. This study was prompted to reflect on the extent to which students' prior experiences of encouragement and access to learning opportunities may have shaped their willingness to engage in new situations, including their decision to participate in the research itself. One illustrative case was that of the fifth-grade cellist who, according to both his own account and that of a peer, had frequently been offered diverse opportunities at school and was among the first in his class to express interest in participating in the study. These patterns highlighted the importance of nurturing students' sense of competence and self-efficacy in the pursuit of individual learning tasks, for example by offering constructive feedback and sustained encouragement to reinforce their confidence in their own abilities.

When considering the distinctive position of children, the observations in this investigation aligned with those made by Laes and colleagues (2018), who emphasise that children rarely make decisions affecting their lives independently and therefore require the support and guidance of guardians and other adults. In this study, the students' shared accounts of their music school experiences revealed that many of the participants were either unaware of, or had limited exposure to, the range of opportunities their music schools offered. Since children's capacity to imagine and make purposeful choices may be more limited due to having less experience with different options compared to adults, this lack of awareness represents a significant barrier. Access to information can therefore be considered essential in order for children to form opinions and make informed decisions (see also Thomas, 2002; Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006). Acknowledging

that individuals' past habits and experiences guide their future projections (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), what emerged was an understanding of how increasing positive social experiences and experiences of personal achievement could further support students' resilience in music learning. In essence, this investigation demonstrated that placing genuine decision-making opportunities within children's reach requires not only recognizing their current capabilities but actively expanding the horizons of what they can imagine and achieve through sustained support and encouragement. These observations regarding children's distinctive developmental position and their dependence on adult support and institutional structures for accessing opportunities reveal the inherently relational character of student agency in music education. The following section synthesizes these findings within a broader theoretical framework, examining how the multiple dimensions of agency identified throughout this chapter – from individual skill development to collaborative practice, from teacher recognition to institutional affordances – cohere within an ecological understanding of student agency as it manifests within the music education ecosystem.

8.6. Student Agency as an Ecological Achievement in the Music Education Ecosystem

This study has demonstrated that the promotion of children's inclusion in music schools is not merely a matter of representation or redistribution, such as access to music school education or tokenistic opportunities to exercise voice. Rather, it is also a matter of student agency within educational relationships, where agency encompasses students' capacity to act and contribute to their environment, exert control over and give direction to their lives and immediate living environments, and potentially establish connections with diverse sources of well-being and interactive relationships that collectively enhance the meaning of life (Isola et al., 2017). This necessitates access to reciprocal processes of participation: the capacity to make choices, manage one's needs, and have control over common resources (Isola et al., 2020). To theoretically ground this conceptualization of agency, this study drew on Klemenčič's (2015, 2017, 2021) integrated framework and Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological view of agency, adopting a view of student agency that is not merely an individual trait or a situational feature, but an achievement that occurs within a temporal-relational context of action within an institutional ecosystem of interconnected, interdependent elements (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Klemenčič, 2017). This ecological perspective posits that children's ability to participate is influenced by cultural, social and economic contexts, positioning their agency within a framework of social interdependence

rather than individual autonomy (see also Abebe, 2019; Esser, 2016). Within this ecological framework, the relational and distributed understanding of agency rejects the idea that agency is an inherent quality of individuals or a capacity that an individual possesses; rather, agency emerges within specific contexts and through relationships, continuously taking shape and evolving during the action itself. By conceptualizing agency as something that develops through relationships, and is shaped by specific circumstances rather than existing as a fixed personal quality, the process of investigating agency in this study involved examining the particular context in which the students are situated and the ways in which their agency can be enabled (Klemenčič, 2015, 2017, 2021; Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020).

Through this relational and contextual framework on student agency, this study examined students' capacity to act within, and mediated by, broader institutional, social, and material conditions, conceptualizing student agency in music school education as an ecological achievement (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) that emerges through the interaction of students' internal orientations and external possibilities within an institutional ecosystem. The data illuminates how students' agentic possibilities were shaped by external factors that operated as both resources for and constraints on agency, including access to material resources (such as musical instruments, facilities, rehearsal spaces), the availability of non-material resources (such as trust, decision-making power, and encouragement), students' awareness of available options and opportunities, and the structural support provided by institutional practices (such as flexible scheduling). This integrated yet non-deterministic understanding of student agency – where agency is constituted through the dynamic interplay between agentic orientations and agentic possibilities (Klemenčič, 2015, 2017, 2021) – proved a lens sensitive to changing temporalities, encompassing students' agentic orientations (such as their will to act and efficacy beliefs) and the multiple dimensions of their agentic possibilities, including their power and resources to achieve intended outcomes (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Klemenčič, 2015). My role as a teacher in supporting student agency involved more than instructional support: it encompassed creating conditions in which students could initiate, pursue, and sustain meaningful musical engagement. Creating such conditions included aligning decisions with students' developing abilities, supporting their sense of competence, and reinforcing their self-efficacy through positive reinforcement and trust.

To develop understanding of how student agency operates within institutional contexts, this study's analysis employed Klemenčič's (2021) theoretical framework, which illustrates how institutional structures, regulatory frameworks, and procedural mechanisms differentially afford students varying degrees of

agentic possibilities to engage actively in learning processes and influence their educational environments. The policy review conducted within this investigation (Chapter 4) revealed that expectations and dependencies regarding student participation in music school education are embedded within broader societal mandates governing music schools. This finding necessitated an examination of the interdependencies and relational dynamics between music educational institutions and adjacent systems, including vocational institutions. This analysis indicated that historically institutionalized demands have mediated processes in music schools, with policies aligning music school studies with degree structures and vocational education requirements influencing instrumental classrooms by defining expectations for participation and study performance. This alignment with higher education requirements has shaped musicianship approaches as a linear progression, focusing on individual skill development through stage-delineated structures oriented toward children's musical growth in relation to adult professional ideals. The musician's profile, reviewed and constructed toward professional study thresholds and perceived professional skill requirements, was supported through systematic curricular design.

To understand how these institutional structures and historical processes shape individual student agency, the examination incorporated views from cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 2001a; Engeström & Rückriem, 2005), which recognizes that individuals gain agency through participation in social institutions and that agentic actions cannot therefore be dissociated from the historical and history-making activities in which they are embedded. From this perspective, the agency of individuals – their capacity for action and their motivated contributions – further depend on socially developed and socially available tools (Hopwood, 2023). From this cultural-historical activity theory perspective, agency is not something that emerges without individual will and contribution (Engeström et al., 2022). Agency is thus never directionless but rather involves intentionality and purpose (Edwards, 2023). It is shaped by intentions and motivated by what individuals value, drawing attention to personal values and aspirations and the meaning behind their actions (Edwards, 2016). Within an institutional setting individuals are defined as agentic beings who interpret and respond to demands in practices with actions shaped by their motivational orientations (Edwards, 2020). Importantly, while these perspectives on agency encapsulate the intention and effort involved in the unfolding of motivated actions that have an impact (Edwards, 2023), as discussed previously, it is important to note that, rather than conceptualising agency as an intention to bring about a future that is different from the present, agentic actions can also be understood as attempts to sustain something.

This incorporation of views from the cultural-historical activity theory into Klemenčič's integrated framework and Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological view of agency allowed this study to examine students' agentic orientations with specific attention to their willingness to act, the "agency for what", through the conceptualization of students' desire to influence or change activities toward something they aspire to and value (Edwards, 2023; see also Hofmann & Rainio, 2007). Edwards' (2017) cultural historical approach to motive is based on a collective idea of what matters to others and to oneself within a particular practice. As discussed previously, Edwards (2017) employs the terms "what matters" and "motivational orientations" to avoid the connotations that theorising "motive" outside of cultural-historical activity theory can have with individual needs. In this study, the notion of "what matters" has been utilized to examine the meanings attributed to music school education by students, acknowledging that these aspirations are formed in relational situations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Olsson, 2009). The findings demonstrated how the multiple meanings identified in this study emerged through students' relational interactions within their environments, reflecting their collectively formed aspirations rather than purely individual preferences.

By tracing the music school object of activity in its temporal and socio-spatial trajectory, to identify the collective meanings and motives in its cultural-historical development (Engeström, 2000b), the study extended this analysis from an individual to institutional level. By identifying music schools as social and cultural arrangements within a broader institutional ecosystem (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Klemenčič, 2017), the study examined how the processes in music schools are structured by their network relationships with other educational institutions. This analysis included identifying ways in which music school students' musical trajectories are co-created by multiple actors within an institutional ecosystem, with interconnected, interdependent elements (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Klemenčič, 2017; see also Hahn, 2024). The dimensions of student agency as an ecological achievement were illustrated for example in the ways in which the comprehensive schools and music schools provided complementary resources and opportunities for students and how the development of individual skills in one context (music school) provided students with agentic opportunities in the other (comprehensive school). It was also observed how the social connections that formed through music-focused classes provided students with social and emotional resources for individual learning.

It should be noted that the need for cooperation between different music education institutions was acknowledged already in the early stages of establishing music-focused classes in the 1970s, when cooperation between music schools and comprehensive schools was considered essential for the

organisation of music-focused education (Törmälä, 2013). This early recognition stemmed from an understanding that the resources available from Basic Education alone would be insufficient for providing extensive music instruction, especially in relation to instrumental learning. The findings of this study reaffirm the value of such collaborative structures by illustrating how music-emphasised classes played a central role in fostering peer relationships, a dimension identified as essential for advancing students' experiences of inclusion (Kiilakoski et al., 2012). These peer networks, formed within the institutional ecosystem, functioned as relational infrastructure that enhanced both the social and academic dimensions of students' musical engagement. While debates continue regarding whether children's agency should be conceptualised as situational and contingent or as something developmental and enduring (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017), this study highlights the cumulative nature of students' agentic possibilities across institutional contexts. That is, students' experiences of agency are not confined to isolated settings, but rather build upon and are shaped by, multiple overlapping institutions and practices.

Adopting an ecological view of agency also requires acknowledging the constraints inherent in the very systems that support it. The institutional arrangements and cultural expectations that enable certain forms of agency can simultaneously delimit what counts as legitimate musical engagement. The definitional boundaries around what it means to be "musical" or to "make music" are themselves socially constructed and maintained by prevailing discourses and power relations (Wright, 2015). Therefore, while institutional ecosystems may expand opportunities for student agency, they also embed normative assumptions that shape the recognition of particular musical practices and identities.

These observations invite a critical re-examination of the prevailing conceptualizations of musicianship and musical learning, which establish discursive frameworks through which children and young people are understood, managed, and positioned within educational institutions (see also Murris et al., 2020). This includes the conceptions of musical development which may also contribute to individualistic interpretations of socially structured phenomena (see also Burman, 2017). In the context of this study, this could, for example, mean preoccupations with the perfection of specific ideals of musicianship, compromising attention to broader social issues related to music-making and children as part of social contexts. Music school policy in Finland has historically promoted a particular conception of musical development, articulated through the notion of a linear learning pathway, where musicianship is constructed as a progression through discrete stages of skill and knowledge accumulation (FNAE, 2002; Finnish Association of Music Schools, 2005). This perspective on musical development is considered to embody a conception of pursued musical

development that finds congruence with the criteria established by higher music education.

Conceptualizations of musicianship have undergone a significant evolution in correspondence with transformations in public policy and cultural expectations. Within the Finnish comprehensive school system, early curriculum positioned music education predominantly as vocal training, with instrumental instruction emerging only in subsequent decades. More recently, music curricula have undergone considerable expansion alongside broadened expectations for musicianship development, including instrumental proficiency, body percussion, improvisation, arranging, composing, interdisciplinary engagement, embodied expression through movement, and the use of digital technologies (FNAE, 2014, pp. 141–143). These conceptualizations of musicianship therefore demonstrate contextual specificity and historical contingency rather than static frameworks, as evidenced in the formation of music education policy (FNAE, 2002; FNAE, 2017a, see also FNAE, 2014). A parallel trajectory can be observed in the Basic Education in the Arts music schools, where recent policy reforms have sought to promote creative pedagogical approaches to music school education, particularly improvisation and composition. In the 2017 curriculum renewal, improvisation and composition were elevated to constitute core areas of assessment in music school studies (FNAE, 2017a, p. 51), reflecting a heightened prioritization of these pedagogical areas.

A persistent ambiguity in policy developments concerns the extent to which children's perspectives are incorporated into these reforms. While it may be hypothesised that broadening curricular frameworks and pedagogical approaches may potentially benefit music students and expand their participation processes, the absence of children and young people from deliberative processes regarding these developments highlights a fundamental disconnect. Specifically, it remains unclear to what extent these reforms are responsive to children's lived experiences, initiatives, and aspirations, or whether they reflect top-down assumptions about what constitutes valuable musical engagement. This observation calls attention to the need for greater reflexivity in how institutional change is conceptualized and enacted – particularly in relation to who is afforded a voice in defining the aims, content, and values of music education.

This study contends that policy formulations enacted on behalf of children and young people, in the absence of their direct participatory engagement, systematically render their experiences of inclusion increasingly arbitrary and unpredictable. When decisions are made *for* rather than *with* children, their participation becomes contingent, exposing systemic vulnerabilities in the realisation of their agency. The study acknowledges that exclusion from agency may occur not only through overt institutional mechanisms, but also through pre-

existing social categories and normative assumptions that precede and shape the processes of subject positioning (Rainio, 2010; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). The findings prompt a critical examination of how established, fixed conceptions of musical development and artistic engagement constrain student agency by delimiting legitimate participation. Considering that children's agency is contingent on how they are recognized (Fraser, 2008, 2000), the study calls for an examination of whether public authorities perceive a lesser need for stakeholder representation in situations where musical development is viewed as a journey from a generalised state of incompetence to already framed forms of competence (Kanellopoulos, 2010, 2019). Drawing on Fraser's (2000, 2008) framework of recognition, the study's findings suggest that how children are recognized – or misrecognized – within policy development processes fundamentally shapes their agentic possibilities. As Fraser (2000) argues, the need for recognition might be especially relevant for groups that have been recognized from a certain kind of frame. Through misrecognition, individuals can be routinely discounted in stereotypic representations or rendered invisible by means of authoritative representational and interpretative practices. Misrecognition does not merely involve a lack of acknowledgment, but functions as a form of symbolic injustice, wherein individuals or groups are systematically distorted, marginalised, or rendered invisible through dominant interpretive and representational practices. In the context of music education, this calls for a sustained interrogation of how children's interests and capacities are framed, and whether these framings allow for the emergence of student agency or serve to delimit it within predefined institutional norms.

9. Discussion

As presented in the introduction, the aim of this study has been to contribute to the understanding of the policy-practice gap in Finnish music schools, and of children's inclusion in music school education. By conducting a formative intervention to invite children and young people to shape the policies and practices that affect their music school education, this study has sought to identify conditions that support student agency, with the overall aim of increasing children's participation and decision making in the music school context. As part of the formative intervention, the study has reflected the present situation against the historical development of the policy and practices of the music school system, attempting to identify and analyse the dynamics, opportunities, and barriers that emerge when bridging the policy-practice gap. This process has required focusing on both the practical pedagogical processes and the systemic policy considerations.

This chapter synthesizes the findings of this dissertation, bringing together all of the elements of the research to demonstrate this investigation's contribution to understanding co-constructed music school practices and participatory governance in music school education. The chapter begins with an integrative summary of the research findings (Section 9.1) and continues to explore the implications for music education practice (Section 9.2) and policy (Section 9.3). The chapter concludes by reflecting on the theoretical and methodological considerations, contributions, and limitations of the study (Section 9.4), as well as implications for future research directions (Section 9.5).

9.1. Key Findings in Summary

This investigation has been guided by three interconnected research questions that examine both the micro-level dynamics of co-constructed musical practices and the macro-level dimensions for participatory governance in music education. I will next address each research question by synthesizing the key findings from the formative intervention.

Research Question 1: How do children and young people co-construct music school practices when their agency and decision-making are supported by their teacher?

The findings demonstrate that through active support of their agency and decision-making, children and young people engage in multifaceted co-construction processes that are fundamentally relational, emergent, and socially embedded. Rather than pursuing isolated individual interests, students demonstrated that their musical initiatives emerged from and were oriented toward their broader social communities, including family connections, peer networks, and school environments. The co-construction processes were characterized by dynamic, non-linear trajectories where students' goals evolved organically through collaborative dialogue, challenging traditional sequential models of music education. These processes required both students and teacher to embrace uncertainty and accept that neither the phases nor outcomes could be fully predetermined, necessitating collective tolerance for the inherent unpredictability that characterizes emergent learning (Littleton et al., 2012; Viilo et al., 2018; Härkki et al., 2023).

Students exercised agency through multiple interconnected dimensions: they initiated repertoire choices based on meaningful social purposes (such as preparing music for family celebrations), further seeking participation and performance opportunities across various contexts, balancing individual skill development with collaborative musical engagement. The findings demonstrate that advancing individual instrumental competence facilitates and enriches meaningful collaborative musical engagement, underscoring the unique characteristics of agency in instrumental music education where personal technical development serves as the foundation for collective artistic expression. Importantly, allowing students to pursue self-initiated projects rather than proceeding through pre-structured, simplified repertoire exceeded expectations about their abilities, demonstrating how prescribed learning pathways may underestimate children's capacities and constrain co-constructive possibilities. The teacher's role evolved beyond traditional instruction to encompass facilitating

collaborative engagement, scaffolding collective decision-making processes, and providing both material and non-material resources, including encouragement, trust, and opportunities for shared governance. This required maintaining a delicate balance between offering structural support and remaining responsive to emergent student-led directions, often necessitating the adaptive orchestration of multiple classroom dynamics simultaneously. Critically, the teacher's role included providing trust in students' abilities to overcome obstacles in their self-initiated projects, recognizing that student-led work did not diminish their need for support but rather highlighted different forms of pedagogical engagement. Central to this supportive role was the teacher's ongoing attention to identifying and understanding what mattered to individual students – their personal interests, social connections, and meaningful purposes – which informed classroom decisions and enabled authentic responsiveness to student-initiated directions (Edwards, 2017).

Research Question 2: What institutional dynamics and democratic possibilities emerge in such co-constructed policy processes?

The investigation demonstrates that co-constructed policy processes generate rich multi-voiced dynamics characterized by the intersection of diverse student perspectives, collaborative negotiation processes, and the emergence of genuine power-sharing between teacher and students. These democratic possibilities, manifested through students' participation in shaping educational content and approaches, move beyond token consultation toward substantive involvement in decision-making. The study revealed significant contingencies that affect student participation. Students' access to participation opportunities varied considerably across both music schools and comprehensive schools. The findings underscore that equal participation possibilities are not automatically realized but require deliberate institutional commitment to equitable access and the recognition of children's competence as educational stakeholders. This requires an acknowledgement that children do not automatically assume agentic positions within educational relationships but require explicit recognition, encouragement, and legitimization of their participatory rights.

The study demonstrates that meaningful student involvement creates opportunities for multiple perspectives to shape educational practice, moving beyond traditional top-down policy formulation approaches. Students' voices emerged as distinct from institutional assumptions – for instance, while music education scholars have advocated for reducing the focus on performance, participating students expressed a desire for more performance opportunities, revealing a significant disconnect between scholarly critique and student

aspirations. This divergence highlights a critical democratic tension: decisions made on behalf of children, even when well-intentioned, may not align with participants' own experiences and values. Such misalignments underscore the necessity of creating systematic channels through which children's perspectives can inform policy development, rather than relying on adult assumptions about children's needs and interests. Moreover, ensuring meaningful participation requires employing diverse methods of consultation at different stages of policy development, while recognizing that direct participation in decision-making processes remains an essential element in realizing authentic student voice.

The institutional dynamics observed in this study further revealed how democratic possibilities are constrained or enabled by broader structural factors. Critically, advancing participatory governance requires not only establishing consultation mechanisms but also identifying when and how institutional structures themselves impede participation. The study illuminated how linear learning models and prescribed curricula may inadvertently constrain democratic participation by positioning students as incompetent subjects requiring predetermined pathways, thereby limiting opportunities for students to engage with learning decisions in the here and now based on what holds meaning for them in the present. This study's findings suggest that advancing participatory governance requires interrogating the dominant frames through which children and their musical development are understood – frames that may inadvertently delimit what counts as legitimate musical engagement and who counts as a credible educational stakeholder. Recognition of children's competence must extend beyond acknowledging individual achievements within existing frameworks to encompass validation of their collective capacity to contribute to the very definition of what music making and music education should be and become.

Through analysing students' experiences, it became evident that children's limited awareness of available opportunities within music schools constitutes a significant barrier to meaningful participation, demonstrating that access to information constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for informed decision-making and self-determination. Moreover, the findings illuminated how children's capacity to imagine possibilities and articulate preferences is shaped by their prior experiences and exposure to diverse musical practices, suggesting that expanding children's participatory capabilities requires not only creating decision-making opportunities but actively broadening their horizons through sustained engagement with varied musical contexts.

The co-constructed processes further revealed the temporal dimensions of democratic participation. Students' agentic orientations developed through accumulating experiences of success, encouragement, and recognition, indicating

that democratic possibilities are not static but emerge and evolve through ongoing relational processes. This temporal aspect highlights how past experiences of having agency supported – or constrained – shape students' future willingness and capacity to participate in governance processes. The study thus demonstrates that participatory governance in music education requires sustained institutional commitment over time, rather than isolated interventions or one-time consultations.

Research Question 3: How does the co-construction of music school practices with students contribute to broader understandings of participatory governance and inclusion in music education?

The co-construction of music school practices with students contributes to broader understandings of participatory governance in several important ways.

Firstly, the findings necessitate moving beyond individualistic conceptions of agency toward ecological understandings that recognize student agency as emerging through dynamic interplay between internal orientations and external possibilities within an interconnected institutional ecosystem. This ecological perspective reveals that student agency can be understood not as an individual capacity that children either possess or lack, but rather as an achievement that becomes possible – or constrained – within specific institutional, relational, and material configurations. In this study I examined these external possibilities through analysing how students' agentic opportunities were shaped by institutional structures, relational networks, material resources, and the prevailing conceptualizations of musical learning embedded within the music school ecosystem. Understanding agency as an ecological achievement shifts analytical attention from assessing individual students' capabilities to examining the conditions within the music education ecosystem that enable or constrain agentic action. This reorientation has profound implications for participatory governance: it suggests that promoting inclusion requires transforming the structural, relational, and discursive conditions within music schools, rather than focusing solely on developing individual students' skills or orientations. The institutional ecosystem encompasses the interconnected network of formal institutions (music schools, comprehensive schools, higher music education), actors at multiple levels (families, teachers, administrators), material and non-material resources (instruments, facilities, information, recognition), regulatory frameworks (curricula, policies), and governing bodies (National Agency for Education, Ministry of Education and Culture) that collectively shape student agency. Students occupy a distinctive position within this ecosystem: their agency both emerges from and contributes to shaping the ecosystem's dynamics, making them

participants whose actions shape the educational practices and possibilities. Agency emerges not from isolated contexts but through relationships across this ecosystem. This ecosystem is both historically constituted – shaped by past relationships and institutionalized practices – and continually evolving through ongoing interactions among its elements, where agency emerges through dynamic relationships rather than as an isolated individual capacity.

Secondly, authentic participatory governance must address both representation (ensuring student voices are heard and acted upon through meaningful opportunities for student agency) and recognition (validating children's competence and perspectives), while simultaneously attending to the relational, contextual, and socially embedded nature of children's musical engagement. The study suggests that representation alone – providing formal channels for student voice – proves insufficient if institutional actors fail to recognize children as competent participants whose perspectives merit genuine consideration in decision-making processes. Moreover, recognition requires active responsiveness: institutions must engage substantively with students' initiatives rather than merely acknowledging them and must actively foster the social relationships and peer networks that enable collective musical engagement and support students' continued participation.

Thirdly, the study establishes that creating conditions for meaningful student participation requires addressing structural vulnerabilities that impede equitable engagement across all levels of educational provision. This includes ensuring transparency, consistent access to information, and systematic availability of opportunities – principles that align with core tenets of open government. The research advances understanding by illustrating that participatory governance must address not only policy design but also implementation, as the policy-practice gap manifests in the exclusion of children's voices from both deliberative policy processes and the actual enactment of educational opportunities.

Fourthly, the co-construction processes revealed the necessity of rethinking prevailing conceptualizations of musical learning and development that underpin institutional practices. The study's findings challenge linear, stage-based models of musical development that position children as moving from incompetence toward adult-defined standards of competence. The empirical findings demonstrated that students' self-initiated projects, when taken seriously rather than redirected toward simplified, staged repertoire, exceeded adult expectations about children's capabilities. This suggests that prescribed learning pathways may reflect institutionalized assumptions rather than genuine developmental necessities, potentially underestimating children's capacities while imposing rigidity through predetermined "next steps" that portray learning as one-way movement toward competence. Such models, while appearing neutral or

grounded in pedagogical necessity, function as normative frameworks that delimit legitimate forms of musical engagement and constrain children's agentic possibilities by prescribing predetermined pathways.

Post-developmental approaches informed by the practices observed in student-initiated projects suggest viewing music education as emergent, contextual, and co-constructed rather than as the delivery of pre-formed content along fixed trajectories. This perspective recognizes children's capacity to live their musical lives in the present – engaging with what holds immediate meaning within valued relationships – not as arbitrariness or inability to sustain engagement, but as reflecting the inseparability of musical learning from life outside the classroom (Biesta, 2021; Tuovila, 2003). Understanding music-making as a way of life highlights how skills and disciplinary knowledge become meaningful when embedded within valued relationships and co-constructed purposes. This reorientation carries profound implications for participatory governance, as it positions students not as recipients of predetermined curricula but as co-creators of educational meaning and practice. Realizing this vision requires critical examination of how music schools' historical relationships with vocational education institutions have shaped normative expectations for student progression, potentially privileging certain forms of musicianship while marginalizing others. Advancing participatory governance thus requires interrogating these institutionalized assumptions and creating space for diverse conceptions of musical value and development to emerge through dialogue with students themselves.

Finally, the study illuminates how participatory governance in music school education operates within a broader institutional ecosystem where students' agentic possibilities are shaped by multiple interconnected contexts. The findings demonstrated how music-focused classes in comprehensive schools, instrumental lessons in music schools, and family environments collectively constituted relational infrastructures that enabled student agency. The complementary resources provided by comprehensive schools and music schools – social networks of peer musicians, opportunities for ensemble participation, individual skill development –functioned together to expand students' agentic possibilities in ways that neither institution could achieve alone. This insight suggests that participatory governance frameworks must account for these ecosystem dynamics, attending to the ways in which policies and practices across multiple institutional contexts collectively shape children's agency. Moreover, it highlights the value of institutional arrangements, such as music-focused classes, that deliberately foster peer networks and shared musical contexts, thereby providing the social and emotional resources that enable sustained engagement and collective action.

9.2. Implications for Music Education Practice

9.2.1. From Individual to Relational Approaches

This investigation's findings indicate a necessity to understand children both as individuals and as members of extended social circles, fundamentally challenging educational frameworks that position students primarily as isolated learners pursuing individual skill acquisition. The analysis extended to examining how children are recognized within educational systems (Fraser, 2008), particularly through individualizing discourses and policies that produce learner subjectivities characterized by self-regulation and self-improvement, subsequently shaping children's lived experiences in educational contexts (see also Bradbury, 2019). In contrast to these dominant framings, this study challenges individualistic views of children as inherently self-interested, egocentric subjects (Klemenčič, 2021), and demonstrates that children's musical motives can also include actively seeking a connection and contribution to community life.

The research findings indicated that students' musical learning was directed by social purposes, transcending concerns beyond purely musical, individualistic, and technical concerns. Music-making emerged as a relational practice: a way of participating in and nurturing meaningful social connections. Students' personal development was deeply interconnected with their relational contexts, including peers, family, and broader social networks. Recognizing children as embedded within their social networks acknowledges that the reasons for participating in hobby activities are often fundamentally social (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017a; Myllyniemi & Berg, 2013), with activities being initiated, sustained, and discontinued through peer influence and encouragement (Berg, 2015; Harinen, 2005; Lehmuskallio, 2011; Merimaa, 2015). Consequently, peer relationships significantly shape both the inclusivity and exclusivity of educational services (Harinen, 2005; Lehmuskallio, 2011).

While desire is often presented pejoratively, as excessive and in need of interruption (e.g., Biesta, 2006a, 2019b), the findings suggest adopting an alternative conceptualization of desire (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that enables the identification of students' initiatives within broader, relational contexts as part of assemblages of relations (Olsson, 2009). This understanding is vital for considering what characterizes desire, particularly in artistic experimentation and expression. Such a reframing of desire calls for examining prevailing conceptualizations of children within educational frameworks, underscoring the necessity of investigating whether assumptions regarding individuals as inherently self-interested, rational actors pursuing the maximization of personal

gain constitute manifestations of neoliberal discourse (Hastings, 2019) rather than empirically grounded phenomena.

Consequently, these findings necessitate a fundamental reorientation toward relational approaches in music education practice. Building on this understanding of children's relational needs and social embeddedness, music education practice must expand beyond a narrow focus on individual skill development to acknowledge the broader meanings that children ascribe to music-making and actively develop opportunities for social participation. The investigation demonstrates that engaging in co-constructive processes with students not only facilitates a broader understanding of arts' significance but also restores art's meaning-making capacity in relation to fundamental questions of human and social existence.

The contribution of this work lies in exploring the meanings that children ascribe to music, expanding focus toward music education research from the child perspective (Karlsson, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2020), thus distinguishing it from previous studies that have prioritized individual-focused learning enhancement. The literature mapping (Chapter 3) revealed an extensive focus on learning and skill development, aligning with previous scholarship that has also identified this emphasis within the field (e.g., Custodero, 2024). In contrast, adopting a child's perspective entailed extending beyond supporting students' individual learning to encompass broader meanings attributed to students' music-making and their initiatives in relation to the wider community (Edwards, 2017).

Importantly, this shift toward relational approaches did not diminish the need for attention to the development of individual skills and knowledge. As the findings demonstrate, the development of individual skills and the maintenance of students' sense of competence (see also Hasu, 2017; Tikka, 2017) remained crucial for students' agency and served as gateways to collaborative music making and participation in school projects. The student projects further demonstrated this balance, with participants expressing both a desire to assume meaningful and responsible roles that challenged their abilities – rather than engaging in what they perceived as trivial tasks such as just snapping fingers – and a concurrent need for advancing their musical skills to enable more substantive contributions to collective endeavours. This distinctive nature of instrumental music-making draws attention to supporting students' sense of competence and self-efficacy, including providing learning opportunities, constructive feedback, and encouragement that reinforce students' belief in their capabilities.

The implications for practice include designing learning environments that support both individual growth and collaborative engagement, recognizing that personal musicianship development enables meaningful participation in collective musical contexts. This requires moving beyond either/or thinking

toward approaches that intentionally cultivate both dimensions as mutually reinforcing aspects of musical learning. This study posits that signals of diminishing arts education participation (Hanifi & Huomo, 2020; Lähteenmaa, 2021) are potentially attributable to inadequate institutional responses to social dimensions of inclusion within accessibility considerations.

Moving toward a commons framework, rather than addressing accessibility through individualistic frameworks of "individualization" and "personalization" (e.g., Kaikkonen et al., 2025), the research calls for recognizing arts and arts education as a social practice of commoning, a shift from a focus on individualistic pursuits to a more collaborative and community-oriented approach to creating and sustaining cultural practices and resources. This involves reconceptualizing arts education as commons – shared resources governed through collective institutional arrangements – which fundamentally reframes the understanding of cultural production and transmission (Bertacchini et al., 2012; Ostrom, 1990). When conceptualized as commons, education functions as goods and resources utilized and managed through egalitarian, participatory approaches (Cappello et al., 2024) and a shared endeavor and collective responsibility (Locatelli, 2019), thereby challenging both neoliberal and top-down state power structures (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020).

The practical implications of this commons framework position artistic practices within educational settings not as commodities to be consumed but as shared resources requiring collective oversight. In contexts such as the one examined in this study, such collective governance requires recognizing that co-construction constitutes an essential and inalienable component of public service delivery, inherent to all public services, as services are always co-produced (Osborne et al., 2018). Given that co-construction is not novel to previous practice – that public services cannot be delivered without stakeholder co-construction – the critical consideration becomes how to ensure meaningful participation structures that enable rather than constrain children's agency – or, more provocatively, whether exiting rather than utilizing their voice would provide children with greater agency within these collaborative frameworks. This understanding further acknowledges that the practice of making and managing a collective good, such as the arts in society, remains an ongoing collective endeavour: the commons is not a static reality, but something that is constantly evolving. For the continuity of artistic activity, these questions about children's participation hold significant importance.

9.2.2. Children's Voices in Educational Decision-Making

The meaningful incorporation of children's voices in music education requires transcending tokenistic consultation practices to establish genuine power-sharing arrangements and collaborative partnerships (Brooker, 2011; Hart, 1992, 2008). This investigation distinguishes between consultative and collaborative participation (Lansdown, 2018; Van Bijleveld et al., 2020), rejecting approaches that regard the child's "voice" as something to be extracted by adults. Rather than adopting essentialist assumptions regarding "children" as a homogeneous social group possessing collective interests and unified identity, this study recognizes the heterogeneity of children's perspectives and experiences within educational contexts, the multiplicity of their identifications, and the tensions within their various affiliations (Fraser, 2001).

Building on established research on child participation, this study has acknowledged that the formation of children's and adults' viewpoints is influenced by dynamic interactions between participants within their respective contexts (Skauge et al., 2021). This dialogical reciprocity proves difficult to achieve through survey methods alone (Olsen, 2024). If an open exchange of views is considered central to the understanding of democracy (Cohen, 1997), where decisions are accountable and open to scrutiny, discussion and debate, the critical question extends beyond whether children are allowed to influence crucial and important actions to encompass who decides what is considered a crucial and important action (Karlsson, 2020). This study thus aligns with views that suggest that collaborative participation grounded in actual activities can enhance the sharing of decision-making power in situ (Shier, 2022), providing children opportunities to influence the course and outcomes of activities in which they participate directly (Weckström et al., 2021). Such approaches recognize the potential contestability of existing arrangements (Mouffe, 2013).

Building on this understanding of dialogical processes, this study established that student involvement in discussions regarding their interests and preferences did not constitute a pursuit of self-centred freedom (Biesta, 2019a; Säfström & Biesta, 2023), but rather facilitated students' awareness of possibilities and their capacity to contribute to decisions. Co-construction processes were not conceptualized through market transaction frameworks emphasizing voice and choice, where quality consists of providing customers with their preferences (Biesta, 2019a). From a legal perspective, children's right to participate in decisions affecting them does not mean the same as children's right to decide on their own affairs (Pajulammi, 2014). The inclusion argument does not seek to maximise children's decision-making power, but to recognise them as unique individuals and valuable contributors to society (p. 454).

Importantly, this approach also recognizes that children are not guided to create something conceived of as their own "children's culture" in isolation from the adult world, but rather to work together with adults in shared cultural construction. This perspective contrasts with approaches that position children's musical practices as isolated from broader cultural spheres instead exploring how collaborative processes can facilitate living a common world (Biesta, 2019a). Based upon this study's findings, the research further suggests that adopting co-constructed educational approaches should not amplify arbitrariness in students' agentic possibilities. Such limitations might include allowing personal skill development to be governed entirely by collective negotiation processes' arbitrary results, where students' development opportunities become contingent solely upon particular group engagements without proactive teacher and institutional involvement to ensure that participatory opportunities enhance students' agentic possibilities.

In practice, this institutional responsibility translated into recognizing my responsibility as a teacher to ensure that, despite organizing instrumental studies within peer-based group settings, students' individual agentic possibilities required deliberate attention. This included safeguarding their capacity to develop personal instrumental proficiencies essential for meaningful participation in collaborative musical practices. The findings indicate that without deliberate institutional safeguards, co-constructive approaches risk creating educational experiences that privilege group dynamics over individual growth, potentially disadvantaging students whose learning needs diverge from collective preferences or whose voices may be marginalized within group processes.

While this study has established its interactive foundation upon co-construction involving peer group negotiation, the findings thus indicate that educational institutions bear a responsibility for ensuring that educational spaces do not become antagonistic spaces (Mouffe, 2005) where students compete for arbitrarily distributed opportunities. Institutions committed to democratic values must acknowledge their responsibility for ensuring that all students possess participation and growth possibilities, irrespective of the voice and agency they may achieve within particular settings. The approach to maintaining constructive rather than destructive conflict is informed by crucial distinctions between dissociative and associative agonistic approaches (Koutsouris et al., 2021). While dissociative agonism emphasizes resistance to reconciliation and maintains rigid adversarial divisions ("us versus them"), associative agonism acknowledges coalition-building possibilities and focuses on commonalities rather than adversarial distinctions. This study therefore posits that, while acknowledging the inevitability of conflict and rejecting prospects for purely rational consensus-building, associative agonistic principles provide enhanced educational

possibilities by the cultivation of an enabling pluralistic environment while maintaining solidarity.

In this study, student involvement in decision-making processes, including instances of disagreement and compromise, was considered valuable for developing an understanding of process complexity and recognizing mutual interdependence through the indirect consequences of others' actions. Promoting student agency involved facilitating collective group decisions while cultivating an awareness of the impact of individual choices on joint projects and outcomes. As demonstrated through this study's student projects, collaborative work also presented interpersonal challenges. Some participants expressed the need for teacher intervention to ensure equitable voice distribution, as certain group members were perceived as more dominant. The pedagogical approach differs from informal pedagogy frameworks, such as those advocated by Green (2002, 2008), where teacher presence is deliberately minimized. Rather than reducing teacher involvement, this study positioned the educator as an active participant essential for supporting democratic participation and ensuring that collaborative processes served all participants equitably, highlighting the continued importance of pedagogical guidance within co-constructed learning environments.

The findings align with prior research indicating that children's participatory competencies do not emerge automatically but require systematic cultivation through sustained practical experience (Hart, 1992) and sufficient time and space (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014). Creating meaningful opportunities for student voice necessitates recognizing that children may not readily assume the right to participate or experience themselves as agentic subjects, particularly given power imbalances in educational contexts that can inhibit their willingness to voice opinions and participate in decision-making (Kiilakoski & Gretschesl, 2012). In this study, creating space for children to express views and engage in imaginative rehearsal of competing courses of action (Dewey, 1922) represented an educational imperative grounded in understanding education as fundamentally a process of communication (Biesta & Lawy, 2006). The practical implications include developing collaborative meaning-making as a genuine educational goal rather than viewing discussion as time-consuming or tangential to learning objectives. Such approaches require fostering interaction on the premise of equality (Biesta, 2017a; Rancière, 1991, 1999), grounded in the assumption that students can speak (Rancière, 1991) – that they do not “lack capacity for speech, nor that they are producing noise” (Biesta, 2010a, p. 540).

The study's findings establish that educators occupy critical mediating roles in both affirming students' initiatives and supporting the development of their perceived competence. This involves more than providing explicit permission for participation; it requires actively cultivating environments where students'

contributions are not only acknowledged but are built upon, following principles of creative collaboration that affirm student ideas (Sawyer, 2006). Central to supporting authentic student voice is educators' sustained attention to identifying and understanding students' motivational orientations – “what matters” to them (Edwards, 2017, p. 4) – enabling genuine responsiveness to student-initiated directions while avoiding predetermined assumptions about children's interests or capabilities.

These educator practices require support through broader institutional reorientation. The evidence suggests that meaningful student involvement requires addressing both structural vulnerabilities that impede participation and developing institutional commitments to recognizing children's competence as educational stakeholders. This includes ensuring transparency, consistent access to information, and a systematic availability of opportunities rather than allowing student possibilities to depend upon individual teachers' preferences or resources.

9.2.3. Addressing the Experience Gap in Cultural Participation

As public administration has searched for ways to increase arts education accessibility, the field has historically prioritized addressing the physical accessibility of cultural services (Ruusuvirta et al., 2020). However, critical assessments of these policies reveal that despite decades of Finnish cultural policy aimed at ensuring equal economic, social, and regional access to cultural services, overall participation levels have not increased (Pirnes, 2021). This critique establishes that the complex causes of non-participation remain insufficiently identified because organizational policies and cultural structures do not always reach the experiential meanings that people attach to contemporary culture, nor do they address their longing for communally meaningful experiences (see also Tiihonen, 2021). An empirical investigation with adult participants examining the determinants of arts non-participation revealed that increased engagement could not be facilitated merely through the elimination of structural barriers such as cost, transportation, or information accessibility; rather, the most significant factor influencing non-participants' involvement was receiving personal invitations from peers (Pirnes, 2021). Similar patterns have also been observed among children and young people, with reports indicating that barriers to cultural participation encompass social and relational dimensions (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

This study posits that children's perspectives should be recognized as pivotal components within broader Basic Arts Education discourse, because their viewpoints illuminate not only the various meanings that arts participation can have in their lives, but also the potential challenges and barriers to participation

encountered in daily life, many of which children cannot influence independently. Such attempts to understand children's experiences would, in the view of this study's findings, represent a way of bridging what has been critically noted as an "experience gap" – an experiential divide between cultural participants and service providers (Pirnes, 2021). Regarding children's arts participation, this would necessitate examining which factors beyond their individual control influence participation difficulties. Contemporary educational policy exemplifies such systemic barriers through recent changes that have intensified academic pressures in upper secondary education, consequently impacting young people's leisure activities and rendering 15–19-year-olds currently less culturally active than other age groups (Tarvainen et al., 2022). Students increasingly report discontinuing music studies due to excessive academic workload (Kanerva et al., 2023). Given the changes in tertiary entrance examination procedures, which have increased the pressure on students to secure a study place, the possibilities for students to continue their music studies during compulsory schooling have changed. Although students may seek leisure activities to counterbalance academic demands, the structured and purposeful nature of music education may prove incompatible with such stress-relief objectives (Kanerva et al., 2023). The policy implications extend to examining funding mechanisms and accountability measures that currently reinforce progression-focused approaches. The study suggests that performance-based funding tied to completion rates, while intended to enhance accessibility, may inadvertently maintain focus on standardized outcomes rather than supporting diverse pathways that honour student interests.

Sustainable democratic participation in arts education requires systemic transformations that address both institutional structures and cultural assumptions related to children's capabilities, rights, and developmental potentials, encompassing governance mechanisms capable of accommodating both professional preparation and democratic participation as complementary educational objectives. In view of this study's findings, current approaches to addressing the disparities in arts education remain limited by their focus on technical solutions – improving information access, reducing costs, or expanding geographic reach – while failing to address the experiential and relational dimensions that the analysis reveals are fundamental to meaningful cultural participation. Such approaches also lack systematic mechanisms for incorporating children's perspectives into policy development, perpetuating the very experience gap they aim to address. These systemic pressures are particularly significant for arts participation, where broader statistical trends show decline in cultural participation among young people (Hanifi & Huomo, 2020; Statistics of Finland, 2019). The persistent underrepresentation of students from immigrant and lower socioeconomic backgrounds in music-focused classes and Basic Arts Education

exemplifies deeper structural barriers (Vismanen & Räisänen, 2017). In Helsinki, foreign-language students constitute merely 2-15% of Basic Arts Education participants despite representing an anticipated one-fifth to one-third of the child population by 2035 (Vismanen et al., 2016; Ahtiainen et al., 2020). Comparable disparities are documented in Vantaa and Espoo (Vismanen & Räisänen, 2017; Partanen et al., 2022). Rather than allowing arts education to become accessible primarily to those with the knowledge, resources, or networks to seek it out, public authorities have been urged to implement proactive measures to disrupt cycles of exclusion (Ilmola-Sheppard et al., 2021).

These challenges reflect broader gaps in monitoring and assessment systems. Such gaps are evident in how children's participation in cultural activities reveals administrative contingencies in safeguarding opportunities: only half of municipalities report on children and young people's participation in Basic Arts Education, despite the increased use of cultural legislation in decision-making (Saukko et al., 2021). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) has recommended that Finland strengthen child rights impact assessment in legislation and integrate child rights-based approaches into state budgeting, including tracking systems to assess how public investments serve children's best interests. The Committee expressed concerns that Finnish municipal autonomy can lead to inadequate resource allocation and regional disparities, while Finland's lack of comprehensive national monitoring systems weakens oversight of children's rights fulfilment.

9.3. Policy Implications

9.3.1 Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap in Music School Education: Possibilities and Points of Resistance

This study's analysis revealed substantial discontinuities between policy rhetoric advocating student participation and the practical co-construction and implementation of music school policy. While Finnish education policy is regarded as the outcome of collaboration between various stakeholders (Sahlberg, 2018; Vitikka et al., 2016), children themselves are rarely recognized as active collaborators in educational decision-making processes, despite policy rhetoric to the contrary and the legal obligations for public authorities. Drawing on an understanding of democracy as a process of experimentation in children's everyday activities (Dewey, 1916/1997) that constitutes an existential and ongoing endeavour rather than a developmental achievement (Biesta, 2006a,

2013, 2019a), the study responded to the recognition that this idea was not pervasive in Finnish education's operational culture (Rautiainen, 2022), which more often relied on representative formal structures (Ministry of Justice, 2020). While Finnish educational policy has taken gradual steps since the beginning of the 21st century to strengthen relationships between democracy and public schooling (Rautiainen, 2022), empirical studies do not support arguments that Finnish public schooling operates as an explicitly democratic basis (Männistö, 2020; Nikkola et al., 2013; Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017). National data on students' participation experiences demonstrates concerning patterns: according to the 2021 School Health Survey of students in grades 8-9 of Basic Education, only 11% of Finnish students in years 8-9 believed they had adequate influence over school affairs (Helenius et al., 2022), reflecting broader concerns about eroding participation and declining voter turnout threatening democratic functionality (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

In contrast to Basic Education, where structures have been established to support student participation, this study's analysis revealed that these mechanisms are less prevalent in arts education. For example, while student councils became mandatory in Basic Education in 2014 and children's councils currently exist at various governmental levels, music schools lack legally mandated student representation. This investigation sought to understand the underlying causes of this limited incorporation of student voice. The findings suggest that a contributing factor may be that the discourse surrounding participation tends to focus on debating whether students should participate or assessing potential benefits rather than recognizing participation as a fundamental right. This investigation demonstrates that children's right to participate extends beyond instrumental benefits and constitutes a legally binding obligation for public institutions (Lundy, 2007). This legal imperative thus requires moving beyond justifications of participation based solely on potential outcomes toward the recognition of participation as a fundamental right that belongs to children regardless of anticipated benefits.

The study identified several structural barriers that impede effective policy-practice integration. In this study, students' access to participation opportunities varied markedly across institutions, shaped by individual teacher orientations and institutional practices rather than systematic policy implementation. Many participating students were unaware of available opportunities within their own music schools, highlighting gaps between policy intentions and practical accessibility. The fundamental prerequisite for participation is knowledge that one has the right to participate. This legal perspective underscores why the UNCRC requires ratifying countries to disseminate information about the Convention to both children and adults working with children, including in teacher training

(Ministry of Justice, 2022). These findings indicate the necessity of developing comprehensive approaches to information sharing and opportunity access that do not depend upon individual teachers' knowledge or initiative. The study suggests that meaningful policy implementation involves systematic institutional commitment to transparency and equity rather than ad hoc approaches that create arbitrary variations in student opportunities.

The study demonstrates that meaningful student involvement creates opportunities for multiple perspectives to shape educational practice, moving beyond traditional top-down policy formulation. Students' voices emerged as distinct from institutional assumptions – for instance, while music education scholars have advocated reducing performance focus, participating students expressed desires for more performance opportunities, revealing significant disconnects between scholarly critique and student aspirations. The implications extend to recognizing that democratic participation must occur as part of children's everyday activities rather than through separate, formal consultation processes. If student councils were to be established in music schools to support children's representation, addressing the challenges identified in other contexts would be beneficial (Alanko, 2010; Alderson, 2000; OECD, 2024b). This approach is informed by the recognition that children are sensitive to situations where participation is emphasized yet authorities are reluctant to share power or consultations are conducted in a tokenistic manner. As children's initiatives cannot always be responded to, it is important to inform them of the reasons why this is so, to foster their awareness of the complexities inherent in decision-making. Consultation without traceable impact on decisions proves counterproductive (Alderson, 2000). Overall, the analysis suggests that addressing these policy-practice gaps involves acknowledging that public policy deliberations must be conducted with rather than for children, necessitating development of participation opportunities beyond representative and retrospective forums. This approach reflects an understanding that children's right to express their views is primarily realized through everyday social practices rather than formal consultation mechanisms (Pajulammi, 2014).

9.3.2. Democratic Ideals and Meritocratic Selection: Structural Tensions in Music School Governance

The findings of this study reveal that children's limited participation in music school decision-making reflects deeper structural tensions between democratic ideals and the governance structures in Finnish arts education, particularly regarding meritocratic selection processes conflicting with principles of equal participation. While the Finnish education system is often viewed as opposed to

concepts such as student streaming or early tracking (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017), music schools have operated as an exception through meritocratic selection policies that allocated resources based on individual ability and progress streaming (Board of Schools, 1970). The examination of music school policy demonstrated official policy has historically stipulated that continuation in studies was granted only to those successfully completing previous courses. Critical scholarship on meritocracy illuminates why such structures pose significant challenges to achieving democratic participation by distancing students from achieving equal footing through justifications to exclude those not meeting predetermined criteria and emphasizing essentialized notions of intellect and aptitude (Littler, 2018). Central to understanding children's positions and participation is how these two governance approaches operate under fundamentally contrasting principles: while meritocracy prioritizes individual achievement and talent as the basis for resource allocation (governance by merit), democracy emphasizes equal participation regardless of individual capabilities. This tension becomes particularly problematic when examining how meritocratic systems operate in practice.

While competence-based systems may appear to offer motivational benefits through performance incentives, assumptions of equal opportunity fundamentally disregard differential social positioning and the unequal distribution of material and non-material resources, resulting in opportunities for advancement remaining variably accessible and substantively unequal. Research suggests that applying merit-based allocation to children's education perpetuates differential treatment that maintains and reproduces inequalities (Batrach et al., 2019). This critique is particularly relevant to music education, where research has raised concerns about entrance examinations for music-emphasized classes: many tests measuring student aptitude also measure different ways that families mobilize and transform capital, especially economic and cultural capital (Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015; Pasu et al., 2023). This scholarship identifies a fundamental contradiction: the societal vision and ideal of meritocracy providing social mobility falls short because societies fail to live up to meritocratic ideals – meritocracy is not meritocratic enough, failing to deliver equal opportunity because individuals do not start with the same advantages (Sandel, 2020).

Although examining the historical rationale of meritocratic policy in the music school system exceeds the scope of this investigation, the persistence of the policy may be attributable to the music schools' dual mandate of providing pre-professional studies alongside accessible education (see also Pirnes & Tiihonen, 2010). This study identified how music schools function within an institutional ecosystem characterized by structural interdependencies with higher education institutions and policy frameworks that reinforce selective practices.

Specifically, the analysis demonstrates that alignment with higher education requirements has influenced both classroom expectations and assessment through curricular design. This structural embeddedness consequently shapes local deliberation and decision-making, as explicitly acknowledged in the policy framework of the national core curriculum, which calls upon music schools to balance in their operations individual student needs, artistic traditions, local cultural heritage, international developments in the art form, higher education requirements, and institutional characteristics (FNAE, 2017c). The findings suggest that collaborative governance within music school education cannot be understood in isolation from these broader systemic factors, which fundamentally shape possibilities for meaningful stakeholder participation. Despite attempts in the 1990s to decentralize the system to grant greater administrative power to music school leaders and municipal decision-makers, vocational and higher education institutions continue to function as co-determinants in defining music school education aims and learning pathways.

The findings suggest that students' aspirations vary considerably, and given the opportunity they might pursue diverse music-making paths, including interdisciplinary pursuits that could lead toward more exploratory directions rather than those specifically designed and aligned to conform with higher music education standards. However, by disrupting the linearity of pre-professional pathways (Väkevä et al., 2017), music schools could potentially compromise students' equal opportunities for higher education. This institutional logic raises questions about how entry criteria and mandatory repertoires serve to standardize conceptions of musicianship, thereby perpetuating particular models and concepts of artistic intellect through existing ideals and pedagogical templates (Biesta, 2019a). This standardization affects not only students pursuing music as a hobby but also those with professional goals, raising questions about whether they can retain genuine choice in their musical development or are instead guided along predetermined pathways, risking assigning teachers the role of bringing students into existing systems (Biesta, 2010b). While it may be possible to envision a music school education where students experience broad learning trajectories across musical genres, it becomes unrealistic to assume that such diverse pathways would allow students to develop the competences required for higher music education entry when those entrance divisions continue to be structured around distinct genre categories (e.g., “classical”, “popular”, and “folk music”). The cumulative effect is a structure where early choices – often made with limited information about long-term implications – create path dependencies that significantly constrain future possibilities. This constraint operates in practice through rigid pathway divisions: if a student initially selects, for example, a popular music or folk music track, their opportunities to engage with classical

music during their studies are significantly reduced, exemplifying how institutional structures can limit rather than expand educational opportunities despite rhetoric about accessibility and choice. These constraints highlight a fundamental contradiction in current music education policy: while institutions promote the values of accessibility and student choice, their structural arrangements systematically undermine these participatory ideals. The study reveals that meaningful transformation toward inclusionary practices requires a fundamental reconsideration of how educational decisions are made and who has genuine voice in determining institutional practices.

Addressing these inclusionary concerns, with their implications for the entire institutional music education ecosystem, raises significant challenges, as the future of the arts depends largely on the provision of arts professionals, artists, and arts educators. Within the context of instrumental music education, practical constraints also arise from the inherently sociomaterial characteristics of musical activity, whereby the professional pathways need to be designed with the acknowledgement that instrumental study requires dedicated practice, often from an early age, given the intellectual, artistic and physical aspects of learning musical instruments (Casas-Mas & López-Íñiguez, 2022). When the current 1998 legislation was being drafted, this distinctive nature of arts education was acknowledged: “In contrast to most other educational fields, admission to professional and tertiary arts education is typically preceded by supervised arts study or practice that has persisted from childhood” (Ministry of Education, 1989, p. 2). Due to an economic recession and limited state and municipal financial investment at the time, priority was given to children and young people (Porna, 2003). Although recent policy proposals for the demographic expansion of Basic Education in the Arts constitute progressive policy development, emerging in part from declining age cohorts and municipal out-migration (Aro et al., 2023; Luoma, 2020), they raise concerns about how to safeguard children's access to arts education amid circumstances where it continues to remain limited (Suominen, 2019). Additionally, questions arise about how this expansion addresses the situation of arts professionals, as it is reasonable to assume that extending arts education to adult populations will not increase the number of individuals seeking professional advancement in the arts. This reflects the reality that arts education serves different expectations across age groups, rooted in adult aspirations for children to preserve and develop cultural and artistic traditions. This issue stems from questions about generational continuity in arts participation and lived artistic experience. The experiential gap between those with and without childhood arts experiences represents a growing concern for arts education policy, especially if disparities in children's artistic participation continue to widen (e.g., Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017b). The significance of this concern is heightened by

the fact that early arts engagement assumes critical importance as childhood experiences exert enduring influences, with research demonstrating that prior musical involvement predicts lifelong participation, whereas lack of early exposure substantially impedes subsequent engagement (Laes & Creech, 2023).

While the preceding discussion has focused on structural constraints and professional pathways, this study contends that pursuing democratic music education and equal participation requires not only addressing these institutional issues but also moving beyond solutions such as musical genre diversification. This investigation has intentionally avoided overemphasizing genre discussions, recognizing how top-down assumptions about “children's musical tastes” often operate as unchallenged truths influencing pedagogical decisions without meaningful stakeholder input. While teachers might assume that diversifying musical styles, particularly popular music incorporation (Spruce, 2015), will increase student engagement, this research suggests that addressing children's inclusion involves complexities that transcend musical content. These views align with previous research that suggests that adopting certain musical genres does not automatically dismantle existing power hierarchies. For instance, the incorporation of popular music within conservatoire curricula while maintaining conventional hierarchical pedagogical approaches has been shown to prove inadequate (Lebler, 2008). Drawing upon Fraser (2008), this study has demonstrated that existing power hierarchies operate multidimensionally through the control of decisions, resources, and recognition. Addressing inclusionary concerns thus requires more than repertoire diversification, necessitating the abandonment of assumptions that particular genres inherently constitute democratic practice (Koskela, 2022).

This recognition of the limitations of content-based approaches highlights a broader tension in music education between democratic aspirations and hierarchical practice, leading to fundamental questions about how democratic ideals can genuinely be translated into educational practice. While music education scholarship has sought ways to build student-teacher relationships on foundations of equality – suggesting that creative music making and practices such as improvisation could be means of practicing democracy and resisting the symbolic violence of formality in instrumental teaching (e.g., Kanellopoulos, 2019, 2021) – this study questions whether specific music-making forms can inherently escape the “explicative order” (Rancière, 1991, p. 4) when formalized in classroom settings without genuine stakeholder representation. Although this study contends that these creative practices have the potential to provide alternatives to predetermined skill transmission (Kanellopoulos, 2007; Ferm Almqvist et al., 2017a, 2017b) and to broaden curricular frameworks and pedagogical approaches beyond performance practices and notational and

instrumental skill acquisition, the fundamental question remains whether any musical practice can transcend hierarchical structures without addressing the underlying power relations.

Drawing on Rancière's (2006) understanding of democracy, the fundamental issue lies not in creative music-making, or in improvisation practices themselves, but in the positioning that treats these practices as a method for democracy, risking becoming a new form of explication (Rancière, 1991) – telling students the “correct” way to understand the practices’ democratic potential, thereby reproducing the very expert-student hierarchy that they seek to challenge. This creates a significant paradox: the moment improvisation or creative music making become institutionalized teaching strategies, they potentially lose their radical character. Considering democracy as an an-archic principle of equality that cannot be achieved but must instead be continually acted upon suggests that any attempt to create a democratic curriculum, methodology, or educational program faces inherent contradictions. Informed by Rancière’s thinking, the pursuit of democratic music education cannot be achieved through institutional reforms alone, whether structural, curricular, or pedagogical. Rather than seeking solutions within existing frameworks – whether through genre diversification or creative pedagogies – democratic practice may emerge through moments of rupture when students demonstrate their equal capacity to participate in educational decisions without being taught how to do so according to predetermined models. If democracy cannot be systematized without losing its essential character, the focus must shift from creating democratic institutions to recognizing and supporting the unexpected moments when established educational hierarchies are genuinely disrupted and reconfigured through student agency that refuses assigned roles and expectations.

9.4. Theoretical and Methodological Reflections and Limitations of the Study

This practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) has been a long journey leading up to the reporting phase of the study findings, the outcome of which I could not have foreseen at the beginning of the process. I have sought what activity theorists call possibility knowledge (Engeström, 2007; Sannino & Engeström, 2017) of involving children and young people in music school education to bridge the policy-practice gap and investigate democratic possibilities in this educational context. This study drew upon cultural-historical activity theory to analyse music schools within their broader socio-political

context, forming an ecosystemic view of music school education to recognize the schools' institutional relationships and interdependencies. Within the broader framework of practice research, this study has used research strategies and methodological approaches from developmental work research (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Engeström, 2015) and, initially, also from case study research (Laine et al., 2007). In retrospect, the research process could be described as rhizomatic (Clarke & Parsons, 2013), in which the diffraction of different theoretical frameworks kept meanings in flux as well as the process itself continuing to open up lines of thought (Engeström, 2007; see also Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). As noted earlier, writing this report in a linear format makes the process appear more linear and static than it was.

Some of the characteristics of this study can be attributed to the research strategies of co-research (Kulmala et al., 2023), which within social science research has critically re-evaluated various aspects of research processes, such as how decisions about research are shared and how the focus of research is ultimately determined. Karlsson (2020) contends that when studying a child's perspective and social participation, children's perspectives should fundamentally influence the entire research trajectory from formulating research objectives and questions, to generating empirical material, selecting methodological approaches, conducting analysis, and drawing conclusions from the findings. In this study, one part of attempting to identify what was relevant to study from the children's point of view, and what was meaningful in each phenomenon (Karlsson, 2010), was the adoption of the framework of inclusion alongside the expansion of the initial student-centred learning focus (Chapter 6) towards understanding what mattered (Edwards, 2017) to students beyond mere skill and knowledge acquisition (Chapter 7). While this study acknowledged that researchers could never really experience what life is like for those who participate in the study (Karlsson, 2012), it sought to create methodological spaces wherein children's lived experiences and perspectives could meaningfully inform and reshape the investigative process itself.

Conducting research with children thus required an open-ended, iterative and evolving strategy rather than a fixed, linear research plan. The study concurred with the conclusions of Kati Honkanen and colleagues (2018), who suggest that in research with children no particular method can be considered universally functional, but rather the optimal methods depend on the children themselves, the interactions among them and the researcher, the phenomenon under investigation, the research context, and ultimately even the children's moods on the day of the study. Student-initiated changes included, for instance, the use of the cross-platform messaging service WhatsApp in the first phase of the intervention, which replaced my initial plans to use individual paper journals. Subsequent to the

preliminary intervention phase, the decision was made to discontinue student engagement in the review and reflection on the group lesson videos, which had been intended to facilitate the "mirroring" of material back to participants (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). One of the reasons for this was the recognition that, despite the implementation of "peer debriefing" and "member checks", techniques that are widely regarded as enhancing credibility within traditional qualitative methodologies (St. Pierre, 1997), I experienced that these approaches did not provide a way of closing the process, but rather continued to keep meanings in motion (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Reflecting the data back to the participants thus did not result in being able to produce a fixed, "finished" interpretation for the participants to recognise and verify, but rather opened up further lines of thought, with the process resonating with Derrida's (1976) assertion of meaning-making as an endless play of difference. In the second phase of the intervention, an attempt was made to engage more actively in the discussions with students in situations where they themselves raised certain issues for discussion. This approach enabled the discussions to extend beyond the designated interview times, thereby facilitating the clarification of the students' responses and comments during the project, whilst not necessarily seeking a way of closing the process.

9.4.1. Rationale for the Evolving Research Strategy: Challenges, Opportunities

Extending the initial case study approach (Laine et al., 2007) to developmental work research (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005; Engeström, 2015) emerged from an evolving research strategy that, drawing on cultural-historical activity theory, situated music school practices within wider socio-political contexts (Engeström, 2001a). This approach enabled a more nuanced understanding of how teacher-student interactions are structured by historically formed societal processes and institutional aims. By reviewing the music school governance system (Chapter 4), I identified collective meanings and motives within the music school activity's cultural and historical development, along with tensions and contradictions between elements of the activity system and networks of interacting systems. This led me to adopting an ecosystemic view of education (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Klemenčič, 2017) that recognises music schools' societal purposes within the institutional ecosystem (Klemenčič & Hoidn, 2020), while identifying tensions regarding their dual role in providing pre-professional studies alongside accessible music school education (Section 4.7).

Developmental work research, through its framework of cultural-historical activity theory, provided a contextualised view of human behaviour and agency,

dialectically linking individual and social structure (Engeström & Rückriem, 2005). Unlike participatory action research focusing on participation and concrete problem-solving, developmental work research pursues a historical-genetic examination of micro-events to transcend individualistic views of human action. The aim of this historical analysis was not to try to trace social practices back to a particular origin, but to examine how the choices, and potentially also certain self-evident truths of society and institutions, are multifaceted and fluctuating. Viewing activity systems as multivoiced formations characterized by multiple viewpoints, traditions, and interests, this approach recognized that multivoicedness multiplies in networks of interacting activity systems. The expansive cycle re-orchestrated these voices, with this investigation foregrounding children's voices specifically. While practitioners typically engage in organizational research through collaborative processes with researchers, this study engaged in developmental work directly with music school students. This represents a contribution to both activity theory applications in music education research (Hargreaves & Lamont, 2017), where the use of activity theory as an analytical tool in music education research has been somewhat limited (see, however, Burnard & Younker, 2008; Hargreaves & Lamont, 2017; Heikinheimo, 2009; Johansson, 2012; Kinsella & Fautley, 2016; Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2022; Thorpe, 2018; Welch & Ockelford, 2016), and formative interventions centring children's roles (Engeström et al., 2014, 2022; Tapola-Haapola & Ruutu, 2023).

Adopting developmental work research necessitated a contextual adaptation in order to accommodate this study's specific requirements. While adopting an approach of continuous cycles with iterative loops (Engeström, 2016) involving questioning existing practices and implementing new solutions, the aim was not consolidating findings into new stable organizational practices across entire music schools, which would have required whole-organization participation. The theoretical-historical analysis examined children's participation theories and childhood concepts (Chapter 2), while the object-historical analysis traced music school policy development and governance systems (Chapter 4). Both processes required significant delimitation for doctoral study purposes, representing acknowledged limitations. This study has intersected childhood studies, philosophy of education, political philosophy, policy studies, and organizational studies with socio-material theories, including cultural-historical activity theory. Following child researchers advocating interdisciplinary approaches to the holistic understanding of children's well-being (Lahikainen et al., 2008), this integration addressed professional groups' needs for comprehensive rather than fragmented research. The challenge involved generating polyphonic texture without superficiality, maintaining holistic perspective while resisting oversimplification. This required balancing detail and precision, avoiding both

overly broad focus lacking specificity and narrow focus losing complexity. The analytical approach adopted in this study thus reflected a commitment to developing a politics of representation that could make conscious shifts towards possibility (Sannino & Engeström, 2017), recognizing that socially impactful knowledge must be actionable – that is, knowledge that can be translated into transformative action in educational practice (Engeström, 2007).

9.4.2. Diffractive Methodology

This study employed a diffractive methodological approach (Barad, 2007, 2011) that involved reading through texts, artefacts, and material-discursive practices in an attempt to bring them into conversation with one another. Rather than seeking absolute, immutable truth, this inquiry adopted a post-foundational position understanding truth as a contingent product of particular, situated ways of understanding the world, rather than as something absolute, immutable, pre-existing in social relations and waiting to be discovered (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). Inquiry is therefore not a search for what is, the immutable truth, but instead is concerned with things in the making (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023, p. 4). By understanding inquiry as something that starts in the middle, these relational events cannot therefore be planned or willed into existence but are rather “a result of attunements and sensings of becoming with the world” (p.3).

This process involved reading the empirical material from the formative intervention not in the traditional way, as “evidence”, but rather as non-representational and transgressive (St. Pierre, 1997), intervening in a process that diffracts rather than forecloses thought, challenging the imperatives to produce coherent and familiar narratives. As previously mentioned, a diffractive reading of data through multiple theoretical insights attempts to move qualitative analysis away from habitual normative readings towards a diffractive reading that spreads thought and meaning in unpredictable and productive emergences (Mazzei, 2014). Thinking within this framework, which has a different ontology to describe the world – the world as unstable and becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) – allowed me to also attempt to disrupt the more conventional thinking behind qualitative research and the nature of qualitative data. This idea of post-qualitative research data lacks determinism and asks questions without a single definitive answer or endpoint and is seen as inherently unstable and always full of potential meanings and interpretations. Whereas representation limits experience to the world as it is known to individuals – a world that is “out there” and in need of representation – post-qualitative ways of approaching the process attempt to allow data to retain its multiplicity of potential interpretations, in other words, a world that is yet to come.

Presenting the study data in Chapters 6 and 7 by including my perspectives on the process as a practitioner-researcher also highlighted my voice as a teacher and my experiences of working with the students. Rather than treating thoughts, feelings, imaginings, and sensory experiences as threats to data integrity, I attempted to portray them transparently, letting go of the assumed researcher "behind the research" and instead trying to understand how the research was creating me as I was trying to create it (Nordstrom, 2018). In the process I realised that conducting fieldwork and "analysis" from a relational performative ontology did not necessarily mean doing research differently but rather acknowledging the ongoing ethical consequences of the researcher's agentic noticing in (re)making the world (Augustine, 2022). In my view these methodological concerns become particularly acute within research involving children, where the imperative emerges for approaches to child research that refrain from reductive simplifications or essentialising generalisations about children and childhood.

With such a diversity of theoretical framings, the question can perhaps be asked: What is the argument for bringing these perspectives together? In this study, experimenting with the generative potentials of inviting different, perhaps in some cases even opposing, theoretical framings, could perhaps be described as what Lather and St. Pierre (2013) conceptualize as a "refusal space", a space "to think within and against the weight of such a context" (p. 629). By diffracting (Barad, 2007, 2011; Mazzei, 2014) the different perspectives into the music school environment and music school education, the research has encouraged me to transit or bring about what Rosi Braidotti (2006) has called transposition, mobility between disciplines and discursive levels (p. 7). Concepts functioned not as representative or descriptive elements but as creative acts enabling movement beyond current experience towards new possibilities (Parr, 2010).

While this study has acknowledged that in contemporary qualitative research there is a growing acceptance of thoughtful theoretical plurality, particularly in interdisciplinary contexts, this study is aware that combining disparate theoretical frameworks may lead to conceptual inconsistencies or contradictions. Nevertheless, this investigation has critically examined whether such pluralistic approaches may prove effective in addressing the complexity and multifaceted dimensions of contemporary research inquiries concerning children and childhood. This conceptual understanding draws upon prior scholarship suggesting that effective relational work with children necessitates the adoption of a wholistic perspective (Edwards et al., 2019) where practitioners prioritize attempts to comprehend the whole child within their broader contextual circumstances rather than viewing the child through narrow professional lenses (Edwards, 2011).

Expanding the study's initial focus from the policy-practice gap to the broader framework of inclusion constructed a holistic child-focused perspective considering children's lives and childhood as comprehensive phenomena (Karlsson, 2020). While recognizing inclusion's abstractness and multifacetedness as challenging, this breadth enabled an understanding that transcended administrative and disciplinary boundaries (Isola et al., 2017). This conceptual framework allowed the recognition of music schools as public institutions that potentially offer children opportunities to invest in the common good and connect to sources of well-being and relationships that increase life's meaning (Isola et al., 2017; Kiilakoski & Gretschesel, 2012). Such a reconceptualization shifts focus from individualistic skill acquisition towards understanding education as pathways to societal participation and civic engagement. Following scholarly recommendations that inclusion research should disaggregate rather than simplify issues (Kiilakoski et al., 2012; Karlsson, 2020), this study recognized that isolated instances of exclusion warranted analytical consideration. Research strategies prioritizing pattern identification and categorical classification may inadvertently overlook profoundly significant individual moments. This raises questions about maintaining analytical rigor while embracing conceptual breadth and translating theoretical insights into educational strategies that genuinely enhance children's opportunities for meaningful participation in both music education and broader social contexts.

9.4.3. Contributions and Limitations of the Study

This study advances the research-based development of Basic Arts Education, aligning with views that strengthening the associated knowledge base would support developing the system (Finnish Government, 2021b; see also Suominen, 2019). Responding to identified gaps in professional competence regarding child participation implementation (Olsen, 2024; Shier, 2022), this investigation centred youth perspectives and provided practical frameworks for participatory policy development. The study addressed the substantial implementation gap between the general recognition of the importance of child participation and actual practice (Pajulammi, 2014), contributing theoretical frameworks and practical strategies for democratic and inclusive policy formation in music education. It elucidates how institutional structures and governance approaches influence possibilities for democratic policy development while articulating challenges related to children's participation and voice.

Theoretically, this research contributes to childhood agency scholarship by developing relational and ecological approaches to agency within educational contexts, responding to critiques that agency has been inadequately theorized in

childhood studies (Esser et al., 2016; Prout, 2000). The study developed an understanding of how children's agency emerges through institutional relationships rather than as an inherent individual capacity, advancing the theoretical understanding of agency as contextually produced and collectively achieved. By examining how generational power structures both enable and constrain children's agentic possibilities, this investigation addressed the theoretical gap between concepts of "childhood agency" and "generational ordering" identified in contemporary childhood studies literature (Esser et al., 2016). Generational ordering refers to the ways in which societies organise relationships between adults and children, creating distinct roles, responsibilities, and power distributions based on age.

Methodologically, this investigation contributes to addressing inherent power imbalances in research with children through the formative intervention approach highlighting the complexities associated with interviewing children, aligning with prior perspectives that have advocated departing from question-and-answer formats and adopting methodological approaches that grant greater agency to children over both interview processes and content, thereby potentially enabling them to be more forthcoming in sharing their perspectives (e.g., Thomas, 2002). The study demonstrates how diffractive analytical approaches can honour complexity while generating new forms of credibility through attention to material-discursive entanglements.

This investigation exemplifies formative interventions that generate new understanding of educational activity's societal purpose and object (Engeström, 2015; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The study reconceptualizes the shared educational object across social-spatial and ethical-political dimensions (Engeström, 2001b; Hasu, 2000) by involving children in decision-making as rights-bearing participants and expanding beyond individualized learning frames toward fundamental questions of educational purpose and meaning. This contributes to restoring educational discourse to questions of purpose, which Biesta (2010b, 2013) argues has become marginalized amid an emphasis on measurement and performance. The study further examines why policy rhetoric fails to materialize in practice, addressing the tension identified by Biesta (2013) between policymakers who view education abstractly through statistics and teachers who engage with real human beings and understand implementation complexities.

Contemporary activity theorists contend that educational research requires the transformation of established approaches (Engeström & Virkkunen, 2023). This study contributes to activity theory's potential for strengthening educational research's social impact by developing genuinely educational theories of agency: enabling an understanding of agency formation rather than merely measuring it

(Engeström et al., 2022). Despite recent theoretical renewal addressing agency's relational nature (Edwards, 2017), this investigation addresses gaps where cultural-historical theories of agency remain substantially incomplete (Hopwood & Sannino, 2023).

Notwithstanding the significance of this study's findings, this investigation is subject to various limitations. Its transferability remains constrained by the Finnish context and institutional specificity, limiting immediate international relevance despite potential insights for educational contexts facing similar challenges. The investigation emphasized analytical transferability rather than statistical generalizability, requiring contextual adaptation for alternative settings. The participating children cannot be assumed to represent other music school populations, as advancing inclusion necessitates direct involvement rather than presumptive actions.

The temporal scope presented additional limitations: while extending twelve months, the study could not capture the longer-term impacts of co-constructed processes. Continued research examining the sustained effects of participatory policies and diverse approaches for incorporating student voice in curriculum design and policy formation remains necessary.

The study acknowledged that the power dynamics between the adult researcher and the child participants persisted throughout the formative intervention, potentially constraining the children's responses. These dynamics were potentially intensified by the researcher's dual role as teacher. While the study employed methodological strategies to redistribute agency, including child-led discussions and collaborative decision-making, and engaged in co-constructed processes to facilitate multiple communication modes, inherent power imbalances remained. The continued development of methodological approaches that further address these power dynamics in research with children remains imperative.

The study's theoretical complexity presented additional challenges: integrating multiple frameworks may create tensions between analytical approaches, potentially compromising methodological coherence. Diffractive analysis may further challenge conventional empirical verification expectations. However, this theoretical plurality reflects the complexity of the phenomena and aligns with post-foundational approaches rejecting singular frameworks. The diffractive approach generates alternative forms of credibility through attention to material-discursive entanglements that conventional analysis might overlook.

Following Sarah J. Tracy's (2010) eight-dimensional framework for research rigor, this study demonstrates: a *worthy topic* through engagement with timely children's participation rights in the under-researched domain of music education policy; *rich rigor* via the employment of substantive theoretical constructs and data, sustained temporal engagement, and diffractive analytical approaches;

meaningful coherence through the alignment of formative intervention methodologies with participatory objectives; *credibility* through employing multi-voiced approaches incorporating children's perspectives, thick contextual description, and the integration of embodied knowledge; *resonance* by exploring tensions between policy rhetoric and educational realities, potentially moving readers toward more critically engaged approaches to educational practice and policy development; *significant contribution* across conceptual (activity-theoretical integration), theoretical (relational agency understanding), practical (policy implementation), and methodological (diffractive approaches in research with children) dimensions; *sincerity* through reflexive engagement with dual teacher-researcher positioning and transparent methodological documentation; and *ethical consideration* through attention to procedural, situational, relational, and consequential ethics in research with children.

9.4.4. Teacher-Researcher Reflexivity in Developmental Work Research

Throughout this research journey, my dual role as teacher-researcher has presented both opportunities and challenges that warrant careful reflection. The extended timeframe of this practitioner inquiry provided the necessary spaciousness (Bresler, 2015) for navigating the complex dual roles, enabling both personal professional growth and broader institutional awareness to develop. While I have already tried to include some of these reflections in the previous chapters, I will further highlight some of the most significant tensions and insights. Overall, what stood out most to me in this process was how conducting the research, and the choices made during this time, were critically intertwined with what the research aimed to achieve. While I initially came to the research process thinking that the process would evolve as if meaning-making could be peeled layer by layer to eventually reach "an end", what I experienced was that the rhizomatic nature of this inquiry (Masny, 2013) remained present throughout: the meaning-making processes never achieved final closure or stable presence. This endless play of difference (Derrida, 1976) was present in each attempt to pin down certain issues – for example, what constituted “genuine participation” during the first phase of intervention – immediately revealing new differences, new questions, and new instabilities. While I acknowledge that part of this process reflects the perennial nature of questions in educational practice, not least in relation to democracy, and the perpetual questions on how to organise collective lives, another dimension emerged from the acknowledgement of the necessity of developing a politics of representation that could make conscious shifts towards possibilization (Sannino & Engeström, 2017). This, in itself, was not a self-evident task.

The greatest challenge, and simultaneously the most compelling aspect of this work, was the attempt to maintain the child perspective throughout this research. In my view, this "messy, organic way" of participatory research (Cahill, 2007, p. 300), was central to navigating the process in a way that consistently returned to the questions: What is relevant to study from the child's perspective, and what is meaningful in each phenomenon from their viewpoint (Karlsson, 2010; Rask & Ertiö, 2019)? The boundaries between "researcher" and "researched" were constantly being negotiated and performed rather than existing as fixed categories, creating ongoing methodological and ethical dilemmas about representation and voice. This raises deeper questions about what realities I am helping to enact through my research choices and what ethical responsibilities this entails. Throughout this inquiry, I have thus had to critically consider what "agential cuts" I make – that is, what specific boundaries I draw in the flow of experience to create distinct "data" or "findings", recognizing my accountability for the world-making effects of my research. While these cuts were necessary for the analysis, they were inherently limiting in what they included or excluded from view. This ongoing negotiation reflects what I see as the fundamental challenge in child research: ensuring that the researcher's demarcation of study focus genuinely meets children's perspectives (Karlsson, 2010). The questions I repeatedly encountered were: What holds significance for these young participants? What are they communicating? I often found myself revisiting initial assumptions that certain observations were inconsequential, instead asking deeper questions about why I considered them as such and what implications could be drawn from this. Overall, I found my role as an educator particularly heightened during moments when I was striving to maintain a broad analytical perspective and open inquiry, recognizing that imposing theoretical frameworks rigidly would be like wearing restrictive lenses that limit genuine engagement and understanding.

Several reflexive questions have emerged that illuminate the complexities of teacher-researcher positioning. Most fundamentally, while my insider position enabled reflection on music school teachers' work across extended timeframes and experiences of working with students over longer periods, which bounded studies could not necessarily access, my embeddedness in existing institutional systems likely prevented the recognition of certain patterns or the questioning of fundamental assumptions that remained invisible to me as an insider. A persistent concern has been that my teacher role would influence students' willingness to share their perspectives, particularly critical ones or disagreements with proposed directions. This concern proved impossible to fully anticipate or resolve. Throughout this experience, I have had to remain aware of my own assumptions about the dynamics of what I have sought to understand and continually work to

make the familiar strange. As previously discussed, I brought personal biases to the process, for example assumptions about students' readiness to participate and their "active" participation (Section 6.9.3), which I needed to confront. As the intervention unfolded, I discovered that my assumptions about students' preferences derived from their backgrounds required constant readjustment. Working directly with students revealed that my preconceptions about their interest in using, for example, their mobile phones and other digital technologies for learning were mostly misaligned. Over the extended research process, I became aware of changes in my own thinking and how I had unconsciously absorbed certain educational trends, such as the initial fascination with digital devices that has since been reconsidered in educational discourse. Opening my pedagogical thinking and teaching in this dissertation proved challenging, requiring a confrontation with potentially uncomfortable truths about my assumptions. Rather than retrospectively revising or "correcting" the documentation of the intervention process to align with my evolved understanding, I have committed to maintaining transparency regarding all of the procedural stages. This transparency has been maintained even though the research has fundamentally transformed my thinking, and I have developed substantially different perspectives compared to the study's outset. This commitment to transparency involved acknowledging multiple instances of confusion, including moments when methodological decisions were made amid uncertainty and when ambiguity became an integral part of the research process. Rather than viewing these challenges as limitations, I have come to understand them as integral to the transformative potential of developmental work research – where the researcher's own growth and changing perspectives become part of the knowledge-creation process itself.

This reflexive journey has fundamentally reshaped my approach to pedagogical practice. The research process has reoriented my professional identity toward approaches that prioritize relational encounters, embracing the complexity and uncertainty that characterizes such relational work. This study has sensitized me to the ways in which pedagogical choices participate in creating educational realities, inspiring continued curiosity about what becomes possible when music education is approached as a relational practice.

9.5. Future Research Directions

This study has identified several areas for future research and development. Firstly, as this investigation did not encompass the perspectives of all stakeholders within the music education ecosystem – notably excluding the viewpoints of

guardians, teachers, and administrative personnel – future research would benefit from incorporating these diverse voices to develop a more comprehensive understanding of both barriers to and opportunities for democratic participation within music education governance. Developmental work research within Basic Education in the Arts contexts represents an under-explored domain with significant potential for advancing participatory educational approaches. Research examining collaboration between music schools, comprehensive schools, and cultural institutions could develop innovative arts education models integrating democratic principles. Such explorations might include cross-sectoral initiatives that break down traditional boundaries between artistic disciplines through interdisciplinary projects and innovative artistic utopian experiments. Research examining how to prepare future educators for collaborative policy work could illuminate pathways for developing pedagogical competencies that support democratic participation.

Research findings on inclusive early childhood education demonstrate that co-construction requires structural and cultural workplace changes supported by institutional leaders (Weckström, 2021). This suggests that dynamic stakeholder relationships could be enhanced through administrative responsiveness to teachers' concerns and strengthened institutional cultures. Future research in this area could include examining how music teachers navigate planned versus lived curricula and the impact of top-down policies on teacher autonomy (Economidou Stavrou & O'Connell, 2022). Systematic investigations into music-focused classes' educational scope, accessibility, and longitudinal impacts are warranted, given the limited empirical research on cross-curricular academic achievement effects. Future research could investigate mechanisms contributing to learning disparities between specialist and general tracks, building on findings of higher academic performance in urban specialist classes (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017). The absence of comprehensive socio-economic data access prevents educational authorities from obtaining institution-specific demographic composition data (Bernelius & Huilla, 2021). The implications of this challenge are particularly salient in light of international comparative assessments, such as PISA, which have documented that Finland exhibits among the most pronounced performance disparities between migrant and non-migrant student populations (Helakorpi et al., 2023). Longitudinal research could examine how specialized music education influences sustained artistic engagement and professional development, given that a significant number of professional artists and individuals working within the arts sector share backgrounds in music-specialized educational programs (Törmälä, 2013). Studies could investigate the role of peer learning communities in educational continuity and their positive influences on academic engagement, with particular attention to outcomes among male students (Tuomela, 2017).

Thirdly, comparative studies examining diverse music education governance models across Nordic and international contexts could illuminate approaches to balancing pre-professional preparation with inclusive participation. International comparison reveals that Finland, like other Nordic countries, exceptionally lacks mandatory school governing boards, contrasting with most OECD nations requiring parental participation; countries such as Denmark, Germany, and Iceland mandate student school board involvement (OECD, 2024c). Research could examine how administrative structures facilitate or impede collaborative approaches and investigate participatory work in other extracurricular domains.

Fourthly, whilst this study has sought to provide a comprehensive overview of the developmental possibilities of the music school system, it acknowledges that there are still some contributions made by actors related to the broader context of music school policy within the broader context that this study did not address. Considering Finland's system of collaborative public policy construction involving trade unions and employers' organizations (Aho et al., 2006; Vitikka et al., 2016), collaboration with these stakeholders could identify challenges in teachers' working conditions that influence music school development. The current scarcity of professional development opportunities underscores the importance of high-quality initial teacher education and raises questions about how to support instrumental teachers' professional learning across multi-decade careers.

Finally, and most importantly, this study's findings necessitate further investigation into the implementation of democratic governance structures within music education contexts, examining mechanisms for sustained student input beyond one-time consultations. Future research could actively solicit children's perspectives on arts meaning-making, addressing the information gap about arts hobby motivation compared to extensively researched sports activities (Lähteenmaa, 2021). Future research could also include empirical investigation of non-participation in the arts. The study further underscores the importance of investigating inclusion's social dimension: children's peer groups are often marginalized in inclusion work, despite young people's sense of belonging to these groups (Kiilakoski et al., 2012). Future research could address this gap by examining how peer relationships influence participation, an understanding that could inform enhanced community engagement strategies throughout the institutional ecosystem.

10. Concluding Thoughts

Educators carry a profound responsibility to help "awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly" (Barad, 2007, p. x). Understanding the world and its potential to be remade in each encounter, in this study I have made constant attempts to stay open and engage in a pedagogy of listening while questioning my own assumptions and ways of working with children and young people, to continue noticing and listening anew and to remain open to alternative ways of moving forward. The inquiry could be described as what Jacques Derrida (1992) has called the aporetic experience of justice, "moments in which the choice between just and unjust is never assured by a rule" (p. 16). Given the never-ending process of the quest for democracy, an exhaustive evaluation of equality is thus impossible, because each time more perspectives are included, the situation looks different (Sen, 1995). At the same time as I have tried to recognise what was important to others, the purpose of this relational work was not to diminish my own expertise (Edwards, 2017), nor to ignore the traditions and disciplinary knowledge that I myself had engaged with, but rather to find ways of enabling students to encounter these accumulated understandings without them being prescriptively imposed. Acknowledging that this relational work of aiming to connect people dialogically to each other and to a common good was thus deeply ethical, such pedagogy needed to grapple with the question: "How to disrupt patterns of thinking that see the past as finished and the future as not ours or only ours?" (Barad, 2007, p. x)

While this study has explored various issues related to supporting children's inclusion and agency, particular attention has been drawn to the pivotal role of teachers as mediators of children's educational experiences and participation. Music school teachers play a substantial role in how students' relationships to music and their view of themselves as musicians are shaped and supported. The one teacher/one student model that has historically dominated instrumental music

instruction in music schools inevitably allows individual teachers' backgrounds to shape the opportunities available to students. From an administrative perspective, reducing children's participation contingencies requires examining how opportunities for social interaction and multifaceted studies are systematically built into curricula rather than left to discretionary resources. Creating meaningful social opportunities for students to build and maintain social connections in their social environments involves recognising and building upon the social communities that already exist in students' lives, such as those cultivated within the comprehensive school environment. Building on existing social models, this study thus calls for developing strategies to broaden access to such socially supportive communities across all student populations. When learning environments are no longer governed by an image of the student as an isolated individual accumulating skill, but instead recognize students as socially embedded individuals, more inclusive and responsive educational practices become possible. This shift requires institutions to move beyond individualistic framings toward an ethos that acknowledges students' interconnectedness and the significance of peer relations in shaping learning experiences.

This study aligns with views that suggest that a shift towards more dynamic relationships with stakeholders could be supported by administrative responsiveness to teachers' practical concerns and the strengthening of the overall operating cultures of educational institutions (Weckström, 2021). Increasing stakeholder involvement in policy design represents a cornerstone of public policy reform worldwide (Bherer & Verhoeven, 2023; Osborne et al., 2018). This study has asserted that increased dialogue between music education stakeholders and open government principles could address the increasingly complex nature of contemporary public policy implementation. Despite the assertion that the issues of democracy are relevant to public authorities working with children, this study acknowledges that for many educators and administrators the idea of children being genuine educational partners in music school decision-making may seem utopian, an impossible vision of the future. As adult attitudes have been recognized as one of the barriers to children's participation (Gretschel & Kiilakoski, 2007; Ministry of Justice, 2020; Mitchell, 2022), the idea of children's active involvement in decision making evokes mixed emotions, including irritation and fear, with many adults resisting the idea altogether.

However, this study adopted a perspective that views utopian thinking as both necessary and transformative, and considered the enactment of utopias as a means of imagining and acting beyond the limits of prevailing systems, in search of possible better futures (Engeström & Virkkunen, 2023; Sannino, 2020). From this perspective, utopias have a disruptive function as historically grounded counter-practices that have the potential to open up the social and political imagination to

new possibilities (see also Lakkala, 2021). This conceptualization of utopias as transformative possibilities draws further support from Mouffe's (2000) conception of democratic politics as essentially contested terrain, where any existing social order represents merely one configuration among many possible alternatives. Consequently, the ability to think utopically emerges as essential to preserving the transformative potential of politics, guided by visions of better societies while recognising that organizing human coexistence always occurs under potentially conflictual conditions.

Whilst the idea of children co-constructing public policy may thus appear utopian, this study suggests that public authorities might consider whether failing to listen to children poses institutional risks that outweigh those associated with more participatory approaches. Rather than pursuing enhanced control mechanisms (Biesta, 2021), this study has proposed that public authorities could develop systematic approaches to engaging children's voices and collaborating with them as stakeholders in forming child perspectives that contribute to socially sustainable practices. Such dialogue could support music schools' continued recognition as a public good with social, cultural, and political significance within the broader network of public provision that fosters opportunities for solidarity and democracy. In this context, utopian thinking may function as a catalyst for encouraging change toward more inclusive and participatory music education, potentially moving beyond conventional hierarchical governance toward practices that better incorporate children's agency and voices in shaping their educational experiences.

Reimagining the purpose and value of music education beyond learning (Biesta, 2010a, 2010b) may appear equally utopian, especially in contemporary educational contexts dominated by human capital theories and competency-based frameworks. This study has proposed considering the perspectives that can come into view when the focus is not solely on learning; in other words, what existential possibilities lie beyond learning (Biesta 2006a), when children's artistic existence is not reduced to skill acquisition nor are spaces for musical engagement designed solely with individual proficiency development in mind. Broadening the perspectives of arts education calls for an examination of what other value there is to the arts beyond self-improvement and personal gain.

Manifestations of intensifying accountability are evident in recent developments within Finnish music school governance, particularly through the implementation of electronic school management systems and digital student portfolios. While these measures amplify and normalise the monitoring of student learning, this study argues they concurrently risk what Biesta (2017d) terms the gradual disappearance of the arts from arts education, emphasizing the evaluation of easily measurable components at the expense of elements possessing authentic

educational significance that warrant comparable attention. This preoccupation with learning measurement risks prompting public authorities to mistakenly equate educational quality with effectiveness and efficiency, when from an educational point of view, such approaches neglect the process of establishing what education is fundamentally for. It is not enough that children and young people "just" learn, or that these learning processes can be carried out effectively, because from an educational point of view it is always necessary to specify what the learning is for (Biesta, 2019a, p. 16; see also Biesta, 2015). This study has advocated the relationality of learning processes and how students could be supported to form meaningful relationships with disciplinary knowledge (Ashwin, 2020; Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020), while sustaining focus on the horizontal, social dimensions of their music-making.

By acknowledging children's participation in music education as something that requires both decentring and recentring children (Spyrou et al., 2018), this study has advocated for understanding such participation as a complex phenomenon that requires maintaining a comprehensive view that recognizes both children's agency and their need for guidance, their individuality and social embeddedness, their present experiences and their future development. The perpetual and iterative nature of democratic processes creates ongoing opportunities to cultivate more equitable relationships with children and their surrounding world. Navigating such a society necessitates the capacity to envision alternatives that function differently – to engage in practicable utopianism: to envision alternative futures and work pragmatically toward their realization.

This work acknowledges the numerous significant steps that have been taken during the course of this research in the adoption of children's rights thinking in the co-construction of Finnish public policy. Recent measures to strengthen the well-being of young people include listening to young people in decision-making and better integrating consultation with young people in the preparatory work of ministries, including legislative work and the preparation of strategies and action programmes (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024b). These developments demonstrate that while challenges remain, meaningful progress toward more democratic and inclusive approaches to children's participation in policymaking is indeed achievable and evolving.

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Appendix A

Participant and guardian information form

Research

Musical Protagonists: An ethnographic case study of learner-centredness in music group teaching.

Implementation of the study

The present study examines learner-centredness in a formal music learning environment, specifically in the context of a Finnish music school. It explores the agency of school-age children and the role of the teacher in developing and facilitating this agency in group lessons. These lessons utilize improvisation, arranging, and composing as teaching methods. The study aims to identify ways to enable students' active participation and contribution in creating and developing a collaborative, creative environment for learning to play an instrument through collaborative, creative practices. In contrast to the note-based approach, music learning is approached from a more holistic perspective of multimodal learning. The overarching aim is to establish a learning environment that supports students' individual learning paths by guiding them to become self-directed learners, who are able to set goals for their learning and to plan their work while assessing their own progress.

The study will collect information on the following issues: (a) the approach to music learning in a student-centred way, taking into account students' interests, their individual ways of learning, and their experiences and perceptions of themselves as learners; (b) the kinds of things students bring to music lessons; (c) what is meaningful to students in a co-constructed music learning environment; (d) the influence of teaching solutions in group music education and peer teachers on the construction of children's music learning environment; and (e) the potential for supporting students' self-direction as evaluators of their own work and goal-setters in music education.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and written consent from the students and their guardians is required. The music school administration has approved how the study will be conducted, and the material for the main study will be collected from September [date] to March [date] by observing students in weekly 45-minute group music lessons. Five groups of students aged between 9 and 15 years who play different instruments from the music school will participate in this study. The pilot study, which will take place in the spring of [date], will include one group that will meet for six weeks for weekly 45-minute group music lessons. During the study, in addition to my role as researcher, I will also act as the groups'

music teacher. The research data will be collected from the students in the following manner: a) individual and/or group interviews, and informal discussions during group lessons; and b) video recordings of group lessons. This material will be part of the research material and will not be made available to third parties or the music school at any stage of the study.

The interviews will take place in the facilities available for group music lessons, and the student interviews will be supplemented by the researcher's research diary. The improvisations, arrangements, and compositions that emerge during the group lessons will also serve as a basis for examining the learning process. The research will be carried out in a way that will cause as little disruption as possible to the activities of the music school and the daily lives of the students and their families.

The interview and survey data will be stored in the format stipulated by the Personal Data Protection Act, and the research data will not be disseminated to music schools or third parties, thus ensuring that the study will not hinder the progress of the participating students' studies at music schools. The information collected from the students is to remain strictly confidential, and the study will be reported in a manner that ensures the anonymity of the participating children and their parents.

The present study is grounded in the endeavours of formal institutions to address the challenges posed by a rapidly evolving environment. In recent years, increased awareness of the significance of social interaction in learning contexts has prompted music educators to re-examine their teaching practices from new perspectives. The traditional master-student model, long regarded as a conduit for knowledge transfer, is now being re-evaluated in contemporary learning theories. These theories emphasise the active role of the student not only as a recipient of instruction but also as a constructor and evaluator of their own learning process. This research, to the best of my knowledge, has not been conducted in Finland previously, and the findings presented here are unique in this respect. As Finland updates its Basic Arts Education Curriculum in 2017, music schools require guidance in cultivating their own operating culture to align with the objectives of the new curriculum. In Basic Education, the draft curriculum statements emphasise enhancing student participation and empowering them to shape their own learning environment. These endeavours to transform school culture are also anticipated to influence the curricular reforms in Basic Arts Education. Students' ideas and experiences are of paramount importance in this reform process. The overall aim of the research is to find ways to strengthen the role of students as active participants and to produce research findings that can be used by educational institutions in their practical work in the future.

Tuulia Tuovinen
University of the Arts Helsinki Sibelius-Academy
[contact information]

Appendix B

Agreement of consent from the guardian of the child participating in the study

Parental consent document [date]

Consent for scientific research

Musical protagonists - an ethnographic case study of learner-centredness in instrumental group teaching.

I have received, read, and understood the fact sheet about the study. I have received an adequate explanation of the study and the collection, processing, and disclosure of data that will be carried out in the context of the study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions to the person responsible for the pilot study. I have also received oral explanation of the fact sheet contents when I have requested it and have received adequate answers to all my questions about the study. I have had sufficient time to consider my child's participation in the study. My child has also been informed about the study, and his/her opinion about participation in the study has been sought. I have also seen and read the consent form signed by my child and confirmed his/her positive opinion about study participation.

I give my consent for the collection of information about my child that is necessary for the study to be recorded in the research register. All information collected about my child during the study will be treated as confidential and will be accessible only to the persons involved in the study. The findings of the study will be reported in such a way that they cannot be linked to the students taking part in the study or their parents.

I understand that my child's participation in this pilot study is entirely voluntary. I have the right to withdraw my child from the study at any time during the study without giving any reason. There will be no consequences for refusing participation or withdrawing from the study. I am aware that the data collected at the time of discontinuation will be used as part of the study data.

I give my consent for my child to participate in the pilot study to be conducted in [date]: Yes _____ No _____

Child's name

Signature of the guardian, name clarification, date

Appendix C

Agreement of consent from the child participating in the pilot study

Student consent document [date]

Consent for scientific research

Musical protagonists - an ethnographic case study of learner-centredness in instrumental group teaching.

I have been asked to participate in a study to collect data on my own thoughts and experiences in weekly instrumental group lessons that focus on instrumental group teaching using improvisation, musical arrangement, and composition as teaching methods. The study will be carried out over six weeks in April-May [date] in weekly group lessons. Interviews for the study will be conducted during the instrumental group lessons or at a time to be agreed upon. Weekly instrumental group lessons will be recorded on video, and the videos will be used to help create shared learning practices.

I have received, read, and understood the information about the study. I have received an adequate explanation of the study and the collection, processing, and disclosure of data that will take place in the context of the study. The contents of the fact sheet have also been explained to me orally when I requested it, and I have received adequate answers to all my questions about the study. I have had sufficient time to consider my participation in the study.

I give my consent to the collection of personal data concerning me which are necessary for the purposes of the study. All information collected about me during the study will be treated as confidential and will be accessible only to the persons involved in the study. The findings of the study will be reported in such a way that they cannot be linked to the students participating in the study.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the study without giving any reason. There will be no consequences for refusing participation or withdrawing from the study. I am aware that the information collected about me up to the time of my withdrawal will be used as part of the study data.

I confirm my participation in this study: Yes _____ No _____

Student's signature Date of birth

Name clarification Date

Appendix D

Agreement of consent from the child participating in the study

Student consent document [date]

Consent for scientific research

Musical protagonists - an ethnographic case study of learner-centredness in instrumental group teaching.

I have been asked to participate in a study to collect data on my own thoughts and experiences in weekly instrumental group lessons that focus on instrumental group teaching using improvisation, musical arrangement, and composition as teaching methods. The study will run from September [date] to April [date]. Interviews for the study will be conducted during the instrumental group lessons or at a time to be agreed upon. Weekly instrumental group lessons will be recorded on video, and the videos will be used to help create shared learning practices.

I have received, read, and understood the information about the study. I have received an adequate explanation of the study and the collection, processing, and disclosure of data that will take place in the context of the study. The contents of the fact sheet have also been explained to me orally when I requested it, and I have received adequate answers to all my questions about the study. I have had sufficient time to consider my participation in the study.

I give my consent to the collection of personal data concerning me that is necessary for the purposes of the study. All information collected about me during the study will be treated as confidential and will be accessible only to the persons involved in the study. The findings of the study will be reported in such a way that they cannot be linked to the students participating in the study.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the study without giving any reason. There will be no consequences for refusing participation or withdrawing from the study. I am aware that the information collected about me up to the time of my withdrawal will be used as part of the study data.

I confirm my participation in this study: Yes _____ No _____

Student's signature Date of birth

Name clarification Date

Appendix E

Agreement of consent from the principal of a music school

Consent for scientific research: pilot study at [name of music school] [date of the study]

Musical Protagonists: An ethnographic case study of learner-centredness in music group teaching.

I have received, read, and understood the information sheet about the study. I have received adequate information about the pilot study and the data collection, processing, and disclosure that will take place in the context of the pilot study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions to the person responsible for the study. I have also been informed orally of the contents of the fact sheet when I requested it and have received adequate answers to all my questions about the study. I have been given sufficient time to consider allowing the research to be conducted at our music school. The students and parents of the students have also been informed about the study, and their views on participation in the study have been sought. I have also seen and read the consent forms signed by the students and their parents.

I give my consent for the collection of the data necessary for the pilot study to be recorded in the research register. All data collected from the students of the [name of music school] during the study will be treated as confidential, and access to the data will be restricted to the persons involved in the study. The findings of the study will be reported in such a way that they cannot be linked to the students participating in the study, their parents, or [name of music school].

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary for the students of [name of music school]. At any time during the pilot study, and without giving any reason, I have the right to terminate the participation of the students of [name of music school]. There will be no consequences for refusing or discontinuing the study. I am aware that the data collected at the time of discontinuation will be used as part of the study data.

I give my consent for the pilot study to be carried out at the [name of music school] [date of the study]

Yes _____ No _____

Principal's signature Date

Name clarification

Appendix F

Agreement of consent from the teacher of a music school / comprehensive school

Consent for scientific research: pilot study at [name of music school] [date of the study]

Musical Protagonists: An ethnographic case study of learner-centredness in music group teaching.

I have received, read, and understood the information sheet about the study. I have received adequate information about the pilot study and the data collection, processing and disclosure that will take place in the context of the pilot study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions to the person responsible for the study. I have also been informed orally of the contents of the fact sheet when I requested it and have received adequate answers to all my questions about the study. I have been given sufficient time to consider participating in the research at our music school.

I give my consent for the collection of data regarding myself that is necessary for the pilot study to be recorded in the research register. All data collected during the study will be treated as confidential, and access to the data will be restricted to the persons involved in the study. The findings of the study will be reported in such a way that they cannot be linked to the students participating in the study, their parents, their teachers, or [name of music school].

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary. At any time during the pilot study, and without giving any reason, I have the right to withdraw from the study. There will be no consequences for refusing or discontinuing the study. I am aware that the data collected at the time of discontinuation will be used as part of the study data.

I confirm my participation in this pilot study: Yes _____ No _____

Teacher's signature Date

Name clarification

Appendix G

Guardian and participant consent form for the use of WhatsApp in the study

Parental and student consent form [date]

I give my consent for the collection of data concerning my child that is necessary for the study to be included in the research register via the instant messaging service WhatsApp. The use of the instant messaging service WhatsApp requires the consent of a parent or guardian for those under 13 years of age. All information collected about my child during the research will be treated as confidential and will only be accessible to the persons involved in the research. The findings of the study will be reported in such a way that they cannot be linked to the students taking part in the study or their parents.

Name of the child

Signature of the guardian, name clarification, date

Name of participant: _____

I give my consent to the collection of personal data concerning me that is necessary for the purposes of the study to be recorded for the research register via the instant messaging service WhatsApp. All information collected about me during the study will be treated as confidential and will only be accessible to the persons involved in the study. The findings of the study will be reported in a way that cannot be linked to the students participating in the study.

Signature of the student, name clarification, date

Appendix H

Interview guides

Interview 1 (Group A)

What was your experience of working in this way?

Did you feel your voice was heard?

Considering how smoothly your group has worked together, how would this process (arranging, deciding on instruments, etc.) work without a teacher? What aspects, if any, do you think would require a teacher's guidance?

If you think about your own past learning, and your learning habits, can you assess how you learn/prefer to learn? On your own first? By practising alone? By practising together? Aurally? From notes? Both?

What can you learn from a peer?

What was that YouTube link that you were watching? Do you ever watch YouTube videos to learn something?

Thinking about your life outside and inside school, what role does technology play in your life? What do you use technology for (e.g., your phone)?

How did you experience the whole project taking shape in this kind of process?

How did it feel to work with everyone contributing to the project?

Interview 2 (follow-up interview with Group A)

In your own project, how did you decide on the different roles you took on in the project?

If you had to characterise each other's learning styles/approaches, could such definitions be made? Do the other group participants agree with them?

Have you ever thought about the way you learn music? How do you approach learning?

Does your approach to learning remain the same when you are learning in a group? Does it change when you interact with others?

How would you describe yourself as a learner? Are peer "models" of learning important to you? How do you think you learn "best"?

What was the reason [addressed to one of the students] that you wanted to practise with a tape at home? Was it because you wanted to improve your own part? Did you want to take the time to look at your own part even more? Or did you want to try things out and then present them in class?

When you mentioned that you did not want to use YouTube videos to learn something, was it also because there were not so many suitable videos for your instrument? For example, if there were videos of kantelists playing pieces from your repertoire, do you think you would watch them?

Would your attitude toward videos change if instrumental teachers encouraged you to analyse hand positions etc. more carefully in videos? What would this kind of learning feel like? If teachers encouraged peer learning in lessons, would this happen more often? Would it also require guidance to be able to observe others playing in videos?

What do teachers use social media for? To organise rehearsals? To listen to specific repertoire? Do any teachers post their own videos or other material? Are any issues discussed in social media groups set up by the teacher (if they exist)? Do you use WhatsApp to learn? Do you use YouTube or social media for other hobbies?

Do you listen to music? If so, from which sources?

How would you feel about using your phone for learning in a formal context (e.g., apps)? Would you see it as blending your personal and school life, and if so, would you have any concerns about that?

What kind of support would you like from teachers? What is your own experience with music teachers - is there freedom, are there strict boundaries? Does it make you feel insecure if the teacher does not have all the knowledge? For example, not telling you directly which position or which fingerings are "best" for you to play, or how to use the bow? If you had problems with these things (in this project), how did you solve them?

Would it be helpful to know where to find resources or support when you need it?

How do you feel about situations where you don't get an immediate answer? What does it mean to you to work with uncertainty in learning? Does it have to do with not always getting an answer right away? Do you consider that there is only one "right answer"?

When you described the challenges in your own project as "not having anyone to tell you what to do as everyone was on the same level", could you elaborate on this? Do you think that the teacher and the student are on the same level?

If you had to do the project again, would it be easier since we already know each other better? Could we, for example, agree on a clear division of roles from the start? Would anything be lost? Would there be room for new ideas if the structure had been "fixed" from the beginning? Would it be good for some to have a clear vision that others would only implement in their own area of strength (e.g., playing/singing) - not trying to take into account everyone's ideas or listening, but rather having a vision in which the others would be invited to participate? Whose vision would be chosen? What are the challenges in collective decision making?

Interview 3 (teacher interview)

How would you describe the learning habits of the students who took part in the study? In what ways do you yourself work with them?

How have the ways of working evolved (if they have)? Do you approach learning with other students in the same way?

How would you describe your own role in the students' learning process?

How would you describe the approaches to learning of the students who took part in the study? Are there similarities or differences?

Have the students' learning styles changed during the time that you have known them?

Reflecting on projects you have done with the students, how have the various stages of the project unfolded?

How is technology used in your teaching? If it is used, who sparked the idea for using technology?

Interview 4 (Group B)

What kind of experiences did today's improvisation evoke in you?

If you had to develop something further in today's improvisation, how would you go from here?

Did you find anything that we did today particularly enjoyable or unpleasant? In your experience, what made it pleasant for you? What made it unpleasant?

Did anything we did surprise you in any way?

Compared to your individual lessons, how do you feel about playing in a group?

Is there anything different about playing in a group compared to your individual lessons?

If you had to list the three biggest differences you felt between individual and group lessons, what would those differences be?

Is there anything difficult about group lessons?

Is there anything about group lessons that you find boring or tedious?

Interview 5 (Groups B, C, D, E)

How has this project been as a whole?

What is learning to play in a group like compared to individual lessons?

What was it like to work in this way: playing repertoire that was partly familiar and arranging together?

What is challenging? Is anything easier?

What is the most fun about playing? What is not so nice?

Can you tell me about what inspired you to start playing? What excites you about playing an instrument?

Does anyone else in your family play?

Could you imagine music becoming a career for you later?

What is it like to learn music at a music school? Do you play band instruments or something like that?

What influences you the most when you want to play something? What makes you choose a particular song to play?

If you could change something in the music school, what would it be? How could it be improved?

What is music education like at school? If you could change something in the music classroom, what would it be? How could it be improved?

Do you listen to music? What do you listen to? Where from?

If you suggest songs to play in class, where do the ideas for these songs come from? Do you think it is important that in school you would get to influence the choir pieces?

What do you use your mobile phone for? Do you use technology (e.g., mobile phone) in your own music learning and if so, how?

When choosing the repertoire and the songs, it seemed to be important for you that the songs were popular, but not something that others had played. Can you explain this a bit further? (a question discussed in Group D)

How did it feel to work in this way? Was everyone listened to equally? As a teacher, was I able to take others into account?

When the aim was to build the practices together, how did you feel about this?
Do you feel we were able to do that?
What did we learn? What did you learn from others?
What was the group atmosphere like?
How do you personally feel – did this way of learning to play help your own learning in some way?
If you think about this project of ours, and the way we worked, how did it fit/not fit with your own way of learning? For example, would you have preferred more time on your own, with sheet music, clearer instructions, more specific "do this" instructions, etc.?
Did you feel that you received enough help during the project? What kind of guidance/assistance would you have liked more/less?
If you imagine the project without me, the teacher, what do you think it would have been like?
A mood map? And using it to describe your own process?
What would you have done differently? Did the piece turn out the way you thought it would? If so, in what way? If not, in what ways did it not?
What issue/idea surfaced most during this process?



How can children's participation transform music education?

This study examines a fundamental contradiction in contemporary educational governance: while participatory principles are widely celebrated in policy frameworks, children and young people remain largely excluded from decision-making processes that shape their education.

Through a twelve-month formative intervention with 25 music school students in Finland, this practitioner-inquiry explored what becomes possible when young people are included in co-constructing their music education. The findings demonstrate that meaningful inclusion requires more than access – it demands reimagining how children's musical learning is understood, managed, and facilitated within institutional structures.

Drawing on developmental work research and cultural-historical activity theory, the study shows how student agency emerges through experiences of relevance, social connectedness, and ability to act. The study challenges music schools' traditional focus on linear progression and professional study requirements, arguing that excluding children from policy processes renders their inclusion increasingly arbitrary. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how allowing children to bring their perspectives to music education can restore art's capacity to address fundamental questions of human and social existence – and offers crucial insights for advancing democratic participation in educational practice.



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