

Rethinking Gifted Music Education Through Aesthetic Care: A Critical-Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This article develops a conceptual framework for aesthetic care in gifted music education, integrating care ethics and Foucault's notion of aesthetic existence. Recognizing that children and adolescents gifted for music face heightened performance pressures, perfectionism, and identity-related vulnerabilities, the study foregrounds the ethical and relational dimensions of music pedagogy alongside technical skill development. Drawing on philosophical, theoretical, and critical literature, and informed by Engeström's Activity Theory, it conceptualizes aesthetic care as a relational, perceptual, and ethical orientation that cultivates gifted students' aesthetic sensitivity, reflective engagement, and moral-aesthetic discernment. The framework articulates ten pedagogical principles: dialogic aesthetic engagement, ethical relational care, co-agency in aesthetic creation, culturally mediated experiences, responsive attunement, multi-voiced participation, reflective aesthetic consciousness, developmental differentiation, integrative musicianship, and transformative aesthetic encounters. By linking ethical attentiveness with aesthetic cultivation, this conceptual-theoretical study positions music education as a site for holistic artistic and personal development, offering music teachers a lens to nurture sustainable identities, relational competence, and flourishing musical lives.

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Boundary Configurations in Gifted Music Education

Music education has long been shaped by a tension between cultivating human meaning and producing measurable musical outcomes—a tension that continues to inform how teaching, learning, and values are understood in the field (Varkøy, 2007; Westerlund, 2007). However, this tension—between attuning to what music means in people’s lives and training bodies and minds to meet externally defined standards of performance—can also be understood as a *boundary problem* (e.g., Midgley, 2000): educators and institutions draw different boundaries around what “counts as the legitimate focus of gifted music education. This issue becomes acutely visible in the system of highly specialized education of children gifted for music (López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2023, 2025; López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023; see further Pihlström, 2023).

From the perspective of individual development, music educators grapple with balancing the cultivation of exceptional performance skills with the long-term well-being and sustainable growth of gifted young musicians. Students gifted for music often display the potential to extend the “seemingly limitless extent of human performance possibilities” described by Subotnik et al. (2011, p. 12) in the broader gifted education literature. Yet, educational practices frequently prioritize technical mastery in ways that may compromise their overall quality of life. For instance, in gifted music education, factors such as selection systems and competitions, audiovisual culture and public exposure, and the normative ideal of “excellence” are intended to frame musical ability as something measurable and rankable, granting privilege to pre-defined, culturally specific aesthetic standards. This approach frames musical learning as a performance to be publicly judged rather than as an avenue for growth and personal meaning, potentially constraining children’s musical agency, willingness to take risks, and diverse modes of expression. Reports such as Jung’s (2015) account of a prodigy’s psychological collapse, Yue’s (2015) discussion of gifted children who struggle in adulthood, or Heye’s (2025) account of chronic stress in gifted young musicians illustrate these systemic challenges.

Empirical research suggests that the difficulties highlighted in individual accounts are not isolated. Reviews and large-scale studies report elevated levels of performance anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, stress, and identity-related strain among students gifted for music, particularly in highly competitive and early-specialization contexts (e.g., Fehm & Schmidt, 2006; Papageorgi et al., 2013; Perkins et al., 2017). Although prevalence varies by context and individual factors, these risks appear systematically linked to evaluative cultures and narrow constructions of musical excellence rather than to exceptional cases alone. Importantly, the distribution of risk appears to depend less on giftedness per se than on how educational systems draw boundaries around success, care, and legitimacy in musical development.

Institutional and Structural Challenges

From an institutional perspective, a further clash emerges between designing specialized programs that genuinely benefit children gifted for music and using these children to enhance institutional prestige (see discussion in López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023). Here, too, boundary drawing is evident: a recent case study involving 81 administrators managing 68 specialized music programs worldwide revealed two competing orientations: one prioritizing the needs and agency of the child, and the other positioning the child in service of institutional goals (López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2025). The former treats gifted students as unique individuals whose personal, social, academic, and musical development should be supported by mentors and allies. The latter emphasizes institutional standards, funneling gifted students into advanced training aimed at achieving socially recognized benchmarks of musical excellence.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the wider socio-educational ecosystem, existing systems—educational, political, and social—often fail to provide sufficient protections for children gifted for music, despite extensive humanitarian and developmental discussions highlighting the urgent need for supportive environments.

(López-Íñiguez, 2024). Meanwhile, international debates on ethics and care values in education sometimes question the recognition of innate giftedness, exceptional talent, or intellectual/creative superiority (Slote, 2013). In this context, Persson et al. (2000) note that there exists a broader cultural and ideologically-driven hesitation to “reward or promote policies that would make some people more accomplished than others” (p. 718). This reflects a broader tension between promoting equity and recognizing exceptional abilities, including perspectives that emphasize anti-elitist and anti-ableist principles, which may inadvertently neglect the particular developmental, ethical, and pedagogical needs of gifted children and the specialist programs designed to support them (see López-Íñiguez, 2026). Recognizing these differing viewpoints highlights the importance of carefully balancing the support of exceptional potential with inclusive, ethical educational practices. These debates also illuminate the boundary assumptions about *whose* needs should be acknowledged and *how* educational policies and practices might navigate tensions between fostering talent and promoting equity.

Ethical Imperatives and Research Gaps

Among these intersecting tensions and competing boundary configurations, the vulnerability and high-risk developmental conditions of students gifted for music call for immediate attention—particularly through an ethical approach that critically interrogates gifted development and reaffirms the importance of care ethics within music education. For instance, a recent PRISMA review of empirical studies on caring approaches for gifted young musicians reveals a significant research gap: a lack of comprehensive studies addressing the creation, support, and effects of supportive environments for this population (López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2023). Within the realm of music education, care, pedagogy, and the aesthetic are profoundly relational and intertwined (Thompson, 2015).

Consequently, this article aims to develop a theoretical framework of *aesthetic care* in gifted music education by integrating the perspectives of care ethics and philosophical aesthetics, and to further articulate a set of pedagogical principles that guide the enactment of aesthetic care in practice.

The structure of the article is as follows: first, it examines the foundational concepts and ethical obligations associated with giftedness, giftedness in music, and gifted music education through a review of existing literature. Second, it outlines the scholarly heritage of aesthetic care through the lenses of care ethics and aesthetic theory. Finally, it conceptualizes aesthetic care as a form of pedagogy, incorporating Foucault (1988) notion of aesthetic existence as a mode of cultivation, and develops a pedagogical framework that integrates both the artistic and ethical dimensions of development and learning for children gifted for music.

To address the critique that aesthetic self-cultivation risks becoming an ego-centric form of aesthetic subjectification, this critical-theoretical study incorporates responsibility, relational attentiveness, and ethical responsiveness directly into the conceptualization of aesthetic care. In doing so, it positions aesthetic existence not as a self-enclosed practice but as a relational and ethically accountable mode of self-formation. This framing makes artistic development and ethical responsibility mutually reinforcing, thereby grounding the study's guiding research questions. Accordingly, this article defines aesthetic care as a relational, perceptual, and ethical orientation in which aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness, and responsiveness are cultivated not only for artistic refinement but also for responsible engagement with others. It integrates the cultivation of the self (aesthetic existence) with core practices of care ethics—attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and relational awareness (as discussed below)—so that artistic self-formation becomes inseparable from ethical responsibility within musical, interpersonal, and educational relationships.

To further clarify the concept, and to distinguish aesthetic care from closely related constructs (see Table 1), it is important to note what aesthetic care is *not*. First, aesthetic care is not equivalent to heightened aesthetic sensitivity alone. A teacher may demonstrate refined musical perception or expressive awareness while remaining unresponsive to a student's emotional distress or developmental vulnerability. Second, aesthetic care is not reducible to aesthetic self-cultivation understood as an individual project of excellence. When self-formation is pursued without relational responsibility, it risks reinforcing perfectionism, self-surveillance, or ego-centric subjectification rather than ethical growth. Third, aesthetic care is not identical to caring intention or goodwill. Even well-meaning pedagogical practices may undermine students' agency or well-being if they prioritize normative standards of excellence over attentiveness to students' lived experiences and relational needs.

To develop the framework of aesthetic care, we drew on literature highlighting relationality, ethics, and self-cultivation, including care ethics (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984/2013; Tronto, 1993/2020; Held, 2006), Foucault's notion of aesthetic existence (1988), and critical analyses of care ethics debates with implications for gifted music education (López-Íñiguez, *in press*). We excluded work focusing solely on technical skill, performance metrics, or outcome-oriented expertise, as these did not address ethical or relational dimensions. The framework was built by

Table 1. Conceptual Boundaries Between Aesthetic Care and Related Constructs in Music Education. Source; Authors' Own Elaboration

Concept	What it includes	What it excludes	What it looks like in practice
Aesthetic judgment (e.g., Kant, 1790)	Evaluation of actions or expressions in terms of aesthetic-ethical values	Ongoing care practices, relational support, pedagogical mediation.	Teacher judges a performance as “authentic” or “ethical” but does not support the student’s developmental needs.
Aesthetic experience (e.g., Dewey, 1934)	Affective, embodied, and emotional responses to music.	Sustained responsibility, pedagogical intent, relational accountability.	Student feels deeply moved during performance, but the experience is not pedagogically reflected upon or ethically guided.
Aesthetic sensitivity (e.g., Reimer, 1965)	Heightened perceptual awareness of sound, form, nuance, and expression.	Ethical responsibility, relational concern, care for the other.	Teacher helps a student hear fine tonal differences but does not engage with the student’s emotional or relational experience.
Aesthetic competence (e.g., Eisner, 2002)	Skills, knowledge, and judgment aligned with aesthetic standards.	Care ethics, responsiveness to vulnerability, relational attunement.	Student demonstrates refined stylistic judgment and technical mastery according to disciplinary norms.
Aesthetic existence (Foucault’s philosophical concept, applied in this study)	Self-cultivation through reflective, aesthetic, and ethical self-formation.	Explicit pedagogical care for others; teacher–student relational responsibility.	Students engage in disciplined self-reflection and identity work through music.
Aesthetic care (this study)	Relational attentiveness, ethical responsibility, aesthetic sensitivity, and pedagogical responsiveness.	Purely individual self-cultivation; technical or affective focus alone.	Teacher supports musical refinement while responding to students’ vulnerability, agency, and ethical formation within practice.

synthesizing these perspectives to define aesthetic care and translating this synthesis into ten pedagogical principles, iteratively checking for counterexamples and conceptual tensions. To ensure robustness, we compared multiple theoretical traditions and aligned them with empirical and illustrative cases from gifted music education.

This process produced a conceptually coherent, relationally grounded, and practically applicable framework linking teaching, artistic formation, and ethical development.

Research Question and Conceptual-Theoretical Steps

Given the framing above, the study is guided by the following primary research question:

How can aesthetic care be conceptualized and operationalized as a pedagogical framework that supports both the artistic and ethical formation of children and adolescents gifted for music?

To address this overarching question, the analysis proceeds through two conceptual-theoretical steps that make explicit how the framework of aesthetic care is developed and articulated. First, the article examines the ethical and philosophical foundations—care ethics, aesthetics, and Foucault’s notion of aesthetic existence—that are brought into dialogue in conceptualizing aesthetic care in gifted music education. Second, it translates this integrated conceptualization into a set of pedagogical principles that articulate how aesthetic care can guide the artistic and ethical formation of children and adolescents gifted for music in educational practice. In exploring these conceptual-theoretical steps, the study employs a critical theoretical perspective to examine aesthetic care in the context of gifted music education.

Drawing on critical theory’s commitment to understanding and transforming social conditions, our analytical approach foregrounds the power dynamics, institutional structures, and cultural norms that shape both teaching and learning (Fay, 1987; Madison, 2005). In keeping with critical scholarship’s emphasis on reflexivity, we also reflect on the influence of our own positionality and assumptions in constructing and interpreting the theoretical framework. We acknowledge that the development from giftedness in music to musical talent is a complex process shaped by the interplay of biological, psychological, educational, social, cultural, and policy-related factors (see further, López-Iñiguez & Westerlund, 2023). We further recognize that certain prevalent practices, which prioritize institutional reputation over the long-term well-being of individuals—such as conservatory hierarchies, highly competitive training and evaluation systems, parent–institution dynamics, and policy or funding structures that emphasize measurable outcomes—may pose structural risks to the physical and mental health, artistic identity, and equitable inclusion of gifted students.

Dominant educational norms and ideological discourses around achievement and ability may further constrain ethical, relational, and aesthetic development. The study therefore explores how aesthetic care functions *not only* as a pedagogical orientation but *also* as a mechanism through which students gifted for music and their teachers navigate, negotiate, and potentially resist these implicit hierarchies and normative expectations in music education. In other words, introducing aesthetic care into gifted music education does not mean adding an affective layer to existing teaching and evaluative systems; rather, it entails a *reconfiguration* of the institutional boundaries that govern assessment, feedback, and competition—specifically, boundaries that determine who is compared, how comparison is conducted, and when competitive evaluation structures students’ learning trajectories.

In *assessment*, aesthetic care reshapes evaluative boundaries within elite programs by requiring multiple, non-commensurable criteria to coexist—such as technical precision, interpretive insight, ensemble collaboration, and longitudinal development—rather than culminating in a single rank or prize. This limits the hierarchical authority of conventional grading and validates parallel judgments that recognize diverse forms of musical achievement. In *audition contexts*, aesthetic care restructures the boundary between faculty and student by instituting mandatory, structured feedback sessions, even for non-selected candidates. Auditions thus move beyond unidirectional gatekeeping and become reflective learning opportunities, where students can understand the rationale behind decisions and receive guidance that supports long-term artistic growth. In *competitive regimes*, aesthetic care introduces temporal and procedural boundaries by limiting competitions to key transitional points—such as entry into conservatory tracks, summer program placements, or major performance juries—and by clarifying evaluative criteria in advance. This reframes competitions as intentional, stage-specific interventions rather than continuous, pervasive pressures that dominate daily practice, thereby protecting students’ developmental and psychological well-being while maintaining rigorous artistic standards.

Giftedness, Giftedness in Music, and Gifted Music Education

Discussions and research regarding giftedness have been ongoing for an extended period; however, as of now, there is no universally accepted definition of giftedness that has garnered international consensus (Rutigliano & Quarshie, 2021). Despite persistent debates, researchers generally concur that *giftedness* (1) functions primarily as a label typically linked to a specific culture, (2) can be interpreted in both general and domain-specific contexts, and (3) is shaped by conceptualizations that vary across historical and geographical contexts (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008). Nevertheless, the concept of giftedness within educational philosophy is, by its very nature, ethically laden, as it is not merely an individual’s “own” property but carries a “beyond-the-self” orientation (Pihlström, 2023). A case in point is the notion of *transformational giftedness* advocated in the Finnish and Nordic education systems, which emphasizes cultivating individuals into competent citizens capable of fully realizing their talents and drawing on their abilities for the benefit of society (Tirri, 2021).

This societal framing introduces not so much a *value tension* as a *boundary problem*: Should the boundaries of gifted education center narrowly on technical-musical development, or be drawn more widely to include the wellbeing and ethical formation of the child? For gifted individuals themselves, bearing the responsibility associated with their “gift” may become a form of “unbearable heaviness”—a deliberate inversion of Kundera’s metaphor in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984; see also Powell, *in press*), used here to illuminate the structural burdens shaping and constraining gifted children’s agency—particularly when they are children without full legal capacity. Consequently, educators within gifted education systems need to carefully consider two essential inquiries: (1) what does it mean for children to possess giftedness? and (2) what does it signify when gifted individuals live in a world that they are more or less implicitly tasked with transforming?

Focusing on specialist music education requires a systematic examination of how gifted students are taught, which presupposes some working definition of giftedness in music. Yet, in the absence of a universally recognized definition of giftedness in general, how can musical giftedness be reliably identified? The understanding of giftedness has been influenced by various significant theoretical frameworks, each providing a unique viewpoint on its essence and origins. *Domain-general models*, initiated by Spearman, 1904, suggest the existence of a fundamental, general intelligence factor ('g') that underpins cognitive performance across all domains. Conversely, *domain-specific models*, exemplified by Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, contend that intellectual abilities are separate and relatively independent, with giftedness emerging in specific domains such as music (i.e., *musical giftedness* as opposed to being *gifted for music*; see conceptual differentiation in Gagné, 2021). While this latter perspective by Gardner has supported recognition of exceptional biopsychological potential in music, it has been subject to critique for insufficient empirical grounding (Waterhouse, 2023). To reconcile these perspectives, *systems models* highlight the dynamic interaction of various elements. For example, Renzulli (1978) proposed a three-ring conception defining giftedness through the interaction of above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment, while Sternberg (2003) advanced a broader model of successful intelligence that integrates analytical, creative, and practical facets.

Within music education, early scholarly work on musical giftedness was comparatively limited. McPherson (1997), noted the scarcity of empirical studies distinguishing gifted from typically achieving music students at the time (e.g., Atterbury, 1991), and observed that the terms *giftedness* and *talent* were often used interchangeably. His recommendation to adopt Gagné's (2021) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) remains relevant because the model provides conceptual clarity rather than relying on dated empirical datasets: it distinguishes between natural abilities (gifts) and systematically developed skills (talent), and outlines the developmental process and catalysts through which one (potentially) becomes the other.

This fourth iteration of the DMGT (Gagné, 2021) serves as the key framework for framing giftedness for music in this paper. It has two important implications. First, it introduces a distinction between "giftedness," referring to innate abilities, and "talent," referring to systematically cultivated skills. Second, it clarifies the process through which exceptional potential—giftedness—is transformed into tangible talent, highlighting the role of educational intervention. According to Gagné (2021), giftedness denotes possession of extraordinary abilities, termed *gifts*, in at least one of six domains—intellectual, creative, social, perceptual, muscular, and motor control—at a level ranking an individual within the top 10% of their age cohort.

Consequently, individuals described as being gifted for music are those students (typically children or adolescents) who display more advanced abilities than the other peers of their age and perform above a certain limit. The core of *gifted music education* lies in its function as an educational process designed to transform giftedness for music into musical talent—that is, to facilitate musical talent development. This developmental journey generally takes place within specialist music institutions, and is designed to assist students gifted for music in nurturing advanced and sophisticated musical expertise (i.e., musical talent).

Although the DMGT identifies program quality, facilities, financial support, and the milieu—including family, teachers, peers, and cultural context—as central components of educational catalysts (Gagné, 2021), it does not explicitly address the ethical and moral responsibilities involved in nurturing giftedness. In music education, caring relationships are essential for the holistic development of students, framing pedagogy as an ethical engagement in which teachers and students co-create environments that support identity formation, wellbeing, and human flourishing (López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023; see also, Hendricks, 2023). While López-Íñiguez and McPherson (2023) identify a gap in research on caring approaches for children gifted for music as argued above, this underscores the need to expand the boundaries of gifted music education—moving beyond structural and instrumental catalysts to foreground ethical reflection, relational attentiveness, and actionable principles of care in pedagogical practice. This transition naturally leads to a discussion of care, care ethics, and aesthetic care as conceptual frameworks that can guide both artistic development and ethical formation in music education.

Care, Care Ethics, and Aesthetic Care

In recent years, the ethics of care—initially a subject within moral philosophy—has garnered increasing interest in the social sciences, broadening its impact from philosophy and political theory into areas such as management, organizational studies, and education (Pellegri-nelli et al., 2022). In these fields, the concept of “care” is progressively recognized as a situated, socio-material practice, which highlights the importance of being attentive to the contextual and relational aspects of moral action (Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016). To prioritize “care” is thus to embrace responsibility for someone or something, emphasizing that its significance lies not merely in being a domain to be defended, but more fundamentally in being a mode, a style, and a method of working (Mol et al., 2010, p. 7). Tronto (1993) further conceptualizes care as encompassing attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness, framing it as both an ethical and political practice. Consistent with this ethos, UNESCO’s 1989 report *Learning to Care for Others: The Aims of Education for the 21st Century* explicitly elevates “learning to care” to a central educational objective. The report proposes a developmental trajectory for young people—beginning with caring for oneself and one’s health, then extending to caring for family, peers, and community, and further to caring for the social, economic, and ecological wellbeing of society, other species, and ultimately toward truth, knowledge, and learning. In this way, the “learning to care” paradigm seeks to transform a biologically rooted natural care into a shared, ethical commitment.

From the perspective of education, Nel Noddings offers a distinctive articulation of care ethics. She argues that care is a fundamental human need, and draws a distinction between “natural care” and “ethical care” (1984/2013). Natural care is conceptualized as an innate human predisposition, whereas ethical care must be cultivated through deliberate learning and educational processes. The ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius employed the hypothetical scenario of “a child falling in a well” (Mencius, ca. 372–289 B.C.E./2009, orig., 2A:6, p. 35), which underscores the manifestation of natural care. Mencius posited that anyone witnessing such an event would be overcome with a sense of compassion and

distress. This moral intuition, he argued, is not contingent upon the observer's relationship to the child or any calculated self-interest; rather, it springs directly from our fundamental disposition as human beings. However, this instantaneous, reflexive response is ill-suited to the protracted and multifaceted challenges inherent in real-life practice. This very limitation underscores precisely why educational emphasis on the value of ethical care is indispensable. Its cultivation relies on the accumulation of memories derived from both *caring for others* and *being cared for*, which collectively enable individuals to respond appropriately to the needs of others. Noddings emphasizes that a caring relationship is established when the one-caring accurately identifies and responds to an expressed need of the cared-for, and the cared-for, in turn, recognizes and receives this response. This relational dynamic constitutes an ethical framework characterized by equality, tolerance, and mutual respect, contrasting sharply with traditional hierarchical, authoritarian, or controlling relationships that have been common in conservatoire-based education (e.g., [Pozo et al., 2022](#)). Crucially, the cared-for is not a passive recipient but an active participant in this relationship.

While care ethics primarily emerged from moral philosophy and feminist theory, recent scholarship has increasingly illuminated its aesthetic dimensions, leading to the development of what is now referred to as *aesthetic care*. The conceptual roots of this notion can be traced back to Noddings's early discussion of *aesthetical caring* (1984/2013), where she uses the term to describe a form of caring directed toward objects and ideas rather than persons. Noddings argues that such caring is marked by an immersive, perceptual mode of engagement—one might be “seized” by mathematics, music, or artistic creation—yet it remains categorically distinct from ethical caring because it does not entail a moral relationship with an actual other. For Noddings, aesthetical caring resembles ethical caring insofar as both involve receptive attention and engrossment, but aesthetical caring lacks the relational reciprocity that grounds moral obligation. Nevertheless, the deeper philosophical foundation of aesthetic care does not lie in this narrow category alone but emerges from the aesthetic orientation embedded throughout Noddings's broader theory of caring. Scholars have noted that her emphasis on receptivity, perceptual sensitivity, and embodied attentiveness resonates strongly with John Dewey's aesthetics, particularly his conception of aesthetic experience as articulated in *Art as Experience* (1934/1980). Dewey reconceptualizes the aesthetic not as a property of artworks but as a heightened mode of experience characterized by qualitative unity, active-perceptual engagement, and an openness to undergoing and being transformed by encounters with the world. Noddings's notion of engrossment parallels this Deweyan framework: both emphasize an attuned mode of perception that privileges presence, receptivity, and a willingness to be affected, rather than instrumental engagement in the sense of goal-directed utility (see e.g., [Westerlund, 2008](#), for a discussion of Dewey's instrumentalism in music education).

Building on these philosophical convergences, contemporary theorists have expanded aesthetic care beyond Noddings's limited definition of aesthetical caring. In current discourse, aesthetic care refers to the aesthetic dimension inherent in ethical caring itself—namely, the perceptual, affective, and interpretive capacities that enable individuals to attune themselves to the needs, expressions, and lived realities of others. [Hansen \(2021\)](#), for example, emphasizes that teachers' embodied demonstrations of attentiveness function as “empathetic exemplars” through which students come to perceive and internalize caring

as a lived value rather than merely a moral prescription. Similarly, in the field of aesthetic education, teachers themselves embody aesthetic caring, as their “empathetic demonstration” of caring behaviors can directly influence students’ awareness of care (Hansen, 2021). Burnard and Mackinlay (2025) further highlight the ethical and relational responsibilities of music educators, advocating for pedagogical practices that foreground students’ agency, contextually situated care, and responsiveness to what matters most in musical learning.

Greene (1978, 1995, 1997, 2001) and Eisner (2002) also assert that aesthetic education can serve as a means to foster care and cultivate emotion. While aesthetic experiences may enhance students’ empathy and emotional sensitivity, this is neither automatic nor guaranteed; outcomes depend on context, guidance, and reflection (Cheng, 2019). From this perspective, the aesthetic is not an optional embellishment but a constitutive condition of ethical relations: to care well requires the ability to see, hear, and feel the other in all their situated complexity. This reconceptualization has profound implications for education. If ethical care depends on aesthetic receptivity, then cultivating such receptivity becomes a crucial pedagogical aim. Aesthetic experience—whether mediated through the arts, through attentive listening, or through reflective forms of inquiry—can potentially expand students’ capacity for empathy, relational perception, and moral imagination. Moreover, by encouraging students to inhabit multiple perspectives, aesthetic practices help counteract the routinization, emotional detachment, and instrumentalization that often undermine caring relations in institutional settings. The aesthetic therefore operates not merely at the level of content (e.g., artistic activities) but at the level of form—the manner in which teachers and students encounter one another and the world.

In this sense, aesthetic care transforms the ethics of care from a primarily moral framework into relational one. It underscores that ethical responsiveness is inseparable from the cultivated ability to perceive subtle cues, to remain open to ambiguity, and to sustain attentiveness in the midst of complexity. Thus, aesthetic care not only enriches our conceptual understanding of care ethics but also provides an essential bridge between moral philosophy and educational practice in music education—a domain that has historically distinguished between musical skill and broader ethical, moral, or social values (e.g., Reimer, B., 1989). Its incorporation into educational theory highlights a fundamental insight: caring well requires *seeing* well, *listening* well, and *responding* in ways attuned to the qualitative richness of lived experience.

Aesthetic Care in Gifted Music Education

Aesthetic Care as Pedagogy

As noted earlier, care, pedagogy, and aesthetics are deeply interconnected rather than existing as separate domains. Here, pedagogy is understood broadly as the theory and practice of teaching that shapes the learning environment, guides interactions, and mediates both skill development and ethical, relational, and aesthetic formation. Noddings (1984/2013) introduces the concept of ‘aesthetical caring’, which encompasses care for ideas and objects, suggesting that *artistic receptivity* and *receptivity of caring* may not be inherently linked. This implies that heightened aesthetic sensitivity—often celebrated in

young gifted musicians—does not automatically translate into relational or ethical responsiveness. When individuals engaged in music learning are unable to cultivate aesthetic care or a sense of existential engagement, they may find it more difficult to establish meaningful interpersonal connections. In such cases, relationships risk becoming instrumental rather than relational, potentially giving rise to interpersonal distance, misunderstandings, or tensions.

The challenges faced by students gifted for music necessitate a reevaluation of teachers' roles in caring educational relationships. Biesta (2017) redefines educators' significance, stating that "the educational task consists in arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way" (p. 7). This suggests that education should nurture the subjectivity of children and adolescents gifted for music by offering alternative avenues for existence, rather than focusing solely on skill acquisition. For students gifted for music, whose identities are frequently shaped by external expectations and performance-driven norms, this shift opens spaces for alternative modes of being that support autonomy, relational maturity, and ethical self-formation. Biesta further argues that subjectivity emerges through engagement with others, emphasizing that students' existence as subjects involves a continuous "state of dialogue" (p. 3) with non-subjects. Aesthetic care, understood as a pedagogical practice grounded in attentiveness, responsiveness, and dialogical openness, becomes fundamental to enabling such emergence. Consequently, a teacher's capacity to create an aesthetically caring dialogical space significantly affects the existential condition of children gifted for music as subjects.

Aesthetic Existence as Cultivation

Foucault's concept of the *aesthetics of existence* (1988) offers a compelling theoretical lens for understanding the cultivation of aesthetic existence in gifted music education. This concept is particularly relevant for the education of students gifted for music, who often face intense performance pressures, emotional challenges, and identity-related complexities (Feldman & Goldsmith, 1986; Freeman, 1983, 2006; McPherson & O'Neill, 2010; Schmidt, 2005; Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Sosniak, 1985; Winner, 1996). By emphasizing the aesthetic dimension of life, Foucault frames self-cultivation not merely as the pursuit of beauty or pleasure, but as a disciplined engagement with the self that integrates ethical, reflective, and relational practices (Gao, 2015). In music education, this perspective foregrounds the development of students' reflective and self-regulatory abilities, supporting their ability to navigate both the technical demands of music and the emotional and ethical dimensions of musical engagement.

As Gao (2015) has extensively argued, central to Foucault's framework is the notion of "care of the self", which encompasses both conceptual understanding and practical techniques for self-cultivation. Gao delineates four interrelated dimensions: first, recognizing the intrinsic importance of self-knowledge as foundational to self-care; second, actively engaging in a continual process of introspection, or "turning toward oneself," whereby thoughts, feelings, and actions are oriented toward self-improvement; third, approaching self-care systematically, emphasizing ongoing maintenance of physical and

psychological well-being; and fourth, exercising self-regulation and mastery over one's behaviors and desires. Importantly, Foucault stresses that self-care is not synonymous with isolation; rather, it is realized through the artful management of relationships with others, integrating ethical sensitivity and relational awareness into everyday life (Gao, 2015).

Applied to gifted music education, aesthetic existence as cultivation entails nurturing students' capacity to perceive, interpret, and respond to musical and social environments with attentiveness and ethical discernment. It encourages students to internalize music not merely as a technical skill but as a medium through which self-reflection, emotional attunement, and relational awareness can be developed. In doing so, educators support the holistic formation of students gifted for music, helping them navigate pressures related to perfectionism, social comparison, and identity formation, while fostering their capacity for ethical and aesthetic judgment. From this perspective, aesthetic existence is both a pedagogical objective and a means of equipping students with the tools for lifelong self-cultivation, resilience, and creative engagement.

Pedagogical Principles for Both Artistic and Ethical Dimensions of Learning

In the context of music education for gifted children, constructing a robust pedagogical framework and a set of clear pedagogical principles is essential for systematically examining the dynamic interplay between teachers' aesthetic caring practices and the cultivation of students' aesthetic existence. While existing literature provides extensive conceptual analyses of aesthetic care and aesthetic existence, and care in (gifted) music education (Hendricks, 2023; López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023), it largely lacks theoretically grounded frameworks that can integrate everyday pedagogical practice with individual processes of artistic and ethical development. To address this gap, the present study adopts Activity Theory—particularly Engeström's third-generation model (2001)—as a foundational framework for analyzing how teachers' aesthetic care can foster the aesthetic existence of children gifted for music. Using Activity Theory enables a holistic understanding of teaching and learning as interrelated, culturally mediated, and socially situated activities, thereby providing a structured lens for examining the relational and pedagogical mechanisms through which aesthetic care is operationalized and experienced (Engeström, 2001; Roth & Lee, 2007).

Based on the core elements of third-generation Activity Theory—subject, object, mediating artifacts, rules, community, and division of labor—the corresponding diagnostic questions clarify how tensions, contradictions, and asymmetries manifest within gifted music education:

- Subject: Who are the key participants, and what capacities, roles, or perspectives do they bring?
- Object: What constitutes the central object of the system (e.g., musical learning, competitive achievement, institutional prestige, or talent selection)? Where do tensions arise between formally stated goals and the object that structures actual practice?
- Mediating Artifacts: Which tools or resources mediate activity, and how do they shape visibility, comparison, and pressure, or enable/limit aesthetic exploration?

- Rules: Which formal or informal norms privilege prestige, efficiency, or selectivity over aesthetic growth, and how do they constrain alternative musical trajectories?
- Community: Who comprises the community, and whose perspectives or contributions are marginalized in shaping outcomes?
- Division of Labor: How are roles, responsibilities, and authority distributed among participants?

Reflecting on these questions, we constructed an aesthetic activity system with teachers and children gifted in music as the primary participants.

In this *Aesthetic Activity Systems* framework (see Figure 1), the instructional activities of the teacher and the learning activities of the child gifted for music are conceptualized as interdependent but distinct activity systems, forming a bilateral composite activity. Within this framework, the teacher and the student function as subjects, each engaging with a potential shared object: the creation and exploration of an aesthetic space for musical dialogue and development. This shared object encompasses the cultivation of aesthetic perception, judgment, experiential sensitivity, and musical literacy. Both subjects interact with the object through culturally and contextually mediated tools, situated within their respective communities, governed by specific rules, and operating within differentiated divisions of labor (see Table 2). This configuration allows for a nuanced analysis of how teachers’ aesthetic caring practices can actively scaffold students’ engagement with musical experiences, supporting the development of their aesthetic existence in socially, culturally, and pedagogically embedded ways.

Beyond the pursuit of shared object, the framework reveals a series of systemic clashes that function as potential drivers of change, presenting both challenges and transformative potential for aesthetic activities. For example, the tension between parental aspirations for competitive advantage, institutional demands for standardized excellence, and the

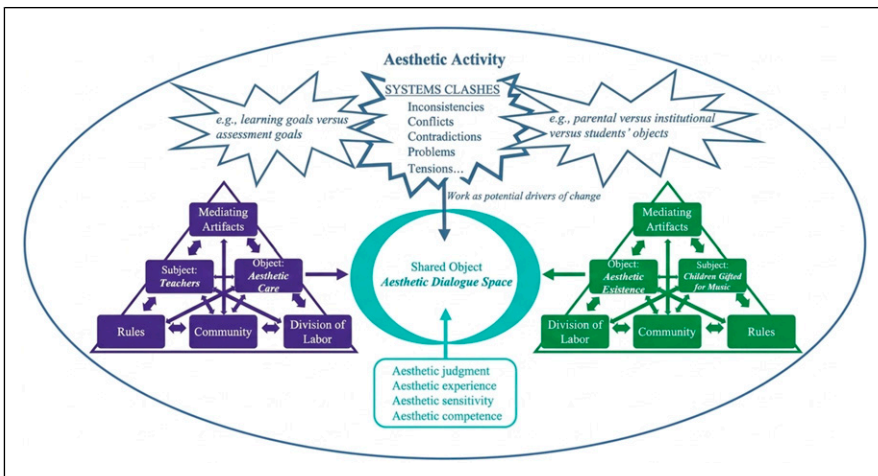


Figure 1. Authors-designed model of aesthetic activity systems (adapted from Engeström’s model interacting activity systems)

Table 2. Key Components of the Teacher and Student Activity Systems. Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

	Teachers	Children gifted for music
Mediating artifacts	<p>The cultural, symbolic, technological, and material tools that teachers employ when enacting aesthetic care:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Instructional materials (e.g. scores, repertoires, teaching manuals, model performances) - Aesthetic guidance tools (e.g. questioning frameworks for aesthetic dialogue, critical listening tasks, emotion or experience logs) - Technical tools (e.g. instruments, audio systems, recording devices, digital music software) - Symbolic tools (e.g. metaphors and aesthetic imagery-music-theoretical notation, analytical methods) - Communication tools (e.g. language strategies, feedback techniques, discourse structures in classroom interaction) 	<p>The tools and resources that students use to cultivate their aesthetic existence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning materials (e.g. etudes, repertoire, model recordings) - Learning tools (e.g. instruments, metronomes, tuners, recording devices, digital platforms) - Expressive tools (e.g. voice, gestures, facial expressions, creative works) - Symbolic systems (e.g. notation, stylistic vocabularies, bodily techniques) - Reflective tools (e.g. practice journals, emotional logs, aesthetic-response writings)
Rules	<p>The explicit and implicit norms governing teachers' instructional activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educational policies - Curriculum standards - Classroom management norms - Ethical and professional norms - Musical conventions (e.g. rehearsal discipline, performance etiquette, progression of technical training) 	<p>The formal and informal norms governing students' participation in musical learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning expectations - Classroom and rehearsal discipline - Musical conventions - Social-emotional norms
Community	<p>The social groups and stakeholders who jointly participate in the teacher's aesthetic care activity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School-based groups - Professional music communities - Parents and guardians - Colleagues and interdisciplinary partners - Cultural and artistic institutions 	<p>The social groups with whom students participate in aesthetic-musical activity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peers - Teachers - Family members - External artistic communities
Division of labor	<p>The distribution of roles, responsibilities, and authority within the teacher's activity system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher roles - Task allocation - Professional specialization 	<p>The roles and responsibilities assigned to students within their learning activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student roles - Musical-task allocation - Practice responsibilities - Collaborative division of labor

student's intrinsic aesthetic joy. Specifically, the parental object dictates rigid rules (e.g., intensive practice schedules), while the institutional object imposes a division of labor that casts the teacher as a "taskmaster" focused on technical precision. Within these systemic clashes, aesthetic care functions as a transformative mediator that reconciles structural contradictions. By reframing technical errors as expressive possibilities, the educator resists the "taskmaster" role imposed by institutional objects. This shift re-aligns the division of labor from distal evaluation to co-participation, effectively scaffolding the student's aesthetic existence. In doing so, aesthetic care transforms the music lesson from a site of labor into a shared aesthetic space where the child's agency and sensory engagement are preserved amidst parental and institutional pressures.

Building upon these aesthetic activity systems, the study derives a set of pedagogical principles structured within four core areas: relational engagement, cultural and contextual mediation, reflective and developmental practice, and artistic and transformative outcomes. To avoid treating pedagogical principles as decontextual or normative prescriptions detached from practice, the ten principles articulated below are conceived as *boundary reconfigurations* that emerge from the integration of care ethics, philosophical aesthetics, and Activity Theory. Rather than offering a set of techniques, they articulate normative pedagogical orientations that respond to the value tensions and boundary problems identified earlier in gifted music education—particularly the tendency to privilege technical mastery, institutional standards, and future achievement over the relational, ethical, and existential dimensions of learning. Principles emphasizing dialogic engagement, co-agency, and multi-voiced participation derive from care ethics' relational ontology and Activity Theory's understanding of learning as a socially mediated activity organized around shared objects. Principles foregrounding attentiveness, responsiveness, reflective consciousness, and developmental differentiation arise from care ethics' emphasis on ethical responsibility and perceptual attunement to students' expressed needs, especially in the context of the heightened vulnerability of children gifted for music. Finally, principles oriented toward integrative musicianship and transformative aesthetic encounters draw on aesthetic theory and Foucault's notion of aesthetic existence, framing musical learning as a mode of ethical-aesthetic self-cultivation rather than solely as instrumental skill acquisition. Taken together, these principles specify how aesthetic care can be enacted pedagogically as a critical response to prevailing boundary configurations in gifted music education.

- Relational Engagement:

- (1) Dialogic aesthetic engagement: Rooted in care ethics and Activity Theory, dialogic engagement positions students as co-creators of aesthetic meaning, fostering their aesthetic existence. In gifted music education contexts, teachers prompt students to articulate interpretive insights, facilitate masterclass debates, or guide collaborative interpretations of repertoire. Risks include slowing technical progress or discomfort among students unused to public articulation. Observable indicators include frequency of student-initiated interpretive contributions and reflective journal entries documenting aesthetic reasoning.

- (2) Ethical-relational care: Grounded in relational responsibility, ethical-relational care fosters psychologically safe environments, enabling gifted students to take interpretive risks. Teachers can provide pre-performance check-ins, structured peer feedback, or individualized guidance before auditions. Risks include over-reliance on teacher support or tension with competitive norms. Indicators include student-reported safety, instances of peer-supported feedback, and reduced performance anxiety.
 - (3) Co-agency in aesthetic creation: Drawing on Activity Theory, co-agency encourages shared decision-making in musical interpretation. Teachers may invite students to propose musical phrasing, co-design recital programs, or lead interpretive discussions regarding specific repertoires. Risks include uneven engagement or conflicts with standardized curriculum expectations. Indicators include student-led interpretive decisions and documentation of collaborative choices.
 - (4) Responsive aesthetic attunement: This principle highlights teachers' perceptual and adaptive responsiveness to students' emotional, cognitive, and expressive states, grounded in care ethics' attentiveness to individual needs. Examples include adjusting lesson pacing based on student fatigue/workload, modifying repertoire to match expressive readiness, or providing alternative practice strategies for students struggling technically or emotionally. Risks include subjective bias in teacher judgments or inconsistent application across gifted students. Observable indicators include logs of teacher adjustments, student reports of personalized guidance, and measurable alignment between repertoire challenge and student readiness.
- Cultural and Contextual Mediation:
 - (5) Culturally mediated experience: Anchored in Activity Theory, culturally mediated experience leverages diverse musical artifacts to expand aesthetic awareness. In practice, educators may introduce repertoire from multiple cultures, incorporate digital listening platforms, or explore interpretive models or improvisatory techniques from different historical traditions. Risks include potential overwhelm if material is too unfamiliar, or gaps in teacher expertise. Indicators include the range of repertoires/styles introduced, student ability to articulate stylistic features, and reflective assignments demonstrating cross-cultural understanding
 - (6) Multi-voiced participation: Recognizing the social nature of meaning-making, this principle engages peers, families, and artistic communities. Examples include constructive ensemble critique sessions, collaborative workshops involving industry professionals, or community presentations in relevant performance venues. Risks include logistical complexity or uneven participation. Indicators include frequency of collaborative activities and documented integration of community feedback.
 - Reflective and Developmental Practice:
 - (7) Reflective aesthetic consciousness: Based in care ethics and aesthetic theory, this principle encourages gifted music students to examine and articulate their aesthetic judgments, emotions, and artistic goals. Teachers might integrate

practice journals, interpretive discussion prompts, or reflective essays on performances. Risks include superficial reflection if prompts are poorly designed, or time trade-offs with technical practice. Indicators include completeness and depth of reflective entries, verbal reflections in lessons, and alignment of reflective insights with performance choices.

- (8) Developmental differentiation: This principle emphasizes tailoring instruction to individual cognitive, technical, and emotional development, consistent with care ethics' attention to student vulnerability. Practically, music teachers may adapt repertoire difficulty, assign personalized expressive tasks, or sequence technical challenges according to readiness. Risks include potential perceptions of favoritism or misalignment with group learning objectives. Indicators include tracking differentiated assignments, progression in skill and expression, and student-reported appropriateness of challenges.
- Artistic and Transformative Outcomes:
 - (9) Integrative musicianship: This principle connects technical mastery with expressive and interpretive growth, grounded in aesthetic theory and Activity Theory's holistic learning model. Teachers can combine technical exercises with expressive phrasing tasks, link scale practice to interpretive motifs, or integrate ensemble work into solo instruction. Risks include uneven attention to technical skill if overemphasizing expression or student frustration when integration is complex. Indicators include performance evaluations combining technical and expressive criteria, reflective reports on interpretive application, and teacher observation of expressive-technical alignment.
 - (10) Transformative aesthetic encounters: Drawing on Foucault's notion of aesthetic existence, the final principle facilitates experiences that reshape students' self-understanding, emotional awareness, and artistic identity. In practice, educators may guide students through interpretive challenges that connect personally meaningful themes to repertoire or design performances that highlight individual or collaboratively-shaped artistic voices. Risks include emotional overload or misinterpretation of aesthetic intent. Indicators include student-reported insights into personal growth, observable shifts in expressive confidence, and reflective essays or recordings demonstrating transformative engagement.

Discussion

Aesthetic care in gifted music education can be understood as a relational-pedagogical practice that integrates ethical attentiveness with the cultivation of students' aesthetic existence (Noddings, 1984/2013). Rather than centering solely on technical mastery, aesthetic care emphasizes dialogic engagement, emotional attunement, and the nurturing of students' expressive intentions, positioning musical learning as a site of ethical and aesthetic formation (Hendricks, 2023; López-Iñiguez & McPherson, 2023). The need for aesthetic care arises from the unique pressures and vulnerabilities experienced by students gifted for music. This group frequently faces heightened expectations, performance

anxiety, perfectionism, and identity-related tensions (e.g., López-Íñiguez, 2026; Sosniak, 1985; Winner, 1996). Aesthetic care offers a pedagogical response that supports their emotional well-being and artistic development, helping them cultivate healthier self-concepts and more sustainable forms of musical engagement. The relationship between aesthetic care and the cultivation of aesthetic existence lies in their shared emphasis on self-formation and reflexive engagement. By highlighting the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of gifted music education, this framework challenges institutional tendencies to prioritize technical excellence over holistic student development.

The relationship between aesthetic care and the cultivation of aesthetic existence lies in their shared emphasis on self-formation, relational attentiveness, and reflexive engagement. Drawing on Foucauldian perspectives, aesthetic existence involves shaping one's life and artistic practice through conscious reflection, ethical discernment, and aesthetic choices (Foucault, 1988). Within music education, aesthetic care provides the pedagogical conditions—attentive relationships, guided reflection, culturally and musically mediated tools, and interpretive freedom—through which gifted students can develop these capacities and craft their musical identities. The Activity Theory-based framework outlined in this study further illustrates how structured activity systems, mediating artifacts, and relational scaffolding operationalize aesthetic care in practice, linking ethical, relational, and aesthetic dimensions within the learning environment (Engeström, 2001; Hendricks, 2023; López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2023; Roth & Lee, 2007). The ten pedagogical principles outlined above operationalize aesthetic care by providing concrete ways to enact relational attentiveness, ethical responsibility, and aesthetic cultivation within music education, translating the theoretical framework into actionable guidance for teachers.

This study also highlights the need for empirical research examining how aesthetic care manifests in real instructional contexts and its influence on gifted children engaged in musical learning. Future investigations may draw on classroom ethnography, longitudinal case studies, or cross-cultural comparisons to illuminate relational dynamics, pedagogical strategies, and developmental outcomes associated with aesthetic-care-oriented teaching. Such research could further clarify the interplay between ethical reflection, aesthetic sensitivity, and technical skill development in gifted music education.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes aesthetic care not as a critique of music teachers—who, in practice, are deeply committed to their gifted students in highly specialised music programs—but as a response to systemic pressures that often prioritize future achievement over present well-being. By foregrounding the value of students' lived experiences through ethical, relational, and aesthetic engagement, aesthetic care provides emotional and artistic grounding within the learning process. Introducing aesthetic existence as a form of cultivation further reframes the aim of gifted music education: beyond potentially producing professional artists, it seeks to nurture ways of being that are ethically reflective, aesthetically grounded, and personally meaningful. Together, these insights advocate for a renewed pedagogical orientation that integrates aesthetic care and aesthetic existence, supporting students gifted for music in developing not only their artistic capabilities but also sustainable identities and flourishing lives.

By situating these principles within the Activity Theory-based pedagogical framework, this study illustrates how music teachers' aesthetic caring practices, mediated through tools, communities, and relational scaffolding, can operationalize ethical and aesthetic formation in practice. The pedagogical principles proposed operationalise aesthetic care, translating the theoretical framework into actionable guidance for teachers and providing strategies for ethical, relational, and aesthetic formation.

The framework also generates testable predictions for future research. For example, aesthetic care is expected to improve: (1) gifted students' identity coherence and self-reflective competences, (2) emotional well-being and reduction of performance-related burnout in young musicians, and (3) long-term career sustainability, including informed choices to pursue careers inside or outside music. Outcomes to measure may include wellbeing, stress and burnout indicators, perceived autonomy-supportive climate, identity coherence, and career trajectories over time. Investigating these outcomes will allow empirical evaluation of how ethical, relational, and aesthetic pedagogical practices support sustainable development for children and adolescents gifted for music.

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