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Activism at the Pivot of Agenda and Agency: Critical Relatedness and the Promise of Global Citizenship in Music Education

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Global Citizenship Education (GCE) offers particular promise encompassing socio-political ideologies, such that the agency of individuals is continuously negotiated with social agendas. Yet these forces do not always align: agendas can enable activism but also constrain or appropriate it, sometimes creating the illusion of agency within predetermined ideological boundaries. Although GCE is often interpreted through diverse orientations, its implications for music education remain underexamined. This essay aims to explore the complex relationship between agenda and agency, examining how their intersections and tensions shape activism when framed through the lens of global citizenship. In this regard, the analysis has focused on the intersubjectivity of activist music education, appraising the agency, the resistance agenda, and the ideological relationships that intertwine them. The results show music education nurturing resilience, critical awareness, and collective resistance when activism becomes genuinely central to GCE. As such, it can cultivate liberatory, critical, and transformative behaviours, enabling educators and students to engage with complexity while resisting the co-optation of their agency and working toward more just and sustainable futures.

Keywords: supranational agenda, political agency, full development, ideological relationships, human rights education, polarisation.

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Introduction

At a time when nations across both the global North and South are confronted with intensifying polarisation, protectionism and resurgent authoritarian populism—often accompanied by cultural intolerance, historical revisionism, digital disinformation, and the erosion of trust in expertise and institutions—the educational sphere has not remained immune. In concrete terms, music education has become "a means of the state governance of socio-political transformations to maintain social stability and consolidate its political leadership" (Ho, 2019, p. 11). As such, the rhetoric of equal opportunity conceals structural inequities, as students' success is mediated by access to private tutoring, class privilege, and unequal school resources—thus exposing the neoliberal underpinnings of the so-called global citizenship agenda in education (Yi, 2023).

According to Hess (2019, p. 7), it is necessary to question the "pedagogy of oppression," arguing that when music education aligns uncritically with neoliberal frameworks, it not only reproduces social gaps but also imposes emotional and psychological pressures on learners. This concern resonates with Fernández Morante (2024) and Jääskeläinen et al. (2020), whose studies identify how such pressures intensify through institutional malpractice and excessive academic workloads, leaving students stressed and alienated from the creative and communal essence of musical learning. Consequently, neoliberalism has reconfigured agency itself: human experience is harvested as a raw material, reducing individuals to data-generating assets—effectively digital livestock—whose extraction-driven value maximisation comes at the expense of mental health, autonomy, and democratic participation (Peabody, 2025).

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These trends, which echo the divisive logics once associated with fascism, are now visible in curricular censorship, attacks on academic freedom, instrumentalised patriotism, and the politicisation of knowledge (Angel-Alvarado et al., 2021; Hebert, 2016). Such dynamics have profound educational and cultural consequences, shaping not only policy but also personal dispositions toward 'the other.' It is thus worth examining how and why the conditioning of global citizens by borders, barriers, and socio-political environments stands in tension with the very essence of global citizenship—a construct that rests on the capacity of "sharing the essential characteristics of humanity...with all other human beings" (Dower & Williams, 2002, p. 2).

The objective of this essay is to examine the intersections and tensions between agency and agenda within activist music education, taking Global Citizenship Education (GCE) as an analytical framework through which to consider broader and future-oriented professional practices in the field. We begin by outlining the central framing elements of GCE (UNESCO, 2015), focusing on how international educational actors have conceptualised and structured GCE in policy terms. We then turn to the (inter)subjective dimensions of key ideological constructs in music education—particularly agenda and agency—to explore how these notions shape, enable, or constrain activism within educational and professional contexts. That being said, we have established the following research question: How are the intersections and tensions between agency and agenda framed in activist music education?

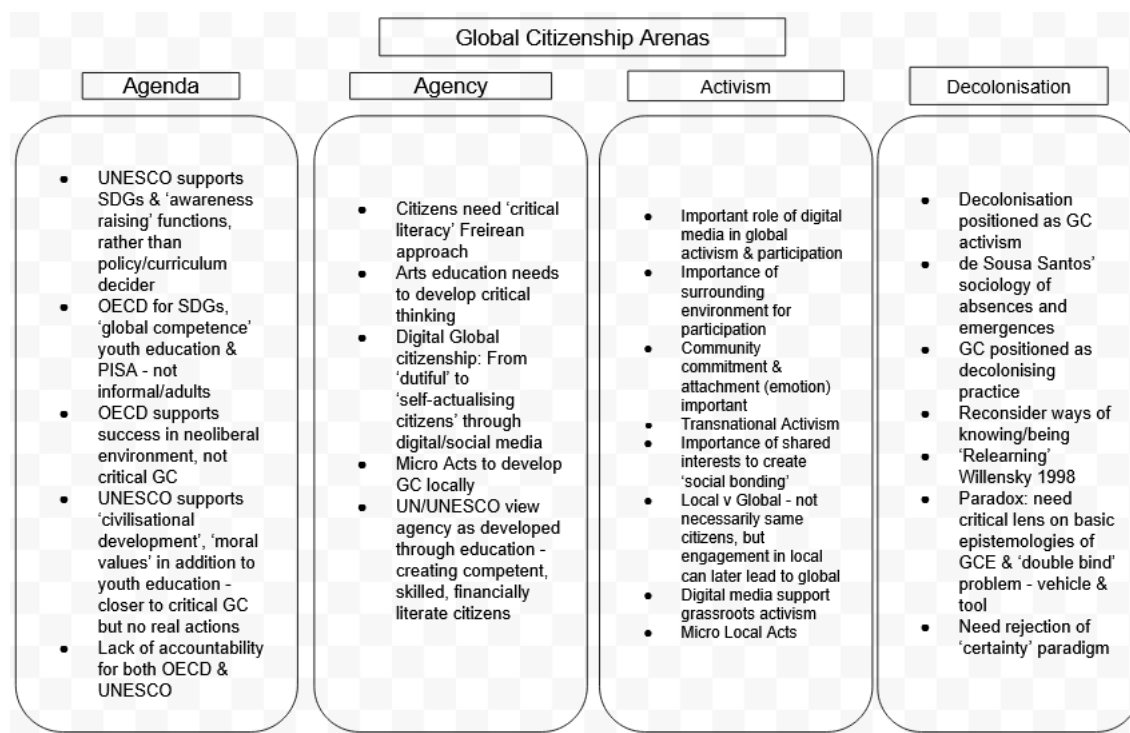
Global Citizenship Education: Critical Visions

Global citizenship is an indisputably complex term with competing operating assumptions and discourses, both present and impacting educational imaginary and

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decision-making. As Figure 1 shows, even a limited representation of the research literature in this arena easily foregrounds tensions between policy organisations (e.g., UNESCO, OECD; see Figure 2), distinct conceptions of practice in literacy, criticality and agency formation, among many others (Baek, 2018; Costa & Ponte e Sousa, 2020; Potts, 2009; Sanz-Prieto et al., 2024; Schattle, 2009), or underscores various representations of activism or decolonial criticality (Pillay & Karsgaard, 2023).

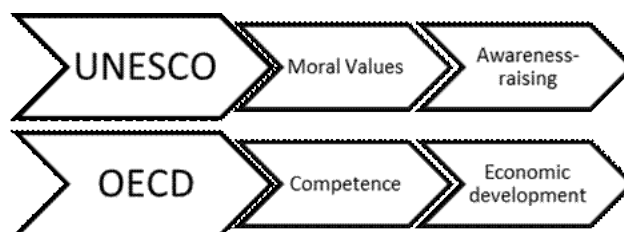
Figure 1. Global Citizenship Arenas and their different epistemological conceptions.



GC = Global Citizenship; SDG = Sustainable Development Goal; PISA = Programme for International Student Assessment.

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Figure 2. Tensions between policy organisations regarding Global Citizenship.



The educational and cultural explorations we develop here are thus embedded in a wide conceptual-political environment, which according to Goren and Yemini (2017), can be understood through at least three, often hierarchical, categories:

open global citizenship, which recognizes the interdependence between nation states in the global age and recognizes opportunities for cultural diversification; moral global citizenship based on equality and human rights and emphasizing global responsibility; and socio-political global citizenship, which is meant to shift the balance of political power so as to promote equality and cultural diversity. These categories are hierarchical, with open global citizenship representing a shallow form of GCE and socio-political global citizenship representing a profound form. (Goren & Yemini, 2017, p. 171)

For the purpose of this paper, we pay particular attention to socio-political global citizenship, the concept upon which UNESCO (2015) established GCE. We view this framing as promoting activism through essential "values in education such as non-discrimination, respect for diversity and solidarity" (UNESCO, 2023, p. 5) and drawing "on the methods and ideas behind well-established educational concepts such as human rights education, education for sustainable development, education for international/intercultural understanding and education for peace" (UNESCO, 2023, p. 5).

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Following the UNESCO model, GCE presents three domains of learning that should be considered in education policies (Table 1):

Table 1. Domains of learning and topics defined in GCE by UNESCO.

Domains of learning	Topics
Cognitive	1. Local, national and global systems and structures.
	2. Issues affecting interaction and connectedness of communities at local, national and global levels.
	3. Underlying assumptions and power dynamics.
Socio-emotional	4. Different levels of identity.
	5. Different communities people belong to and how these are connected.
	6. Difference and respect for diversity.
Behavioural	7. Actions that can be taken individually and collectively.
	8. Ethically responsible behaviour.
	9. Getting engaged and taking action.

Source: UNESCO (2015). *Global Citizenship Education: Topics and Learning Objectives*. UNESCO Publishing.

However, the GCE agenda is accused of centralising power and delegitimising democracy because the cosmopolitan sense of supranational institutions involves hierarchical and neoliberal relationships—in interactions between countries, social classes, and societies (Dower & Williams, 2002; Pashby et al., 2020). Supranational here refers to governing bodies or institutions—such as the United Nations, the World Bank, OECD, or UNESCO—that operate above the level of individual nation-states. While they are designed to coordinate international efforts and set global standards, they often wield disproportionate influence over national education policies and priorities.

This can produce top-down dynamics in which local actors, particularly those from the Global South, have little real power to shape agendas ostensibly created 'for all.' In other words, the weakest submits to the strongest because the former has limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in the drafting and monitoring of such agendas (Pais & Costa, 2020). Consequently, these supranational frameworks can "close down the possibility of more critical approaches, particularly approaches that offered

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alternative ways to conceptualize development, knowledge, and solutions from the perspective of historically subjugated peoples" (de Oliveira Andreotti, 2014, pp. 34-35).

(Inter)subjectivity in Activist Music Education

Understanding activism as critical or liberating actions that confront oppressive conditions (Freire, 2005), activist music education encourages the overhaul of daily routines to ensure social justice, inclusion, interculturality, and sustainability (Angel-Alvarado, 2025). Activist music teachers promote the revitalisation of music teaching (Schmidt, 2015; 2017), even though the agency differs among teachers because everyone seeks to overcome social oppressions and unfavoured conditions in accordance with their own viewpoints, contexts and order of priorities. Activist music education is then subjective, as "there are as many pedagogies as there are teachers" (Cain, 2013, p. 78).

From the perspective of activism, agency and agenda may be seen as opposite yet interdependent forces that each seek social change (Salvador et al., 2020); however, we propose that activism serves as a pivot between the two concepts. In this way, it is reasonable to say that activist agency implies an intrinsic commitment to continuously improving quality of life and education for all, while recognising oneself as a change agent (Schmidt, 2024), whereas activist agenda is a consensual action plan defined by one or more social groups, mobilising their members to enact and comply with the social agreement between them (Niedhardt, 2020). Both concepts reinforce the sense of intersubjectivity because every form of activism has social impact as both reason and outcome. In that regard, Sutela et al. (2020) assert that individuals tailor and

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accommodate behaviours to changing relational contexts, so agency may be adjusted within a larger agenda that advocates for policy change (Hess, 2019).

Intersubjectivity is understood "as the variety of relations between perspectives. Those perspectives can belong to individuals, groups, or traditions and discourses, and they can manifest as both implicit (or taken for granted) and explicit (or reflected upon)" (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010, pp. 19-20). Here then, the analytical focus is oriented toward relatedness, as the social nature of humans is described as a node in a network where individuals and groups interact (Tanaka & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013). As a result, activist agency may align with the activist agenda promoted by supranational organisations through the GCE, thereby increasing the perception of relatedness. However, consistency may decline if individuals' activist agency diverges from the supranational agenda, which not only undermines global and local relatedness but also facilitates the emergence of resistance movements that confront certain governmental agendas and their status quo.

In the era of post-truth, it is essential to critically examine resistance movements to comprehend emerging conceptions of policy change. Anti-establishment speeches have emerged from both the far-left and far-right wings (Oleksiyenko & Jackson, 2021), revealing that activism can be represented on both sides of the political spectrum. At this point, agency assumes a crucial role, as it is key to internalising the position of a change agent and facing inequalities and injustices. In this regard, Angel-Alvarado et al. (forthcoming) assert that agency necessarily involves the redefinition of social vulnerabilities and precariousness from humanising perspectives grounded in equal opportunities and activism, thereby promoting the internalisation of social awareness, dialogical models, and self-determination.

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In light of the above, we have carried out the following actions. Initially, we discuss the intersubjectivity of agency, as the rise of social movements of resistance implies nonconformity with the official agenda (Hess, 2019). Subsequently, the emergence of resistance agendas is analysed, as the confluence of individual visions is represented through coalitions that seek to participate in public debate through a social agenda—which does not always promote agency because self-interest prevails (Oleksiienko & Jackson, 2021). Finally, the ideological relationships and bridges between agency and agenda are described from the perspective of critical relatedness, as social interactions become more relevant (Tanaka & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013).

Intersubjectivity of Agency: What is Happening in Music Education?

People tend to act individually to achieve their own well-being, even adopting attitudes that undermine the common good (Angel-Alvarado et al., 2021). Thus, teachers' experiences are affected by the actions of community members and policymakers to the extent that human dignity is disregarded. The cases of two U.S. music teachers who confronted hostile, self-interested institutional contexts in Catholic schools after entering same-sex marriages offer a useful illustration. On the one hand, James LaBanca was accused of violating church policy for publicly celebrating his wedding and subsequently lost his position (Collins, 2024). On the other hand, Mark Richards was dismissed following the death of his husband, after a parent recognised his name in an obituary and filed a complaint identifying him as a widower (Vargas, 2025). Both cases reflect ongoing struggles against cultural discrimination, positioning music teaching as an inherently political act (Leung, 2024) and foregrounding the intersubjective nature of agency.

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Political agency becomes particularly salient here, as contextual challenges are interpreted through personal histories, ethical sensibilities, and lived experience—factors that shape whether music teachers choose to act as agents of change or not (Angel-Alvarado et al., forthcoming). Political agency, therefore, may function either to reproduce the status quo or to catalyse transformations aimed at improving social conditions.

Drawing from a different arena, the conservatoire approach privileges direct instruction organised around an instructor–learner dyad (Palmer & Baker, 2021), in which the teacher retains decision-making authority over technique and repertoire, while students are expected to comply with prescribed tasks. As such, the conservatoire approach is rarely positioned as a catalyst for change, as it prioritises the development of technical and theoretical musical skills while largely neglecting moral and ethical considerations central to culturally responsive pedagogy (Campbell et al., 2016). Indeed, evidence of physical violence has been documented in some contexts: in the Turkish education system, for instance, approximately ten per cent of students report experiencing physical aggression from music teachers following unsuccessful musical performances (Özevin, 2022). These dynamics suggest the predominance of teacher self-interest, whereby musical performance is privileged over an ethics of care—an imbalance also identified in recent critiques of specialist music education for gifted children (López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023).

As a potential change factor, constructivism has been advanced as a means of reorienting the conservatoire approach toward more humanising pedagogies (Pozo et al., 2022). Within constructivist frameworks, students become active agents in educational settings and music teachers serve as mediators of learning, using different

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formats of auditory, oral, instrumental, psychomotor, and psychological representation to promote learning (Carey et al., 2017; Gaunt et al., 2021). In this sense, constructivist approaches are understood to safeguard and promote the full development of human personality—a principle that aligns with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In light of the above, we also highlight acts of resilience and resistance promoted at Rimón School of Music in Israel. The terrorist massacre at the Nova Music Festival on October 7, 2023, caused a collective trauma in Israeli society (Simon et al., 2025). For that reason, songwriting workshops were introduced at the Rimón School of Music to provide therapeutic activities for survivors and their relatives (Birnberg, 2024), allowing participants to address their memories and emotions through composition and staging, as they can perform their original songs to an audience. In that regard, constructivism prevails because participants seek lyrical inspiration in their own experiences and feelings, such that music teachers act as mediators who focus their agency on optimising therapeutic management and encouraging the songwriter's own musical satisfaction. We contend that in such efforts, the full development of the human personality is promoted, as musical practice serves as a means of expression oriented toward the verbalisation and performance of personal ideas that arise through introspection.

Resilience and resistance are also promoted on the other side of the border. Concretely, Abu Amsha's constructivist initiative, Gaza Birds Singing, operationalises cultural practice as a form of psychosocial infrastructure aimed at sustaining dignity, agency, and everyday resilience within displaced communities. As reported by Minisini (2025), initially, the project encountered scepticism from camp residents who prioritised

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material survival over cultural activity. Over time, however, the structured music sessions reconstituted social space within the camps, enabling children exposed to chronic violence to recover routines, symbolic expression, and a sense of purpose. Complementary reporting describes these grassroots music initiatives—conducted in tents and improvised shelters—as embedded practices of coping and everyday resistance that contribute to emotional regulation, social cohesion, and the reconstruction of meaning under conditions of extreme precarity (Alkas, 2025).

What is presented above aims to underscore the centrality of social context in the exercise of political agency, emphasising its fundamentally intersubjective character. Cultural conditions and social realities shape not only how music is taught, but also the purposes teaching is understood to serve. As illustrated by initiatives such as the Rimón School of Music's engagement with trauma through music therapy in Israel and Abu Amsha's work supporting the mental health of children and young people in Gaza, music education can function simultaneously as an act of care, love, and resistance (Karlsen, 2019). Yet, because these practices emerge from markedly different social and political contexts, the forms and meanings of agency they enact necessarily diverge. Taken together, these cases reaffirm that political agency in music education is neither uniform nor singular, but contextually situated and plural in nature (Cain, 2013).

Emergence of Resistance Agendas in Musicology and Music Education

Over the past decade, global debates in higher education and the arts have witnessed an intensification of what may be termed resistance agendas—movements that arise in response to perceived hegemonies in knowledge, culture, and power (Rosenberg, 2023). Within musicology and music education, such agendas often align with decolonial, feminist, and social-justice frameworks that challenge Eurocentric traditions and seek to

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expose the colonial legacies embedded in curricula, institutions, and repertoire choices.

Yet as these movements gain institutional momentum, questions emerge about balance, reciprocity, and contextual relevance. In European contexts, for instance, Eurocentric musical practices are part of local cultural heritage and intellectual history—erasing or marginalising them risks undermining, rather than diversifying, cultural literacy.

Moreover, while decolonial critiques often target Western canons in Europe or North America, they rarely interrogate the near-absence of European classical music within educational systems in other regions—such as India, the Arab world, or sub-Saharan Africa—where curricular nationalism or cultural essentialism similarly restrict intercultural exchange.

These asymmetries suggest that decolonial discourse, when applied uncritically and targeted to a specific context, can reproduce new exclusions by treating European cultural forms as inherently oppressive rather than as one voice within a pluralistic global ecology. The growing polarisation between advocacy and academic critique thus raises an urgent question: how can educators sustain ethical and political engagement without replacing one hegemonic orthodoxy with another? It is within this shifting terrain that this section examines the emergence of resistance agendas in musicology and music education, exploring how agency and agenda intersect, conflict, and co-evolve across global contexts.

In recent discourse, certain decolonial narratives within music education have taken on a dogmatic form—less an invitation to critical inquiry than a mandate to align with particular political and ideological agendas. The narrative that the classical musical canon 'must be decolonised' is sometimes presented not as a research question but as a declarative truth that admits no dissent. For example, in the United Kingdom, a

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professor of music history resigned in protest at what he described as rising ideological conformism—woke musicology—within his field (Harper-Scott, 2021). This prominent scholar left academia arguing that such statements become dogmatic not by their content, but by the fact that they "admit of no doubt, no criticism, no challenge" (Pace, 2021)—in short, what began as a call to re-examine structures of cultural power risks becoming an orthodoxy of its own. His departure points not merely to ideological disagreement, but to an environment where agenda-driven narratives replace open scholarly praxis and agency.

At the same time, wider commentaries caution that decolonising music curricula cannot become a process of erasing Western art music simply because of its historical entanglements with power. As one article put it, "Decolonising the music curriculum should be an adagio movement... careful thought is required before Western art music is condemned and cast out" (Olsen, 2022). Furthermore, Kertz-Welzel (2020) highlights how a rejection of Western 'classical' music in some educational contexts often reflects deeper frustrations: the music is sometimes perceived as elitist or insufficiently connected to some students' lived experiences, particularly when it is pedagogically positioned in ways that privilege certain forms of cultural capital. She argues that this hatred is not merely a dislike of repertoire, but a response to how classical music is frequently framed or institutionalised in relation to students' identities and experiences—thereby raising critical questions of relevance, exclusion, and agency.

What this suggests for music education is a decolonising commitment to: an orientation that acknowledges colonial and nationalist legacies across musical practices and repertoires—affecting not only Western art music but also many other genres and traditions—while remaining reflexively alert to the risks of replacing one totalising

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political narrative with another (Pace, 2022). When decolonial discourses harden into polarised frameworks—casting 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' as fixed identities, positioning students as passive victims and educators as moral arbiters—they risk foreclosing agency rather than cultivating it. Such dynamics point to a broader concern: when ideological certainty eclipses relational listening and contextual judgment, educational spaces may be reduced to the enactment of predetermined activist scripts, rather than sustained sites of dialogic, self-critical, and context-sensitive engagement.

Importantly, this risk of reduced agency extends beyond Eurocentric discourse to broader academic, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. Campaigns to boycott Israeli academics and universities raise pressing concerns about academic freedom, individual agency, and institutionalised exclusion. For example, the Student Union of the University of the Arts Helsinki called on the institution to terminate its relations with Israeli educational institutions (Uniarts Helsinki Student Union, 2024). Similarly, the Royal Academy of Art (KABK) in The Hague decided to cancel its cooperation with the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, citing human-rights concerns (Krijgsman, 2024). These documented actions show that scholars, artists and institutions affiliated with Israeli organisations increasingly face cancelled exchanges, suspended collaborations or boycott pressures—effectively revoking autonomy and, in some cases, amounting to structural discrimination. Such measures diminish, and in some cases cancel, the agency of critical voices.

For instance, within Israel's education sector, school principals—including leaders of prominent music institutions—have publicly called for a cease-fire in Gaza and the return of hostages, only to be threatened with disciplinary action for introducing politics into education, showing that a new form of silencing critical voices in education

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has emerged. An example of this would be an interview published in 'Calcalist', in which principal and music education researcher Dan Sagiv explained that "in the education system, it is impossible to even mention the prices paid by the population in Gaza," describing an atmosphere in which educators avoid humanitarian discussion out of fear of political labelling or reprisal (Dori, 2025). Sagiv warned that this climate of fear erodes the humanistic and democratic foundations of Israeli education and "poses a danger to the moral image of the country." Writing later in 'Haaretz', he argued that educators have an ethical duty "to voice basic humanistic positions and model moral clarity for students," emphasising that compassion and calls to end the war "are not political acts but ethical imperatives" (Sagiv, 2025).

Thus, we advocate for a music education that remains open to multiple perspectives, avoids ideological closure, and invites students and educators into genuine inquiry rather than performative alignment. Rather than simply replacing one canon with another—or, by analogy, allowing political or institutional agendas to silence or boycott voices and individual agency on contentious issues such as Israel and Gaza—this approach foregrounds research-based knowledge, dialogic pedagogy, and reflexive practice, so that the aim of GCE is not merely to follow agendas but to activate agency in confronting complexity, ambiguity, and change in the pursuit of global citizenship.

Ideological Relationships: Can Activism Become a Mediator?

The GCE framework articulated by UNESCO (2015) is grounded in a human rights orientation, recognising gender equality and dignity as fundamental rights. Similarly, the OECD's Global Competence Framework (2018) foregrounds human rights as central to educational aims. Together, these supranational initiatives align with Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms education's role in "the full

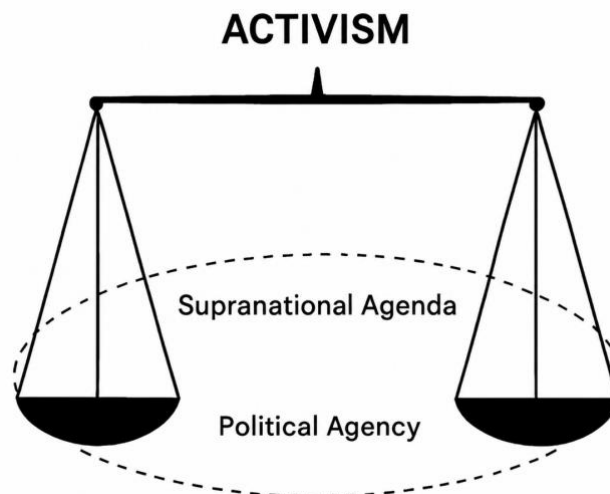
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development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (United Nations, 1948, p. 76). Within this framing, peace and sustainability are advanced through commitments to fairness and inclusion, while cultural diversity is positioned as a means of fostering "understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups" (United Nations, 1948, p. 76).

Building on these commitments, the supranational agenda advances a conception of activism (UNESCO, 2015) that seeks to awaken political agency in ways that defend and promote human rights (Zamorano-Valenzuela, 2024). Here, activism operates as a mediating space between policy frameworks and real-life practice, enabling political agency to emerge relationally when activist engagements are exercised with critical reflexivity, ethical restraint, and attentiveness to context. In this sense, responsible activism does not prescribe predetermined political positions, but rather sustains civic spaces in which freedom of expression and assembly can be enacted dialogically, and where agency is cultivated through critical relatedness rather than ideological closure (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Activism at a pivot between the supranational agenda and political agency.

Source: Skywork.ai was used in the design.



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The NGO Toki Rapa Nui serves as a good example of responsible activism, as it assumes a social role on Easter Island, Chile, promoting equal opportunities in access to music education (Fortín, 2024). Specifically, this project promotes decolonialism because students can learn about local and foreign music, thereby dignifying local knowledge in its own codes of expression, in balance with canonical knowledge of music (Shifres & Rosabal-Coto, 2017). Hence, the agenda oriented toward interculturality attracts pluralistic political agency. This responsible activism allows communities to embrace the past, adapt to the present, and foresee the future (Angel-Alvarado et al., forthcoming).

Another example is the Red de Escuelas de Música de Medellín [the Network of Music Schools of Medellín; Colombia], which aligns with responsible activism because it promotes an educational model based on social justice to improve the quality of life of children and adolescents from socioeconomically disadvantaged families (Baker, 2021). The Network accepts that music education alone does not improve living conditions, so it is necessary to have ongoing support from psychologists and social workers to satisfy students' holistic needs. This example also reflects responsible activism in which agenda and agency attract each other because, on the one hand, it is consistent with the supranational agenda by promoting the full development of the human personality and, on the other hand, it is mobilising by fostering the awakening of political agency with a focus on social justice.

In light of the above cases, the conservatoire approach should be oriented toward politics of care that promote humanising, constructivist, and contingent teaching practices (López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023). More precisely, music teaching should promote civic engagement, empowerment, and active citizenship through human rights education. Consequently, responsible activism serves as a pivot between agenda and agency, as the

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former is implicit in the curricular structures that determine educational policies, and political agency turns citizens into agents of social and musical change. So, relationships between agenda and agency should be understood subjectively: the mobilisation of individuals can lead to collective agency, giving rise to a shared agenda, while an existing agenda can, in turn, awaken agency in others—drawing new participants into a movement and amplifying its social impact. In this way, the experiential meaning of responsible activism may be continuously redefined through diverse standpoints, contexts, and interpretations, taking critical relatedness as a foundation.

Unlike all of the above, agenda and agency can also be distanced from each other, preventing responsible activism, as the imbalance intensifies the intersubjectivity of agency and the emergence of new resistance agendas. For instance, the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM; 2015) has spoken out on activist practice in music education, establishing three actions. First, explore the identities, senses of belonging, and feelings that music evokes on a personal level. Second, analyse and assess the collective uses of music as a change factor. Finally, value cultural diversity and globalisation through musical syncretism. These three actions focus solely on political agency, so responsible activism is not promoted, as the supranational agenda remains invisible, leaving teachers without a standard curricular structure to follow.

Promoting activism that is both responsible—as UNESCO suggests—but also embodies critical relatedness—as we suggest above—within music education initiatives is therefore essential. This kind of approach can be understood in the context of Human Rights Music Education (HRME; Angel-Alvarado et al., 2025), a particularly generative framework, as it cultivates political agency in ways that remain congruent with supranational human rights agendas (Angel-Alvarado et al., forthcoming). HRME

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understands educational practice as a holistic and relational process in which agency and agenda are not imposed but mutually constituted through social interaction, pedagogical decision-making, and cultural engagement. From this perspective, all educational encounters hold ethical weight, insofar as they may contribute—favourably or otherwise—to the full development of the human personality and to the protection of personal and collective dignity.

This alignment becomes visible in the work of Chilean composer René Silva Ponce, whose composition for street organ and youth orchestra positions a traditionally marginalised popular instrument as soloist (Silva Ponce, 2024). Read through an HRME lens, the project enacts responsible activism by bringing distinct musical traditions into pluralistic coexistence, prompting constructivist curiosity among young musicians during rehearsal processes, and sustaining reflexive engagement with musical temporality. In doing so, the work simultaneously transmits cultural memory, generates new artistic meanings in the present, and broadens future audiences. These intersubjective processes resonate with the supranational agenda's efforts to revalue the figure of the organ grinder and to recognise the street organ as part of Chile's intangible cultural heritage. Here, political agency emerges relationally through practice, demonstrating how responsible activism can be enacted in music education through critical relatedness rather than ideological prescript.

Closing remarks

What this article has sought to do is not to resolve the relationship between agency and agenda, but to clarify its productive tension, using GCE as a site for exemplification and analysis. In doing so, we have situated this relationship within a broader concern for ethical professional practice, asking how educators might sustain political and ethical

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engagement without simply replacing one hegemonic orthodoxy with another. We argue that this is not solely a matter of philosophical discernment or pedagogical criticality, but one that unfolds in direct interaction with the political environments of policy spaces themselves. GCE, in this sense, provides a lens through which the often shallowly framed opposition between agendas and agency can be held in sharper, more generative tension.

Throughout the article, we have suggested that this tension is not only inevitable but productive. When approached critically, it allows activism to be understood as emerging at the intersection of the individual and the systemic, grounded simultaneously in expediency and vision. Activism situated at the liminality of agency and agenda emerges less susceptible to dogmatic dispositions that reduce political engagement to ideological alignment or oppositional critique alone. Instead, it invites a more dynamic, dialogical, and contention-tolerant orientation—what we have described as critical relatedness—one that foregrounds listening, reflexivity, and relational accountability.

Central to this argument is the persistent tension between the foreclosure of possibility and the generation of new forms of action. GCE continues to illustrate how supranational discourses can provide grounding for dialogue, policy intervention, and the facilitation of agency, while simultaneously risking the flattening of criticality and the constraining of localised, emergent visions. As de Oliveira Andreotti (2014) has cautioned, such discourses can delimit what counts as legitimate action, even as they seek to expand it. This paradox is not incidental but constitutive of policy work itself, and it sits at the heart of our argument: that the agenda–agency nexus should be understood as a potentially productive arena rather than a problem to be resolved.

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From this standpoint, several fields of action emerge. One is scholarly, calling for sustained critical policy analysis that examines how agendas such as GCE are interpreted, enacted, and contested across diverse and evolving contexts. Another is praxial, requiring closer attention to how such agendas are enacted locally, including the preparedness of educators and institutions to translate policy into meaningful pedagogical and curricular practice. Higher education, and music teacher education in particular, continues to struggle to identify, document, and learn from these spaces, as well as to partner meaningfully with local organisations engaged in such work. These gaps point to both an empirical and professional challenge for the field.

What we ultimately offer is an expanded conception of activism as a praxis-oriented yet policy-conscious practice. Rather than positioning activism as oppositional critique alone, we link it to critical relatedness, emphasising that political agency emerges intersubjectively—through ongoing encounters among students, educators, communities, and the sociopolitical contexts they inhabit. The topical examples discussed throughout the article further illustrate how GCE takes shape within local realities. On the one hand, they demonstrate the value of supranational discourse in providing a communicable framework that enables translation, visibility, legitimacy, and, in many cases, access to resources. On the other hand, they also show that agentic practices often precede or exceed policy agendas, emerging from values, lived experience, and commitments to socially just and affirming musical practice. Agendas may circulate and recede; agency responds to a wider constellation of ethical, cultural, and contextual conditions.

Taken together, we argue, with the intention of answering the research question, that framing activism through the lens of agency–agenda tension offers a way of

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sustaining openness, resisting ideological closure, and inviting educators and students into genuine inquiry rather than performative alignment (Westerlund et al., 2025). By using GCE as both discourse and policy conduit, we have sought to operationalise this stance as a form of professional practice. Recovering a critically relational approach to activism may enable the field to engage more thoughtfully with agendas such as GCE—as simultaneously imposition and possibility—and to align policy practice more closely with the pedagogical and curricular challenges of music education. In acknowledging and learning to navigate the tension between agency and agenda, not as an obstacle but as a generative condition, we suggest that activism itself can be rethought at a time marked by profound political polarisation and divisiveness.

We end with some questions for the reader: what might have been possible if the arts institutions discussed above had engaged Israeli and Palestinian scholars in shaping the debate? How might contemporary musicology approach colonialism with greater openness to diverse global perspectives? And more broadly, what forms of pedagogical and institutional practice could emerge if agendas were treated less as instruments of compliance and more as starting points for dialogue, reflection, and relational accountability? These questions invite reflection on how agency and agenda intersect, and on the possibilities for practice that are dialogical, critically relational, and attentive to multiple perspectives.

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