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Guadalupe López-Íñiguez

The politics of care in the professional education of children gifted for music: A sustainable ecosystem worth advocating

This report corresponds to the author’s large-scale, ongoing project, *The politics of care in the professional education of children gifted for music* (2022–2027), based at the Sibelius Academy and funded by the Research Council of Finland. The research addresses the inexplicably understudied goal of ethical education for children gifted for music, who are typically involved in music education aimed at professional careers. Overall, this transdisciplinary, intersectoral, cross-cultural, and multimethod research includes data from diverse cohorts of participants in multiple contexts internationally. The project seeks to support children gifted for music to live as agentic and healthy individuals while pursuing desirable educational outcomes in caring ecosystems. In this project, which has a global reach, it is argued that musically gifted children’s pedagogy can reveal the fundamental mental models of expert culture in music and that *ethics of care* in gifted education (i.e., Slotte 2013) could provide a more reflexive space in higher music education to deconstruct the practices that demean these children’s agency and autonomy—treating them exclusively as high-achieving performers and servants of a “hungry” society (López-Íñiguez 2022; López-Íñiguez & Westerlund 2023).

This project takes as its first research-based starting point the most comprehensive theory on talent development, the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) by Gagné (2021), which considers the range of natural abilities, environmental and intrapersonal catalysts, and developmental processes that have so far been associated with this issue. The DMGT acknowledges that while 10% of children display unusually precocious “intellectual, creative and/or physical maturity well before the majority of their peers” (Gagné 2021, 77), (*giftedness* as outstanding potential; e.g., working memory, coordination, perceptiveness), they do not necessarily correlate with the 10% of talented adults who eventually “make it” as top-notch professionals (*talent* as outstanding achievement, e.g., competences). Giftedness is thus conceived of here as a multi-faceted concept that manifests in different ways among young individuals who seem to be extremely intrinsically motivated in what they learn (e.g., Gottfried et al. 2005).

The research reported here argues that music education needs to nurture the wellbeing of children gifted for music by suggesting a transformative politics of care in higher music education (i.e., López-Íñiguez & Westerlund 2023), where more specialist knowledge and ethical approaches to their education are provided (Smith 2006). Such an approach is aligned with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 2010), where it is stated that gifted children in any domain deserve a future as well-rounded, healthy, and agentic individuals. The report delves into the premises, findings to date, and current and future steps of the research. The main dissemination updates can be found on its dedicated website.¹

Research premises: Have children gifted for music been cared *for* and *about*?

Global discourses on humanitarian and developmental issues have widely advocated for the quality of education and special care of exceptional early achievers (UNICEF 2010). Yet, it is known that diverse educational and political systems and societies are failing gifted children globally in a multiplicity of domains, and they remain underprotected and exploited, too often denied their own thriving future (Slote 2013; Smith 2006). Their dramatic stories include being exposed to “extra emotional challenges, such as over-anxious and pushy parents, teacher put-downs, social trip-wires, loss of fun time, boredom and bullying in school and conflicting life choices” (Freeman 2010, p.1; in music, see López-Íñiguez 2019; 2022). Addressing this challenge within the system of professional education in Western classical music—a field particularly connected to the needs of prodigiously gifted children (McPherson 2016)—this research articulates a transdisciplinary ethical, educational, philosophical, psychological, and socioeconomic vision to explore how the politics of care could better support the professional education of children gifted for music by developing safe, tailored, and caring higher music institutions and advanced non-formal tuition internationally. In other words, this is the first research project to address the applicability of caring educational ecosystems in nurturing the gifted for music, going beyond the few theoretical attempts made in other fields (as discussed in Slote 2013) and attending to the ecological agendas of human development in the 21st century (Barnett & Jackson 2020; UNESCO 2019).

Based on the above-mentioned challenges and need to support gifted music learners, the research builds on two main premises. On the one hand, (1) international discourses regarding caring values in education and society are heavily opposed to the recognition of giftedness and the ability to develop superior talent. In essence, contemporary ‘anti-elitist’ and ‘anti-ableist’ research agendas have been primarily concerned with the rights of disabled and marginalised individuals (see Slote 2013). Therefore, the field of music education has adopted narrow views of special education and social exclusion (Smith 2006), where there is a clear “reluctance to reward or promote policies that would cause some individuals to excel more than others” (Persson et al. 2000, 718). Consequently, international discourses regarding ethical or caring values in education and society have been heavily opposed to

¹ <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/caring-for-musically-gifted-children/>

recognising special or superior kinds of talent(s), inborn giftedness, intelligence, and creative achievements (Slote 2013). This is exemplified, for instance, in the lack of special needs education courses for pre- and in-service music teachers tackling giftedness or in the discourses where these children are blamed for being part of (and feeding) the supposed elitist system of gifted education and, therefore, suggested to be put ‘on hold’ while others ‘catch up’.

On the other hand, (2) socio-educational systems exploit gifted children in the name of prestige. This has led to a dramatic situation in music environments worldwide, as evidenced by the underachieving able and gifted dropouts, the abuse of gifted children, and the traumatised adults who were once singled out as outstanding “prodigies”. This means that ‘pro-ableists’ and ‘pro-elitists’ who are aware of the existence of gifted children might want to profit from these children’s extraordinary potential and performances. This type of behaviour has been argued to lead to “lifelong trauma and abuse . . . parental oppression and exploitation . . . authoritarian behaviours of teachers . . . exposure to public scrutiny . . . child labour” (López-Íñiguez & Westerlund 2023, 117). Extreme manifestations of such exploitation may even include sexual abuse, as is known from recent discussions in the media (e.g., Fetters et al. 2020). As López-Íñiguez and McPherson (2023) argue, this is partly explained by the fact that

the education of young, gifted music learners has been based on widely spread reductionist and stereotypical beliefs concerning giftedness/talent, wherein the notion of childhood ethics is missing from the notion of gifted child (e.g., Beauvais & Higham 2016). Thus, when a child demonstrates an exceptional ability in music—e.g., cognitive, creative, affective, sensorimotor—, the socioemotional troubles tend to be seen as an inevitable side effect inherent to their persona (Gagné & McPherson 2016, 2–3)

As a result of the extremely polarising positionings above, gifted learners are typically conceived of as successful stars from elitist backgrounds who can cope very well by themselves and for whom no additional support is needed (Brown et al. 2005; Moltzen 2009). Tackling the vulnerable and high-risk situation of gifted, underage music learners and providing them with more caring futures is at the core of this project. Thus, the research applies the critical lenses of care ethics, justice, and equity to the many substudies of the project, which span across four main stages: 1) mapping the ground through literature reviews and theoretical writings, 2) empirical substudies with all stakeholders surrounding gifted children and the children themselves, 3) pedagogical in-service learning interventions, and 4) systems thinking (Luhmann 1995) as an overarching approach to all substudies findings towards the end of the project.

Findings to date: Mapping the ground of (caring) gifted education in music

During the first stage of the research, a plan was designed to unmask: 1) the professional frames of music education institutions for the gifted and, 2) the empirical evidence of research studies which would address any form of caring *for* and caring *about* gifted children.

This stage was planned to create research-driven materials for empathy-based in-service learning interventions, large-scale surveys, focus-group discussions, and one-on-one interviews with various groups of participants (see next sub-section).

In the first of these studies (i.e., López-Íñiguez & Westerlund 2023), the education of children gifted for music was approached from the perspective of ethics of care with systems reflexivity, suggesting that this group of learners can be seen as a special case of democracy, social justice, and children's rights. The study discusses the need to better recognise the moral space for these children to develop and how musically gifted children's pedagogy can reveal the fundamental mental models of expert culture in music. As pointed out in the study,

children gifted for music, when selected for advanced programs, may enter an “ableist” regime of technically defined and authoritatively prescribed musical competence goals instead of being cared for as genuine partners in human relationships and authors of their own lives. (López-Íñiguez & Westerlund 2023, 119)

The study acknowledges that ethics of care in gifted education could provide a more reflexive space in higher music education to deconstruct the mental models that demean these children's agency and autonomy, treating them exclusively as high-achieving performers—and that this reflexive process could transform not only gifted children's education but the education of all music learners in contemporary societies. However, it is not only up to educational institutions and their stakeholders to provide a more caring ecosystem for these children. For instance, Figure 1 shows an example of the many stakeholders surrounding children gifted for music (i.e., systems environment) and the larger conceptual and organisational elements that shape the entire system of professionalising gifted children. The research project attends to all these elements and tries to establish the interconnections between them to ascertain how and in which ways the system should change and what is preventing this much-needed transformation process from happening.

Figure 1. Socio-educational ecosystem of children gifted for music (adapted from López-Íñiguez 2023a).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Building on the previous study, there was a need to investigate how research studies discuss caring values in the education of children gifted for music, for which a literature review was undertaken (i.e., López-Íñiguez & McPherson 2023). The review considered hundreds of research outputs of diverse nature related to formal, non-formal, and informal educational settings, from which only 11 publications were selected. The review highlighted some positive elements identified in the selected publications, such as

addressing inequalities in the opportunity to access gifted programs; identifying socio-emotional needs of the gifted (and twice-exceptional) students; offering a

nurturing environment; focusing on intrinsic motivation; developing coping strategies for overall wellbeing; and cultivating healthy attitudes toward competitions through a spirit of peer collaboration and humility. (López-Íñiguez & McPherson 2023, 1)

However, the study also suggested that

[t]he existing research on caring approaches to musically gifted children's learning and development [is not only] scarce [but] current knowledge is based mostly on single one-off studies rather than systematic research, and on studies that examine a selection of aspects but not adopting a larger-scale theoretical framework (López-Íñiguez & McPherson 2023, 1)

Considering the findings from the studies mentioned above, it became clear that individuals must expand their (narrow) conceptions of talent development, inclusion, and diversity by creating more caring ecosystems that cater for the socio-emotional, physical, mental, and moral/ethical needs of gifted children in music schools, music conservatoires, and music universities globally. For this, current and future stages of this project aim at linking the previously generated knowledge with “broader national and international concerns such as human rights, ethics of care, and responsibility and laws that might protect highly gifted youth” (López-Íñiguez & McPherson 2023, 13).

Current and future steps: Towards more sustainable and caring gifted education in music

In the second stage of this research, besides being immersed in an edited volume on caring for gifted and talented young music learners (featuring scholarly work by several international researchers and practitioners; López-Íñiguez & McPherson in preparation), the principal investigator devised large-scale surveys for leaders responsible for over 200 music institutions which offer specialised education programs for gifted learners in more than 50 countries. Although specialised music education can be observed in formal and non-formal settings, the survey has mostly attended to the ones aimed at professionalism in music (i.e., formal education). As shown in Figure 2 below,² these institutions primarily respond to formal systems in which, often, “access is controlled through a quota of limited available places” (Gagné 2021, 97). Within these formal education settings, students are accepted after a highly competitive audition process. These programs have a variety of names across the world, such as ‘Talent Department/Lab’, ‘Pre-College’, ‘High School’, ‘Gifted/Talent Program’, and ‘Junior Academy/Department’, but they are also commonly referred to as ‘acceleration’, ‘enrichment’, ‘streaming’, ‘tracking’, and even ‘hot’ programs. Students in these programs can show particular physicalities, high levels of creativity, overly charismatic/shy behaviours in public, and sometimes come from a long line of gifted family

² Note: For this study, we have not attended to private, non-formal education, since that particular system will be part of another substudy of the project involving purposeful, one-one-one interviews, given the close nature of this type of instruction.

members. These programmes are vocational and aim at achieving professionalism in a discipline (Gross 2016) “at rates faster or at ages younger than conventional” (Pressey 1949, 2).

Figure 2. Formal and non-formal music education systems for underage gifted learners talent development (adapted from López-Íñiguez 2023b).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The survey was designed following various international frameworks of care ethics and empathetic pedagogical approaches from diverse gifted education fields that aim to nurture underage gifted learners. Specific aspects within the survey attend to environmental, intrapersonal, and developmental aspects of gifted children’s holistic development across their educational pathways. The survey aimed to identify current and past challenges in gifted education in music, as well as caring practices that are taking place in these settings, hoping to devise educational principles regarding caring ethics and gifted children for music institutions. At the time of writing this report, the principal investigator has reached well over 20% of representation and started analysing the data. The findings of this sub-study will form the basis of further publications.

In addition, adaptations of the survey are now being spread to diverse stakeholders within the music industry internationally (e.g., coordinators of music competitions and festivals). Contents within the survey are also transformed into open-ended interview questions for legal-age musicians with retrospective experience as gifted for music in their childhoods and for vocal/instrumental teachers who have specialised in gifted education for decades. The interviews are being undertaken at the moment of writing this report in both developed and developing countries globally. The findings from these sub-studies will also be included in publications of diverse nature. This stage will be followed by data collection in elite higher music institutions with specialised departments for the gifted in various OECD countries, where the author of this report will carry out pedagogical service-learning interventions including gifted children, their parents/guardians, main teachers, and the people responsible for curriculum and decision making within those institutions.

Once all data from the three first stages of the project have been gathered and analysed, the last stage of the research will aim at promoting conceptual shifts in the field of music education using systems thinking to suggest a new ethical agenda for the education of gifted children. In systems thinking, the music education of gifted children is conceptualised through a complex interconnection and interdependence between systems, subsystems, and their environment, not only to understand how certain values, beliefs, and assumptions shape the system’s structures and educational practices but also to show what needs to be changed in the system (Gonzales 2020; Jackson 2019). All in all, the project acknowledges the larger connecting elements between educational ecosystems and gifted children by employing an ecological theoretical approach (e.g., Barnett & Jackson 2020) through a broad geographical empirical coverage that attends to a child’s socio-educational ecosystem and expands the

critical angles for educational reflexivity to reveal and reconstruct the prevalent ethical-giftedness dichotomy in the field of Western classical music. The project is already doing so by challenging anti-ableist conceptualisations of special needs education, critically assessing elitist and instrumental justifications of the musically gifted in socio-educational contexts, and impacting diverse societies by raising awareness of the rights of gifted children.

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