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BY
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AALBORG
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C.V.

Sergio Garcia-Cuesta is a musician, educator, researcher, and PhD fellow currently working at the Rhythmic Music Conservatory (RMC) in Denmark. Originally from Spain, they have extensive experience as a music educator in Spain, Ireland, and Denmark. Their practice and research focus on expanding access and belonging within music education through participatory approaches to pedagogy and research. With degrees in rhythmic music, a BA in jazz performance, and a Master's degree in music education—from Spain, Ireland, and Denmark, respectively—their work combines research, education, music performance, and composition.

English Summary

As Westerlund and Gaunt (2021) argue, music educators are increasingly being called upon to expand their practices—addressing new social roles, engaging with additional voices, navigating new contexts, and reimagining how to relate to students in changing societies. These transformative goals echo across music education contexts, where values such as inclusion (e.g., Laes & Westerlund, 2017; Richerme, 2024), care (e.g., Hendricks, 2023; Silverman, 2023), social justice (e.g., Benedict et al., 2018; Powell, 2021), and social change (e.g., Hess, 2019; Kertz-Welzel, 2022) keep gaining traction—not as separate from, but as deeply entangled with music education's aesthetic and artistic aims (e.g., Camlin, 2023; Carson & Westvall, 2024).

However, expansion does not guarantee transformation. Even well-intentioned efforts to broaden participation or increase impact may inadvertently reinforce existing exclusions, or promote assimilative practices (Biesta, 2009; Laes & Westerlund, 2017). As Mateiro and Westvall (2016) observe, music educators often operate through "the lens of values and beliefs that they are accustomed to" (p. 157). Being socialized into the field's dominant norms might narrow which challenges music educators may recognize and which possibilities they may envision—risking the reproduction of hegemonic values and practices, in their efforts toward expansion.

Building on participatory approaches to knowledge creation and drawing on principles from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1996; Hess, 2019) and utopian thinking (Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Levitas, 2013), this research explores how music education might be collaboratively reimagined: What music education can be, who it may serve, who may contribute to shaping it, and how it might be transformed. It seeks to hold space for underrepresented voices to belong as co-guides in the expansion of the field—disrupting inherited assumptions, surfacing unnoticed challenges, and exploring plural practices that may allow people, in their diverse and evolving musicalities (Wright, 2018), to experience belonging on their own terms. This is explored through the following overarching research question:

> **RQ1.** How may music education practices be expanded—through critical and collaborative approaches—to increasingly hold space for people's diverse musical voices to belong, on their own terms?

To tackle this question, the dissertation adopts a holistic research approach. In line with Camlin's (2023) call to rethink not only music

education practices but also understandings of music education in order to transform the field, the research engages with the theoretical, practical, social, and personal dimensions of music education. By engaging with these deeply interconnected strands (see e.g., Camlin, 2023; Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Westvall & Akuno, 2024), the aim is twofold: to uncover increasingly holistic forms of knowledge that reflect music's multidimensional nature, and to create multiple points of entry into knowledge-making—where new collaborators feel invited not only to participate, but to experience belonging as knowledge co-creators who may co-shape the field.

This commitment unfolds through collaborative work within three distinct initiatives in Spain and Denmark—Canto Abierto, RePercusión San Cristóbal, and Landsby Akademiet—each aiming to broaden access, participation, and impact in music education. By engaging across varied contexts through critical and arts-based approaches to participatory action research, the research aims to value partial and situated knowledge in exploring how a plural expansion of the field might hold space for multiple musicalities, identities, and ways of knowing. These aims are further explored through three sub-questions:

> **RQ2.1.** How may theoretical, transdisciplinary perspectives and concepts—as exemplified by the exploration of artistic citizenship—contribute to the transformation and expansion of music education practices?
>
> **RQ2.2.** How may the embodied knowledge of practitioners and participants in the field contribute to inform this shared expansion?
>
> **RQ2.3.** How might these insights contribute to the development of more inclusive and plural understandings of music education, and musicality, for music educators and participants?

Across five articles and this dissertation, these questions are explored through the weaving of partial and intertwined empirical and theoretical insights. The resulting findings emphasize the importance of thorough and collaborative engagement between facilitators and participants with values and concepts—such as 'artist' or 'excellence'—that shape experience and meaning-making as part of pedagogical practice. They highlight the value of engaging through diversity—whether by attending to under-represented ideas or embodied experiences from varied contexts—as a way to deepen criticality, awareness, and possibilities for belonging. The thesis also points to

the potential of participatory research as an integrated part of music education practice, fostering a sustained attitude of reflection and development while countering exclusionary or even harmful experiences. At the same time, it cautions educators to remain critically aware of how aspirations toward care or criticality may rest on assumptions that risk reproducing harm or stasis. Together, these findings culminate in the conceptualization of an *integrative approach to music education*—an approach that acknowledges the complexity of the field and insists that meaningful transformation should not only be shared, situated, and critically reflective, but also remain attuned to its inherent limitations and committed to work through them in an effort that will always be partial, and whose impact will remain necessarily ambiguous.

Danish Summary

Som Westerlund og Gaunt (2021) påpeger, bliver musikundervisere i stigende grad opfordret til at udvide deres praksisser—at påtage sig nye sociale roller, engagere sig med flere stemmer, navigere i nye kontekster og gentænke relationerne til elever i foranderlige samfund. Disse transformative mål genlyder på tværs af musikundervisningskontekster, hvor værdier som inklusion (f.eks. Laes & Westerlund, 2017; Richerme, 2024), omsorg (f.eks. Hendricks, 2023; Silverman, 2023), social retfærdighed (f.eks. Benedict et al., 2018; Powell, 2021) og social forandring (f.eks. Hess, 2019; Kertz-Welzel, 2022) vinder frem—ikke som adskilte fra, men dybt sammenflettede med musikundervisningens æstetiske og kunstneriske mål (f.eks. Camlin, 2023; Carson & Westvall, 2024).

Dog er udvidelse ikke nogen garanti for transformation. Selv velmenende bestræbelser på at fremme deltagelse eller øge indflydelse kan utilsigtet fastholde eksisterende eksklusioner eller fremme assimilerende praksisser (Biesta, 2009; Laes & Westerlund, 2017). Som Mateiro og Westvall (2016) bemærker, arbejder musikundervisere ofte "gennem det værdi- og trossystem, de er vant til" (s. 157). At blive socialiseret ind i feltets dominerende normer kan begrænse, hvilke udfordringer musikundervisere er i stand til at få øje på, og hvilke muligheder de kan forestille sig—hvilket risikerer at reproducere hegemoniske værdier og praksisser i bestræbelserne på at udvide feltet.

Med afsæt i deltagende tilgange til vidensdannelse og inspireret af kritisk pædagogik (Freire, 1970, 1996; Hess, 2019) og utopisk tænkning (Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Levitas, 2013), undersøger denne forskning, hvordan musikundervisning kan gentænkes i fællesskab: Hvad musikundervisning kan være, hvem den kan tjene, hvem der kan bidrage til at forme den, og hvordan den kan transformeres. Den søger at skabe plads til, at underrepræsenterede stemmer indgår som medskabende aktører i feltet—ved at forstyrre nedarvede antagelser, synliggøre oversete udfordringer og udforske mangfoldige praksisser, der kan give mennesker med deres forskellige og foranderlige musikaliteter (Wright, 2018) mulighed for at opleve tilhør på egne præmisser. Dette undersøges gennem følgende overordnede forskningsspørgsmål:

> **FS1**. Hvordan kan musikundervisningspraksisser udvides—gennem kritiske og samarbejdsbaserede tilgange—så de i stigende grad skaber plads for, at menneskers mangfoldige musikalske stemmer kan høre til på deres egne præmisser?

For at undersøge dette spørgsmål anvender afhandlingen en helhedsorienteret forskningsstrategi. I tråd med Camlins (2023) opfordring til ikke blot at gentænke musikalske praksisser, men selve forståelsen af musikundervisning med henblik på at transformere feltet, inddrager forskningen musikundervisningens teoretiske, praktiske, sociale og personlige dimensioner. Ved at arbejde med disse dybt forbundne aspekter (se f.eks. Camlin, 2023; Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Westvall & Akuno, 2024) er formålet dobbelt: At afdække mere helhedsorienterede former for viden, der afspejler musikkens mangfoldige karakter, og at skabe flere indgangsvinkler til vidensskabelse—hvor nye samarbejdspartnere ikke blot føler sig inviteret til at deltage, men også oplever at høre til gennem deres rolle som medskabere af viden og medformere af feltet.

Denne forpligtelse udfoldes gennem samarbejder i tre forskellige initiativer i Spanien og Danmark—Canto Abierto, RePercusión San Cristóbal og Landsby Akademiet—som alle søger at fremme adgang, deltagelse og indflydelse i musikundervisningen. Ved at arbejde i forskellige kontekster gennem kritiske og kunstbaserede tilgange til deltagerbaseret aktionsforskning, værdsættes partiel og situeret viden i undersøgelsen af, hvordan en plural udvidelse af feltet kan skabe rum for flere musikaliteter, identiteter og erkendelsesformer. Disse mål undersøges yderligere gennem tre underspørgsmål:

> **FS2.1**. Hvordan kan teoretiske og tværdisciplinære perspektiver og begreber—eksemplificeret gennem undersøgelsen af artistic citizenship—bidrage til transformation af musikundervisningspraksis?
>
> **FS2.2.** Hvordan kan den kropslige viden hos praktikere og deltagere i feltet være med til at informere denne fælles udvidelse?
>
> **FS2.3.** Hvordan kan disse indsigter bidrage til udviklingen af mere inkluderende og plural forståelser af musikundervisning og musikalitet både for undervisere og deltagere?

På tværs af fem artikler og denne afhandling undersøges disse spørgsmål gennem en vævning af partielle og sammenflettede empiriske og teoretiske indsigter. Resultaterne understreger betydningen af grundig og samarbejdsbaseret fordybelse mellem facilitatorer og deltagere i de værdier og begreber—såsom 'kunstner' eller 'ekspertise'—der former erfaring og meningsdannelse som en del af den pædagogiske praksis. De fremhæver værdien i at arbejde gennem mangfoldighed—hvad enten det handler om at

inddrage underrepræsenterede idéer eller kropslige erfaringer fra forskellige kontekster—som en vej til at uddybe kritisk bevidsthed og muligheder for at høre til. Afhandlingen peger også på potentialet i deltagerbaseret forskning som en integreret del af musikundervisningspraksis, idet den understøtter en vedvarende refleksiv og udviklingsorienteret tilgang og modvirker ekskluderende eller belastende oplevelser. Samtidig opfordrer den undervisere til at være opmærksomme på, hvordan intentioner om omsorg eller kritisk refleksion kan hvile på antagelser, der – utilsigtet – risikerer at reproducere skade eller skabe stilstand. Samlet kulminerer disse fund i begrebet en integrativ tilgang til musikundervisning—en tilgang, der anerkender feltets kompleksitet og insisterer på, at meningsfuld transformation ikke blot skal være delt, situeret og kritisk reflekterende, men også forblive opmærksom på sine iboende begrænsninger og forpligte sig til at arbejde med dem i en proces, der altid vil være partiel, og hvis virkning nødvendigvis forbliver flertydig.

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Chapter 1: Introduction 

In this first chapter, I will introduce the background and motivations of my study. I will continue by presenting my research questions and action-based objectives. Finally, I will introduce the structure of the dissertation, the structure of the report, and present the articles that constitute and resulted from this PhD research process.

1.1-Anacrusis

This doctoral dissertation invites the reader into the process and findings of my qualitative exploration of how music education practices may meaningfully engage with, and respond to the diverse musical voices of individuals—on their own terms. However, this research is not as neutral as the previous phrase might imply. My work builds on understandings of music education as an ambiguous practice that can both include and exclude, transgress and conform, and empower and disempower (Baker, 2014; Boeskov, 2022; Bowman & Frega, 2012; Hess, 2019; Kertz-Welzel, 2022). As a historized individual that has experienced—through my music education practice, and my musical upbringing—the empowering and transformative, but also the disruptive and marginalizing effects of these ambiguities, my goal is not only to explore, but to develop research that may expand music education practices and facilitate continuous change.[1] However, how can a "change-resistant" field (e.g., Christophersen et al., 2023; Kratus, 2014; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021) pervaded with tradition reinvent itself? How could those trained and socialized by these systems open a path toward breaking out of them? And why is informing this transformation important to begin with?

Building on non-neutral understandings and methodologies of research—including participatory action research (PAR) (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019; Kemmis et al., 2014; Lenette, 2022) or autoethnography (Adams et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2011)—following principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1996; Hess, 2019), and drawing from utopian thinking (Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Levitas, 2013), this dissertation looks to challenge and expand not only what

[1] The processes of expansion referred to in this dissertation do not aim to reference, support, or challenge any one specific approach or tradition within music education. Rather, they argue for the importance of continuous critical reflection and development throughout diverse music education practices. Chapter 2 introduces the music education traditions that have most significantly informed my research and upon which I have built. Section 1.3 argues for approaching music education as a holistic field, where different traditions and contexts may enrich and inform one another.

music education can be, but who it reaches, and how to craft new collaborative paths forward.

1.2-A Change-Resistant Field Expanding Toward Change

Despite a strong European music education tradition—and the change-resistance that has pervaded the field for years (e.g., Christophersen et al., 2023; Kratus, 2014; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021)—the field of music education is being called to change, seeking to expand what music might do, where, and for/with whom (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021). This is not to say that change in music education is something new. From the paradigm shifts contesting aesthetic music education championed by scholars such as Regelski (1998, 2016) and Elliott (1995); to the work of community music scholars (e.g., Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Higgins, 2012); to the efforts of practitioners inspired by concepts such as artistic citizenship (e.g., Campbell & Martin, 2006; Elliott, 2012; Elliott et al., 2016); and being further exemplified by increasingly prominent calls to center issues such as social justice (Benedict et al., 2018), care (e.g., Hendricks, 2023), and inclusion in the field (e.g., Laes & Westerlund, 2017); music educators and scholars have long worked—and continue to do so—to reimagine the field, expand its impact and access, and transform its values and practices. However, the effects of these movements have often remained limited to specific academic or practitioner communities that already resonated with their values. Much of the broader field—including many higher music education institutions (HMEIs) responsible for educating future professionals—has remained largely unchanged (Christophersen et al., 2023; Rinholm et al., 2023; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021).

Yet this breach might be bridgeable, as change now appears to be taking a more holistic and structural form. Recent scholarship—including Gaunt et al. (2021), Kertz-Welzel (2022), Camlin (2023), and Westvall and Akuno (2024)—points toward a paradigm shift that aims to synergistically bring together music's aesthetic, participatory, and para-musical dimensions (Camlin, 2023). These discussions are reaching beyond academia, shaping the work of practitioners, conservatoire leaders, and policymakers (Gaunt et al., 2021; Thompson-Bell, 2022; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021). Concepts such as artistic citizenship are becoming integral to institutional strategies for development and musician training (CReArC, 2024; Thompson-Bell, 2022), prompting educators and students alike to reconsider their roles in society. These changes—along with rapid technological developments that expand

access to music creation and participation—have placed music education in what Camlin (2023, p. 8) names a period of "hysteresis": a time when "the field has changed and is changing, but where musicians are still adjusting to—or lagging behind—these changes."

This pivotal moment of transformation invites both optimism and scrutiny. For expansion to become more than symbolic, it must confront the underlying values and structures that continue to define the field (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021). Even when seeking to change, music education remains marked by deeply embedded "hegemonies"—often inherited rather than chosen—that shape what counts as musical knowledge, who is recognized as a musician, and how learning should unfold (Carson & Westvall, 2016; Wright, 2018). These frameworks are not easily dismantled; they are sustained through habits, pedagogical routines, and internalized assumptions, and also impact those music educators and scholars aiming to guide the change. As Mateiro and Westvall (2016) observe, music educators often practice and envision music through "the lens of values and beliefs that they are accustomed to" (p. 157), shaped by their own musical and educational histories. Thus, even well-intentioned attempts at transformation may be quietly shaped by these inherited hegemonies, limiting the ability to imagine broader or radically different alternatives, and risking turning efforts toward expanding impacts and practices into assimilative "one-way process[es] of normalization, where the marginalized are included, empowered, and taken into the center which remains more or less stagnated" (Laes & Westerlund, 2017, p. 42).

1.3-A Holistic Research Approach: Holding Space for Softer—Not as Loud—Voices to Belong

To respond to these complexities and contribute to an increasingly ethical and shared expansion of the field, my research explores how music education practices may be collectively reimagined. It aims to bring in increasingly diverse and broad perspectives to illuminate that which might remain unnoticed from within the field, while synergistically seeking to imagine new and plural practices that might enable people—in their diverse[2] and

[2] Aligning with the participatory knowledge-creation values of this research, and supported by the theoretical exploration of difference presented in Article 2 and section 3.5 (see also Waghid, 2018), the definition of 'diverse' that I use in this dissertation "not only describes the fact that differences exist but is also a programmatic term: it advocates for diversity as a positive aspect of society that should be acknowledged, welcomed and fostered so that all people are able to fully participate" (Rosenstreich, 2022, p. 10).

evolving musicalities[3] (Wright, 2018)—to experience belonging within music education spaces on their own terms.

Building on this foundation, the following section introduces three interwoven strands: a holistic research approach that embraces complexity and multiplicity; the importance of amplifying voices that often remain unheard in music education discourses; and the need to hold space for belonging—not as an end point, but as a dynamic and co-constructive process.

1.3.1-A Holistic Research Approach

As Camlin (2023) argues, "developing more holistic music educators that adapt to our changing times demands not only changing musicians' practices and habits, but the whole way we think about music itself, what it is for, and what we do with it" (p. 26). In a field where theory, practice, and the personal are deeply intertwined—and where change may be constrained by inherited norms and internalized assumptions—research approaches that engage with all these layered dynamics may be necessary to explore what shapes music education, its possibilities, its limits, and its meanings.

Following the lead of scholars who advocate for a more cohesive, interconnected, and multidimensional understanding of music education (e.g., Carson & Westvall, 2016; Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Westvall & Akuno, 2024), my research follows a *holistic* path—one that recognizes that "the parts of something are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). It explores music education through theoretical, practical, social, and personal perspectives, understanding these dimensions as inevitably intertwined. Attending to the joints and intersections between them, my research design seeks to put these strands into dialogue—both to uncover increasingly holistic knowledge in service of a holistic field, and to foster more inclusive forms of knowledge-making that a wider range of people may connect with and contribute to. By offering diverse methodologies and points of entry, my research aims to

[3] In this dissertation, the terms (unique/diverse) artistry and musicality refer to the plural and distinctive ways individuals engage with, find meaning in, and take part in artistic or musical practices on their own terms. These concepts acknowledge the variety of musical and artistic experiences, intentions, and capacities that shape how each person encounters and contributes to the arts. This understanding is informed by scholars such as Wright (2018) and Carson and Westvall (2024), who highlight the plurality of forms for artistic and musical engagement and caution against dominant narratives that risk excluding individuals by failing "to speak to their individual musicality" (Wright 2018, p. 221).

expand what is noticed, who feels invited, and who—or what—gets to shape the field.

This approach, however, comes with trade-offs. Designing research around a single context or methodological approach often allows for greater depth and detail than casting a wider net, and working within similar contexts eases reaching replicable or transferable findings. Yet narrowing perspectives or contexts risks overlooking the broader conditions and agents that shape research findings. With this in mind, my PhD makes the conscious decision to work through a wider and more plural lens—aiming to remain as thorough and grounded as possible in the process—in the hope that this research may complement and coexist with more focused studies in informing and advancing the field.

1.3.2-Amplifying Softer Voices

A holistic research approach demands more than expanding how and what we research—it also requires reflecting on *with whom* we do so. Each of us brings only partial insight into the complex realities of music education. Our positionality, background, and personal connections to music shape what we can notice, what we can imagine, and the experiences available to each of us. To better understand and expand the field, we should not only explore music education through multiple lenses that might expand our views, but do so together *with* the diverse voices and lived experiences of others—those who may illuminate what remains hidden from any single position. As Kenny (2021, p. 31) concludes, "we cannot do it alone."

Engaging with under-represented views and co-crafting change with others might be especially relevant in music education—a field that often remains unaware of its exclusions by preventing practitioners from even "encounter[ing] those excluded from current pervasive music teaching and learning practices" (Richerme, 2024, p. 2). This unawareness—even among those seeking transformative change—paired with the change-resistance that still pervades many music education contexts, has contributed to the uncritical perpetuation of practices inherited from an endogamous system—run by those trained and socialized within it—that perpetuates and protects itself (Wright, 2018).

To enable new imaginings, broaden criticality, and ethically expand what music education might become, this cycle must be disrupted—crafting change not *for*, but *with* those diverse and dissenting perspectives that might

help illuminate what those within the field may not otherwise encounter. Thus, my research[4] adopts a holistic approach that both aims to engage with a variety of music education contexts, and with under-represented concepts, insights, and people within music education scholarship. It seeks to amplify and uncover change alongside the *softer voices* in music education—those that feel marginalized by dominant artistic practices or normative research approaches; those with reduced agency, representation, and limited opportunities to participate; and those whose voices remain unheard or unrecognized in music education academic spaces—to invite a diversity of perspectives that might inform increasingly plural, co-created, and de-centered paths towards expansion.

Yet aiming to co-craft change with those feeling alienated from the field raises a difficult question: Why would people who have felt excluded—or who have never experienced music education as part of their world—wish to take part in reshaping it? Why would they believe they have something of value to offer a field in which they may not feel they belong? And even if they did, how could they meaningfully contribute within spaces where their voices have often been undervalued or unheard?

1.3.3-Holding Space for Each Other's Belonging

Addressing these tensions illuminates how amplifying a diversity of voices may require more than surface-level inclusion—it might call for cultivating a plural and de-centered music education field that holds space for diverse musical voices to belong.

Defined as "listening to and hearing another person's perspectives and histories without passing judgment…disempowering or devaluing another person's experiences" (Ostrowdun et al., 2020, p. 91), the concept of *holding space*[5] might highlight the need for the music education field to critically

[4] The research is both mine and not mine alone. In this thesis, I refer to it as 'my research' to reflect the fact that I am the only person who has been involved in all the different contexts and aspects presented here, and to take responsibility for the overall research process and the findings that span the various articles and collaborations. At the same time, I want to acknowledge the essential contributions of co-researchers, participants, and fellow arts educators in shaping and developing the insights shared in the articles that also informed this dissertation.

[5] While the definition of holding space I offer aligns with values central to this research—such as attentiveness, care, and reciprocity—the concept itself is not without complications. It may carry connotations of passivity, suggest that only a few privileged individuals are able (or

consider the contingency of its values, practices, and structures—whatever these may be in a specific context. Rather than striving for neutrality or consensus, holding space calls for an *active engagement with difference* that foregrounds power relations and works to amplify under-represented voices (Ostrowdun et al., 2020). In this light, aiming to hold space becomes an ethical commitment to co-create more equitable conditions for participation and to contest assimilative expansion in the field. It calls for music educators and researchers to embrace multiple and de-centered practices, values and goals—continuously expanding the field to develop a plural space where diverse musical voices and forms of participation can coexist, enrich each other, and more equally and meaningfully *belong*.

In this context, *belonging* may be understood as "the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 1). Exploring music education through the lens of belonging emphasizes that expanding participation or inclusion must go beyond simply sharing, partaking in, or recognizing existing structures and practices in the field; it centers instead on "the right to participate in developing this living tradition" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 3). Furthermore, since belonging "is facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences of the social milieu" (Kern et al., 2020, p. 709), the concept invites a holistic exploration of the field—one that engages not only with the subjective experiences of participants, but also with the practices and the structural and systemic conditions that shape the broader landscape of music education.

In this thesis, I approach belonging not as a fixed, normative, or externally defined outcome, but as a dynamic, plural, and ongoing process that is relational, situated, and deeply personal (Allen et al., 2021; Kern et al., 2020; May, 2011). Through this view, belonging becomes a flexible and multidimensional framework to holistically explore the aspects that enable or hinder participation and engagement with music education practices and the scholarly field, on each individual's terms.

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allowed) to hold space for others, or, as posthumanist scholars might argue, risk overlooking the agency of space itself in shaping processes and relationships. I considered alternatives such as '(co)holding space' or '(co)holding with space' to emphasize mutuality and spatial entanglements more explicitly. However, the definition I employ here already foregrounds active engagement with difference, attentiveness to power, and a reciprocal ethic of care. For the sake of clarity and accessibility in my thesis, I have therefore chosen to continue using 'holding space'—with the above reflections in mind.

Allen et al. (2021, pp. 8-11) suggest framing individuals' experiences of belonging by examining four interrelated dimensions: (1) having *the competencies to belong*—"having a set of (both subjective and objective) skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging"; (2) having *the opportunities to belong*—"the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur"; (3) having *the motivations to belong*—"a need or desire to connect with others"; and (4) having *the perceptions of belonging*—"a person's subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experiences of belonging."

Together, these dimensions seek to invite a practical and nuanced understanding of belonging that may serve as a departure point from which to investigate the different factors that shape belonging in music education. Throughout my research, they guided my inquiry into how participation and access unfold in relation to personal experience, musical practices, and the broader social, cultural, and institutional conditions that shape them.

1.4-Research Collaborators

As stated by Camlin, "each voice in a dialogue is unique and worth listening to; each has something to contribute" (Camlin, 2023, p. 93). The aspiration to bring a diversity of perspectives into dialogue through research encourages engaging with collaborators in different music education contexts. Paired with the commitment to local contexts of my research methodology (see Chapter 4), this invites flexibility in choosing which collaborators to work with. Since no voice should be irrelevant when seeking to understand the interwoven landscape of music education, there could be arguments for exploring any music, or arts education initiative as valuable sources of knowledge to inform a holistic approach to research.

Nonetheless—and seeking to engage with broader, though still inherently limited perspectives for my research within the scope and time constraints of this PhD—I purposefully focused on co-exploring with participants and educators from three artistic initiatives: *Canto Abierto, RePercusión San Cristóbal,* and *Landsby Akademiet*.[6] These three initiatives were selected for sharing a commitment to expanding artistic belonging through arts education, for aiming to hold space for plurality in participatory arts, and for their self-

[6] See section 3.5 for theoretical arguments supporting this approach. See Chapter 5 for arguments on how to bring these perspectives together. See sections 4.4.5.2 and 7.4.2 for discussion on the challenges that this approach might face.

critical desire for development. Each offered distinct opportunities to engage in dialogue with different underrepresented perspectives that could help inform plural and co-developed knowledge for my research. Furthermore, since participation alone is not enough for the success of participatory research methodologies (Kemmis, 2014; Lenette, 2022), these projects were selected for the strong commitment and motivation they voiced to collaborate in the research. From the moment I first contacted the organizers and facilitators of these three initiatives, they demonstrated an eagerness and commitment to reflexivity and criticality, along with a strong desire to challenge and transform their practices, essential for the deeply collaborative and critical research I was aiming for.

Canto Abierto (see Article 4) is described by its organizers as a "choral project that offers artistic experiences of the highest quality and highlights the artistic capabilities of the community of people with disabilities" (Canto Abierto, n.d.). This weekly initiative involved close to forty adults and had been running for five years in Madrid before our collaboration. It pursues a synergistic combination of artistic and social goals, seeking to expand access and belonging within music education through a pedagogical approach grounded in developing inclusive and caring musical spaces. Bringing together facilitators with decades of experience in adapting music education practices to engage additional voices, and adult participants with ample experience with practices aimed toward inclusion—not only in music but also in broader contexts—Canto Abierto offered a unique opportunity to collaboratively explore how music education practices might be reimagined to hold space for unique musical voices to belong, which challenges may emerge in the process, and the impact sustained efforts can have on participants' musical and personal experiences over time.

RePercusión San Cristóbal (see Article 4) is described as a "percussion project that aims to bring music closer to a sector of society that faces major difficulties in accessing culture and education… bringing in and awakening the musical interest of participants from different cultures without prior musical experience, and developing their artistic side" (RePercusión San Cristóbal, n.d.). Having run for a year before our research collaboration, this weekly *cajón* workshop offers free access to music education for a multicultural group of teenagers living in one of the most impoverished areas of Madrid. The initiative aims to expand who gets to engage with—and potentially benefit from—music education. Collaborating with RePercusión sought to bring the insights of young students with limited exposure to—and socialization into—

formal musical training into my research. The diverse backgrounds of the participants—coming from different countries and raised in multiple cultures with distinct approaches to music and education—looked to invite a plurality of perspectives on what music can be and how it can be taught, which might have easily gone unnoticed when working only with people socialized within Western musical traditions. Researching with this initiative's participants and music educators offered a possibility to collectively explore how music education spaces oriented toward inclusion, might be developed and expanded to hold space for those that are often excluded, together with them.

Landsby Akademiet (see Article 5) is described as an initiative focused on broadening opportunities for artistic engagement and learning among residents in rural Denmark, contributing to community vitality, and opening up new working contexts for professional artists (Landsby Akademiet, n.d.). This newly developed initiative invited artists from various disciplines—experienced in facilitating community-based and participatory artistic practices internationally—to bring their knowledge into play and address these holistic goals through two weeks of artistic interventions in small towns across Denmark. Collaborating with Landsby Akademiet, sought to bring the voices of international arts practitioners and educators with years of embodied experience expanding the role and reach of their artistic work in social and community-based projects across Europe, Africa, and the Americas—but whose knowledges had not yet entered academic discourse—into my research. Their experience, rooted not only in music but also in other art forms, aimed to contribute with valuable interdisciplinary insights to broaden the perspectives of my research and enrich the collaborative exploration of how an expanded and plural arts education practice could take shape.

1.5-Summary

Inspired by holistic understandings of music education, responding to current calls for expansion, and driven by the ethical need to make that expansion as shared, transformative, and critical of its exclusions as possible, this dissertation aims to contribute to collaboratively uncovering practices and modes of inquiry that may hold space for diverse musical voices to belong.

Through different points of access to knowledge creation, drawing from plural perspectives, and collaborating with three initiatives aiming to expand the impact and possibilities of music education and participatory arts, this research seeks to develop holistic knowledge that responds to the field's intertwined nature, while/by amplifying softer voices that might bring

new and transformative insights. It seeks to bring these diverse perspectives into dialogue—both with each other and with louder discourses in the field—learning from the resulting interplay to inform future directions for increasingly co-crafted and plural music education practices.

1.6-Research Questions: Calling to action

Primary question

RQ1-How may music education practices be expanded—through critical and collaborative approaches—to increasingly hold space for people's diverse musical voices to belong, on their own terms?

Secondary questions

RQ2.1-How may theoretical transdisciplinary perspectives and concepts—as exemplified by the exploration of artistic citizenship—contribute to the transformation and expansion of music education practices?

RQ2.2-How may the embodied knowledge of practitioners and participants in the field contribute to inform this shared expansion?

RQ2.3-How may these insights contribute to the development of more inclusive and plural understandings of music education, and musicality, for music educators and participants?

1.7-Structure of the Dissertation

This thesis is divided into two main sections: 1) A report organized in seven chapters, and 2) Appendices A-B. The first appendix includes the five articles that constitute and result from this PhD research. In order to provide the reader with an overview of what is to come, I will present the thesis structure in the following section, including a description of the structure of the report, and an overview of the publication status of the articles.

1.7.1-Organization of the Report

For clarity, the report has been organized in the following sections:

Context within the music education field: An outline of selected academic discourses in music education scholarship that my research builds upon and that have been most influential to its development.

Theoretical perspectives on research and education: Exploration of the ontological and epistemological grounds that are the foundation of this research.

Methodology: Conceptualization and description of the methodological approach to my research, and the methodological approaches it draws from.

Discussion of the articles: Introduction of the articles and their role in this thesis in line with two possible ways of weaving them together.

Findings: Thematic summary of the findings of my research exploring the thread that connects the articles and this dissertation, and the implication of my research for practice in the field of music education.

Contributions and limitations of the study: Discussion of the contributions, challenges and boundaries of my research presenting a path forward for future work.

Appendices: This section presents the additional material, which is not included in the other chapters, but is needed for transparency. It comprises the documents and materials that were shared with participants and co-researchers; and the following five articles that shape this article-based thesis.

1.7.2-Status of the Articles

Article 1: Garcia-Cuesta, S. (2024). (Published). Listening all around: What could the fluid conceptualization of artistic citizenships do? *Action Criticism and Theory for Music Education*, 23(1), 80–101.

Article 2: Garcia-Cuesta, S. (Accepted for publication). A reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care: The decolonial voices of Paulo Freire and Yusef. *Nordic Research of Music Education Journal.* 6, 70-90. https://doi.org/10.23865/nrme.v6.6441

Article 3: Liu, L., Garcia-Cuesta, S., Chambers, L., Tchirkov, S., & Hebert, D. G. (2024). (Published). Rethinking "musical excellence" from a decolonial perspective: Disruptive autobiographical experiences among doctoral scholars. *International Journal of Music Education,* Online first. https://doi.org/10.1177/02557614241281992

Article 4: Garcia-Cuesta, S. (Accepted for publication). Co-crafting Belonging through Participatory Action Research. *Finnish Journal of Music Education,* 28(1).

Article 5: Garcia-Cuesta, S., Rios Calderon, G., Lara Garcia, P., Thygesen, S., Westerberg, F., Candal, T., Diaz Reyes, M. (Accepted for publication). Co-crafting Artistic Belonging with Communities through Arts-Based Participatory Action Research. *Research in Arts and Education.*

Chapter 2: Context Within the Music Education Field

Exploring music education through a holistic lens widens the scope of what could be relevant to include in this chapter. When all parts are "interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole," (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) what should my context chapter discuss? Should I focus on the change-resistant conservatory traditions and goals that still "remain the backdrop" (Laes et al 2021., p. 17) of important musical contexts? Would it be better to address the movements—such as community music (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018, Higgins, 2012)—that have helped pave the way toward challenging tradition in music education? Would a broad yet simplified historical overview of the field be preferable?

As if having limited space to introduce a complex and interwoven field weren't enough of a challenge, the task became even more daunting once I began to view this chapter not merely as providing contextual background, but as an ethical commitment to transparency—an opportunity to explicitly share the ideas that have shaped my thinking, and to acknowledge the scholars whose work has guided me here. The result? A constant cycle of rewrites, pivots, and questions.

Coming to terms with the inherent limitations of the thesis format—and the theoretical and methodological decisions I have chosen to embrace—in this chapter I introduce the discourses within the field of music education that I consider most necessary for engaging with the findings and discussions developed in this dissertation. Namely: 1) Artistic Citizenship, 2) Utopian Music Education, 3) Holistic Music Education, and 4) Expanded Musicianship.

Aligning with my research's goals to contribute to holistic and co-crafted expansions of the field, these perspectives share an interwoven understanding of music education—one that recognizes the interdependence between musical, social, and educational dimensions, and sees artistic practice as always embedded in wider cultural and relational contexts; a commitment to expanding boundaries—looking beyond what exists and broadening perspectives to imagine otherwise; a form of criticality that resists closure or singular solutions, and holds space for coexisting, plural musics and educations; and a generative orientation that seeks to turn critique into meaningful and transformative change toward a wider and more plural field.

2.1-Artistic Citizenship

Exploring artistic citizenship has become a springboard in my work for rethinking how normative and taken-for-granted assumptions in music education might be contingent—and the ways these assumptions may restrict what music education is and could become.

Commonly understood as a call for artists to be "socially engaged, socially aware, and socially responsible…not just to produce better art but to use their artistic pursuits to change themselves and the world for the better" (Bowman, 2016, p. 66), artistic citizenship brings forward the ethical and social possibilities and responsibilities of artists as agents for social transformation through the arts. It explores the potential of the arts beyond aesthetic aspirations, for "creating beginnings that engage with the public sphere, explore the world, expose the private, position subjects, and raise questions that test new possibilities" (Caris & Cowell 2016, p. 467).

Despite its significance in prompting critical discussions among music educators and scholars for over a decade (e.g., Campbell & Martin, 2006; Elliott, 2012; Elliott et al., 2016),[7] the concept of artistic citizenship continues to hold relevance today, often used as a catalyst for rethinking music's social roles across educational, artistic, and policymaking contexts (Silverman & Elliott, 2018; Thompson-Bell, 2022; Westvall & Akuno, 2024). This sustained relevance in a variety of contexts has resulted in understandings of artistic citizenship being constantly in flux—still transforming to adapt to evolving situations, perspectives, potentialities and critiques (Garcia-Cuesta, 2024; Thompson-Bell, 2022; Westvall & Akuno, 2024).

Critiques on artistic citizenship have been especially instrumental in shaping discourse around the concept. Scholars have argued that this concept might result in instrumentalizing the arts by keeping "limited attention to artistic concerns" (Gaunt et al., 2021, p. 5), reduce arts possibilities as a sanctuary away from the world (Garcia-Cuesta, 2024; Kertz-Welzel, 2022), place unreasonable pressure on artists to bring change to society (Kertz-Welzel, 2022), and promote the same elitism and exclusions through its language that it aims to contest (Bradley, 2018; Garcia-Cuesta, 2024; Kertz-Welzel, 2022).

Informed by these critiques and responding to current discourses

[7] There is no clear information of when or by whom the concept was first developed (Silverman, 2024, p. 33).

in the field, contemporary conceptualization of artistic citizenship—and 'artizenship' (Carson & Westvall, 2024)—have moved toward increasingly holistic, fluid, relational, de-centered and contextual understandings of the term. These conceptualizations seek to "...avoid binary divisions between forms of art, between professional and amateur, or between skilled and unskilled practitioners in favor of a larger view of artistic expression and social engagement" (Carson & Westvall, 2024, p. 17). They look to challenge normative understandings of arts and citizens and argue for artistic citizenship as a catalyst toward more inclusive forms of social and artistic participation (Carson & Westvall, 2024; Garcia-Cuesta, 2024; Silverman, 2024; Thompson-Bell, 2022). They argue for artistic citizenship as a reciprocal musical praxis[8] that could synergistically benefit artists, their communities, and society, stating that "when "art makers" care about their making, themselves, their connections to those around them, and the world at large through music making, they enact artistic citizenship" (Silverman, 2024, p. 39).

2.2-Utopian Music Education

Utopian understandings of music education have shaped and supported this thesis.[9] They became a catalyst for seeking radically new perspectives on what music education could be when working with the present—or looking to the past—are no longer enough. They opened up possibilities for critically and hopefully reimagining what music education can do, and for reconciling how caring for music might synergize with caring for the world.

Having recently gained traction within scholarly discourse (Viig et al., 2023), utopian approaches to music education encourage music educators to both remain critical of the past and the present, while seeking to radically "envision new alternatives, tell new stories and construct new realities" for the future (Viig et al., 2023, p. 3). They argue for utopian thinking as an imaginative and generative force toward transformation, and as an ethos of experimentation toward "being otherwise"—as a realistic path toward developing "spaces for resistance" in music education (Viig et al. 2023, p. 4; Wright 2018, p. 223) that may respond to common hegemonic (Wright, 2018), "exclusionary and disconnected" (Viig et al., 2023, p. 4), and even "harmful" (Wright, 2018, p. 218) practices that alienate a multitude of unique

[8] Integrating critical reflection and ethical action, musical praxis illustrates "the social embeddedness of critical reflection and ethical thinking-knowing-feeling" (Silverman, 2024, p. 41).

[9] Discussions on utopia beyond music education will be explored in the next chapter.

musical voices (Wright, 2018).

Contributing to utopian music education discourses, Kertz-Welzel (2022, 2023) suggests a path toward reconciling political, social, and *esthetic*[10] goals and practices. Stating that musical autonomy and social responsibility are not in opposition, she presents utopian music education as a synergistic combination of 1) p*olitically/socially responsive music education*, and 2) *esthetic music education*.

Both building on scholars such as Higgins (2012), Elliott & Silverman (2015), or Hess (2019)—and seeking to challenge common advocacy positions that often overextend what "the arts can actually do" (Kertz-Welzel 2022, p. 29)—*politically/socially responsive music education* "emphasizes a sensitivity for social and political matters, but without overextending music education's mission" (Ibid, p. 141). It responds to society and its needs by opening spaces for "thinking and acting otherwise, thus having a unique perspective on political and societal processes through the lens of music" (Ibid, p. 142), while foregrounding that even if it has a social responsibility, music's education agency in bringing change is limited, and could be facilitated through an approach that is "foremost about music and people" (Ibid, p. 142).

Coexisting and synergizing with socially responsive music education—and wishing to differentiate from *aesthetic* music education traditions—*esthetic music education* focuses on the music itself, while still offering possibilities for personal and social change. By centering creativity and esthetic engagement, esthetic music education offers a sanctuary for people to embody transformative musical experiences and open new possibilities for self-formation and self-actualization. Through valuing "the autonomous moment available to music" (Ibid, p. 95), esthetic music education might enable utopian spaces of resistance that—by moving away from everyday life—enable people to experience and imagine themselves and society otherwise, creating new possibilities for belonging, reconnecting, and reengaging with the world through the utopian power of music.

2.3-Holistic Music Education

Holistic understandings of music education have not only impacted the methodological design and research questions of this thesis, but also shaped

[10] Kertz-Welzel makes a point in choosing this spelling to differentiate it from aesthetic music education.

my views on the practices, potentials, challenges, and goals that a critical and ethical music education field should bring forward.

Holistic understandings of music education build on understandings of music as a complex, and multilayered discipline that involves an intertwined plurality of 1) "*people"*—such as performers, listeners, critics, music-therapists, students, etc.—, 2) "*processes"*—performing, listening, musicing[11], etc.—, 3) "*products"*—such as pieces, improvisation, or compositions—, and 4) "*contexts"*—forwarding "the social, historical, political, economic, gendered, ecological, and architectural situations in which musics were or are being made" (Silverman, 2022a, p. 229).

Responding to music's nuanced and entangled natures, possibilities, and goals, holistic music education "recognizes the interconnected and dynamic parts of the music experience and draws on connections to the self, others, and the world outside the classroom" (Abril & Brent, 2022, p. 2). It considers personal identities, and social contexts as central to meaningful music learning and urges teachers and students—as "whole beings" with their own cultural, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions (Regelski, 2004)—to not only develop their musical skills, but also to connect with and transform one another and the world through music.

Camlin's (2023) exploration of holistic music education became central to the arguments and discussions presented in this dissertation. Camlin proposes that music encompasses three coexisting dimensions: (1) aesthetic—focusing on "the performance and appreciation of musical 'works'" (p. 76); (2) participatory—centering on how people access, belong, and engage with the musical experience; and (3) paramusical—referring to the personal, relational/social, cultural, and economic impact of music. He emphasizes that, regardless of intent or context, all three dimensions are unavoidably present in any form of musicing. Aligning with this perspective carries ethical implications for musicians and music educators: any musical practice—including teaching or research—that seeks to be critically reflective and ethically engaged must remain attentive not only to what is foregrounded, but also to those dimensions that might be overlooked, silenced, or excluded.

[11] As defined by Small (1998, p. 9) musicking "is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing." This dissertation will use musicing or musicking depending on the spelling used in each text referenced. See Odendaal et al. (2013) for discussions on 'musicking' vs 'musicing'.

2.4-Expanded Musicianship

Concepts such as expanded professionalism (Lehikoinen, 2018; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021; Westerlund et al., 2021), musicians as civic professionals (Laes et al. 2021), and musicians as makers in society (Gaunt et al., 2021) are scholarly responses to the call for expansion that my research also seeks to address. They have contributed to shaping this thesis' exploration of 'what might be' for music education; informed my attention to the interconnections between the activist, the participatory, and the aesthetic; and reinforced my focus on engaging with diversity as a necessary condition for transformative change. While presenting any of these concepts would be relevant to this chapter, I chose to focus on Westerlund and Gaunt's (2021) expanded professionalism, believing that its scope best aligns with the inquiries and discussions of my thesis.

Challenging normative understandings of professionalization as perpetuating "privileged and self-interested monopolies" (XXII), Westerlund and Gaunt (2021) bring forward the need to expand professionalism in music.[12] Stating that responsibility for social change pertains to everyone in society, they call for music and music education to expand their boundaries, and argue for expanding professionalism as "a dynamo of reflexive practices…. encouraging individuals and institutions to realize and envision their game-changing potential in societies" (p. XVI). They center the importance of expanding music education to resonate with a wider, "horizontal" world, challenging "narrow" or "vertical" approaches to music education where "novices" are trained "to be experts" in line with normative understandings of artistic excellence (p. XXIV). Regardless of its activist call, expanding professionalization does not aim to instrumentalize music and music education as tools for grand change, but emphasizes a coexisting expansion in the qualities, possibilities and values that music can contain and support.

Expanding professionalism highlights the importance of a shared process of deconstructing understandings of quality and excellence for transforming the field. Arguing that change cannot be done alone (Kenny, 2021)—and drawing from scholars such as Greene (1995) or (Biesta 2013, 2018)—it forwards engaging with diversity, access and inclusion. It centers

[12] Westerlund and Gaunt (2021) define professionalism as encompassing "the conduct, aims, values, responsibilities, and ongoing development of a practicing professional in the field… concerned both with competencies and with the enacting of working practices in occupations that are inherently ethical in nature" (p. XIV).

how seeking out plural and diverse criteria of quality and excellence should be a shared and relational process, that through "democratic imagination" (Greene, 1995) with the diverse views of "the other" can result in the "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1995, 2001) amongst musicians and educators that is needed to expand the field (Kenny, 2021).

Paired with artistic citizenship, utopian music education, and holistic music education, perspectives on expanded professionalism became main influences during my inquiry on how to collaboratively develop a broad and plural expansion of music education practices where people may experience belonging on their own terms; they came together in inspiring the choice of participatory, relational, and critical theoretical and methodological frameworks that I will present in the following two chapters.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Perspectives on Research and Education: An Uncertain, Utopian, and Participatory Critical Pedagogy of Music Education

> *"I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow American educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and rewrite my ideas."*
>
> Freire and Macedo 1998, p. 6

In this chapter, I invite the reader to engage with my interpretation of the theoretical perspectives that shaped and inspired my understandings of research and education.[13] While critical pedagogy is a pedagogical framework, its alignment with epistemological positions that challenge positivist, hierarchical, and exclusionary notions of knowledge (Freire, 1970, 1996, 2001; hooks, 1994; Orlowski, 2019; Udas, 1998) makes it a key influence in how I position myself as a researcher. This approach offers a bridge between theory and practice that undergirds my research's goals toward collaborative, reflexive, and transformative knowledge-creation and educational practices.

However, working with critical pedagogy in 2025 should not be approached as Freire did last century. Not only has the context changed, but critical pedagogy has since been enriched by a multitude of critiques, philosophies and practices. For this reason, my research not only draws from Freire's foundational works (1970, 1996, 2001) and is inspired by understandings of critical pedagogy from more contemporary scholars such as hooks (1994), Waghid (2019), and music education academics like Abrahams (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), Hess (2019), and Silverman (2022b); but, in order to reimagine an iteration of critical pedagogy that more closely resonates with the context, goals, values, and needs of this research, I have also complemented these perspectives with insights from utopian thinking,

[13] Even though some scholars distinguish between education—defined as "learning for its own sake" (Hinchliffe, 2000, p. 31)—and pedagogy—as "learning oriented towards social goals" (Ibid)—the holistic understanding of education that informs this thesis weaves together learning and social aims, making the distinction between the two terms often irrelevant to my discussion. For this reason, and to reduce repetition of the words, 'education' and 'pedagogy', I will use these interchangeably throughout this thesis.

poststructuralist and feminist critiques, and participatory action research as an ontological and epistemological stance.

3.1-A Critical Pedagogy of Music Education

Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy frames education as a shared process of "mental decolonization" (Mayo, 2022, p. 2276; Article 2), urging teachers and students to get over inherited, colonial, and uncritically perpetuated pedagogical dogmas (Morán Beltrán et al., 2021). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire argued against a "banking approach to education"—a teaching approach that considers teachers' knowledge "... a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 72). Instead, he advocated for a critical approach to education that encouraged students and emancipatory teachers to collaboratively "name the world" and transform it: to explore their world through a dialogical problem posing pedagogy that reviews their own situations, and the political, systemic, and institutional structures behind them, to uncover their own learned oppressions, and to take action to change them.

Drawing from, critiquing, and building on the work of Freire, education scholars such as hooks (1994) and Waghid (2019; see also Waghid et al., 2021) have expanded, and helped conceptualize more contemporary understandings of critical pedagogy. They have supported an increased attention to intersectionality and relationality by foregrounding the diverse positionalities of teachers and students, the dynamics of power in pedagogical encounters, and the importance of being fully present as holistic individuals in reciprocal learning relationships, as part of a broader effort to reimagine education through a critical lens. They have contributed to reframing critical pedagogy as a transgressive and often dissonant practice that must be grounded in care, collaboration, and a continuous negotiation of difference (Ibid).[14]

[14] Deciding to adopt a holistic perspective that engages with a diversity of complex and deep contexts means that thoroughly discussing the concept of 'care' in music education goes beyond the scope and possibilities of this dissertation. Important contributions by scholars such as Noddings (2002) have highlighted the significance of care in education more broadly, and others have explored its implications within music education specifically (see e.g., Hendricks, 2023; Silverman, 2012, 2023). I encourage readers to turn to these works for a more comprehensive understanding of care in educational contexts.

That said, through its articles, this dissertation draws on Waghid's framing of care as a multifaceted "human act of mutuality whereby humans are bound by universal rights of well-being and rationality coupled with an enactment of just and humane practices" (Waghid

According to Hess (2017), within the field of music education, critical pedagogy has an academic tradition that dates back to the 1990s, which supported a critical turn that introduced important feminist (e.g., Lamb, 1994; Lamb et al., 2004), critical race (e.g., Bradley, 2006; Koza, 2008), disability studies (e.g., Dobbs, 2012; Lubet, 2009), and queer theory perspectives into the field (e.g., Carter, 2014; Gould, 2013;). However, its relevance has not faded in the 2020s. Scholars have recently explored critical pedagogy's potentials to develop a more critical understanding of music education, both practically and theoretically (e.g., Abrahams, 2005; 2006; Bernarducci, 2022; Hill, 2021); utilize it to explore currently relevant concepts such as 'artistic citizenship' in the field (e.g., Narita, 2024); and challenged and explored its limitations for music education (e.g., Hess, 2017, 2019). Despite its current relevance in academic circles, scholars argue that critical pedagogy's influence remains limited across many important contexts, making continued research into its practical applications highly relevant (Rinholm et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2005; Slamkowski, 2019).

Aligning with the central concern of this thesis, critical pedagogy—with its potential to liberate, empower, and amplify students' agency to name and transform their world (Bernarducci, 2022; Freire, 1970; Hill, 2021)—may offer valuable tools for collectively, and critically, reimagining music education as a space where increasingly diverse musical voices can belong. However, these outcomes are not guaranteed. There is no such thing as a perfect or empowering pedagogy, and this includes critical pedagogy. In fact, alongside its liberatory aims, Hess (2019, p. 34) argues that "critical pedagogy may reinscribe power hierarchies between teacher and students, and further exacerbate colonial, patriarchal, and racist systems of oppression."

With these complexities in mind, the next section will examine some of the challenges and potential pitfalls of critical pedagogy. By critically engaging with some of its limitations—while acknowledging that some challenges may still remain unseen—this discussion hopes to foster a more caring, attentive, and nuanced interpretation and application of critical pedagogy moving

2019, xiii; see also Waghid, 2018), and explores his concepts of "caring dissonance," "rhythmic care," and "ubuntu care" (see Article 2). The thesis has also been significantly inspired by Silverman's (2023) exploration of care in music education—particularly the understandings of caring through, with, about, and for (see also Article 4)—and her use of Fisher and Tronto's (1990, p. 40) definition: "Care is a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."

forward.

3.2-Embracing the Critiques to Critical Pedagogy

According to Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010, p. 73), Freire intended critical pedagogy to be understood as a flexible framework—one that adapts to context and change. From this perspective, critiques of critical pedagogy do not diminish its validity but may serve as invaluable tools to expand what it can do and for/with whom. These critiques have enriched my PhD journey as much as Freire's foundational works, not only informing the theoretical exploration in Article 2, but also the methods, practices, and shared reflections developed through the fieldwork in Articles 4 and 5. In what follows, I introduce the critiques of critical pedagogy that have most meaningfully shaped my understandings in the pursuit of participatory, pluralistic, and power-aware research and music-educational practices.

Critiques of critical pedagogy highlight that Freire's notion of the teacher as a facilitator does not necessarily create a truly horizontal learning space where all voices are equally represented (Ellsworth, 1992; Hess, 2017). Feminist scholarship emphasizes that "knowledge produced by the dominant group in society is given more weight than knowledge produced by less dominant (or more oppressed) groups," and that "the knowledge produced by the dominant group will be partial, whereas the knowledge produced by the oppressed groups will provide a more complete view of human relations" (Katz-Wise et al., 2019, p. 188). These imbalances mean that, even when critical pedagogues strive for horizontality and co-creation through shared dialogic spaces, deeply ingrained social constructs—such as those related to musical excellence (Assefa, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008), along with enduring teacher-student hierarchies and power dynamics related to gender, age, and cultural background—skew these interactions. They limit opportunities for equal dialogue and shared agency. Moreover, by framing pedagogical encounters as liberatory, co-created, and horizontal, critical pedagogy may unintentionally obscure power imbalances rather than eliminate them—making them harder to recognize and challenge, and thereby protecting and reinforcing the very structures it seeks to dismantle (Ellsworth, 1992; Hess, 2017, 2019).

Embracing these challenges through my research has meant not taking equality and empowerment for granted, but recognizing pedagogical spaces as inherently shaped by uneven dynamics—and committing to working caringly and collaboratively through that complexity, while seeking to collectively

amplify voices that can never be fully equalized (see Article 4, 5). Feminist and post-structuralist epistemologies (e.g., Ellsworth, 1992; hooks, 1994; Waghid, 2019) have helped inform this process. They enriched and extended Freire's framework by foregrounding how uneven dynamics of difference shape educational encounters, and proposing ways to navigate them through dialogical education. Waghid's (2019) concepts of "pedagogy of rhythmic care" and "ubuntu care," developed in Article 2, exemplify these potentials by offering approaches for engaging with imbalance without erasing it—positioning dissonance as a generative force rather than a problem to be solved. These perspectives have shaped my understanding of what it means to hold space for belonging in education—by foregrounding care, embracing difference, and acknowledging the complexities of power in pedagogical relationships.

Freire's model has additionally been critiqued for portraying the emancipatory teacher as an abstract, universal figure capable of guiding students toward liberation (Weiler, 2003/1991). This perspective overlooks the reality that teachers and students are rarely "on the same side" (p. 220)—having different positions, motivations, power, and so forth—failing to account for the teacher's own learned oppressions as well as the students' learned freedoms. Furthermore, it fosters a philosophy of consensus that risks disregarding these different positionalities. By guiding students toward developing "a new view, one they can share" (Beckett, 2013, p. 50), critical pedagogy often fails to account for the fact that learning processes, interests, goals, and—extrapolating for music education—musicalities, are diverse and nonlinear, looking for unifying practices, and reinforcing a normativity in education that does not reflect a diverse and plural reality.

For a critical music education that embraces and recognizes diversity and power imbalances, teachers and professional musicians—regardless of their intentions—should recognize that the very power structures and traditions they seek to disrupt are the same ones that shaped their own musical journeys (Wright, 2018). These structures not only influenced how they learned but also determined why they, rather than others, are now in the position to teach and challenge the system (Hess, 2017). This does not mean that music educators cannot transform the field or their practices, but rather that they must acknowledge how their positionalities, learnt oppressions, and privilege may skew their efforts. They thrived in a system that others could not access as easily, and possessed a set of skills and attributes—such as ear training, rhythmic precision, and even financial stability to afford conservatory

training or an instrument—that still shape their musical perspectives. These biases, paired with a goal of consensus, can create ideological hierarchies that marginalize those who do not conform (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012) and that might result in the perpetuation or prioritization of pedagogies that reinforce normative musical knowledges, and that exclude many voices from participation (Carson & Westvall, 2016; Wright, 2018).

For my research, addressing these challenges did not mean striving for consensus, but rather seeking to embrace what Trifonas and Balomenos (2012) call an "ethic of heterogeneity"—an orientation that values difference by recognizing the contextual and multivariate nature of human understanding. This approach sought to hold space for different pedagogies and ways of being musical to coexist, embracing difference as a possibility for growth by engaging with "others in their otherness" (Waghid, 2020, p. 305)—expanding one's views by encountering those who may see, experience, or imagine music differently and growing through this friction (see Article 2). It meant challenging fixed understandings of not only music education, but also of the concepts that shape its practices—such as 'excellence', 'artist,' and 'musician' (see Articles 4, 5)—since normative definitions of these terms risk sedimenting power structures, stagnating the field, and limiting what music education can become (Richerme, 2016). Embracing an ethic of heterogeneity in this way positioned plurality and dissonance—not as problems to be resolved—but as vital conditions to enable spaces where diverse musical voices might belong on their own terms.

3.3-My Interpretation of Critical Pedagogy

Explored in Article 2 and applied in the fieldwork of Articles 4 and 5, my understanding of critical pedagogy in research and music education is based on co-developing musical and dialogical spaces among hybrid participants/facilitators/researchers who view music, and the ways in which it is researched and taught, "as something to be constantly questioned, changed and transformed" (Schmidt, 2005, p. 7). By valuing the personal and diverse voices of individuals in naming and transforming their worlds, emphasizing the importance of engaging with diverse perspectives to avoid stagnation and the perpetuation of dominant norms, and offering a framework for transformative dialogue in pedagogical encounters, critical pedagogy centers the need to hold space for diverse voices in music education. It emphasizes the importance of engaging through diversity to both co-develop new practices where people with unique musicalities (Wright, 2018) may belong on their own terms, and

to open up perspectives that challenge the 'learned oppressions' that may still shape the field.

Drawing on the emphasis on contingency, reciprocity, and plurality that echoes through scholars such as hooks (1994), Ellsworth (1992), Trifonas and Balomenos (2012), and Waghid (2019), my understanding of critical pedagogy positions what music is, or how it could be learnt, as contingent—aiming to enable reciprocal learning spaces where teachers, students, and researchers can be enriched and "liberated" by the contact, and possible friction, with each others' unique and plural musicalities. However, this dialogue demands the de-hierarchization of common Western interpretations of musical excellence and expertise (see Assefa, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). Reciprocal learning is only possible if both participants, facilitators and researchers recognize the value of each other's musicality. Thus, my approach to critical pedagogy draws from Abrahams (2005, 2006) in highlighting participant's "knowing that they know", by understanding individuals as artists in becoming, that poses unique and extensive artistic knowledge that exceeds what is formally taught to them, and that are the most qualified 'experts' in creating and expressing their own stories through the arts (Bamberger, 2003; Garcia-Cuesta, 2024; Matarasso, 2019). Furthermore, my research expands on this idea by positioning participants as the only potential experts in also knowing *how* they know—foregrounding the importance of each participant contributing with their unique perspectives on how to co-craft music pedagogies that align with their own ways of learning, understanding and experiencing music.

This approach to critical pedagogy in music education and research aims to distribute agency, hold space for the softer voices (see Chapter 1) in music, and debunk the expert/non-expert, musician/non-musician, researcher/researched, teacher/student, dichotomies that may hinder belonging, while bringing new perspectives to the field. By encouraging participants to look inside their own musical selves for answers, and outside to the systemic and institutional music systems that liberate or oppress them, it aims to counteract common pedagogical approaches that "….still tend to emphasize Eurocentric and even elitist views of music that were inherited during a colonial period, with relatively little space offered to other ways of understanding and making music" (Liu et al., 2024, p. 2), and at the same time, bring the needed critical perspectives to counterfeit unproven populist discourses of music pedagogical practices as always good (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Boeskov, 2019), often present in music projects that strive for inclusion.

3.4-Moving Beyond Critique through Collaborative Utopian Thinking

Utopian thinking empowers individuals to both analyze the current state of the world and envision new possibilities for a better future (Goodwin & Taylor, 2009; Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Levitas, 2013). Like critical pedagogy, utopian epistemologies entail critique (Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Levitas, 2013), but they emphasize a hopeful and generative orientation. Aligning with this thesis' call for plural and de-centered expansions—and engaging with RQ1 and RQ2.3—utopian thinking invites educators and students to move beyond inherited assumptions about what music and education is or can be, to imagine radically new musical practices and pedagogies where they can comfortably belong—no matter how dissonant from current practices—and to move toward them.

According to Levitas (2013) utopia can be an approach to "simultaneously critiquing the present, exploring alternatives, imagining ourselves otherwise and experimenting with prefigurative practice" (p. 219). In her book, she outlines three interrelated modes of utopian thinking. The first is the *archaeological mode*, "piecing together the images of the good society" (p. 153). The second is the *ontological mode*, which "addresses the question of what kind of people particular societies develop and encourage. What is understood as human flourishing, what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed, by specific existing or potential social arrangements" (p. 153). The third is the *architectural mode*, which entails "the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future, acknowledging the assumptions about and consequences for the people who might inhabit them" (p. 153).

I propose that these three modes can synergize with, expand, and complement understandings of critical pedagogy for music education. As such, they became a guiding thread not only in my theoretical understanding of education and research, but also in the methodological design of this PhD (see Chapter 4).

The archaeological mode, with its focus on learning from the past and other cultural contexts to imagine new futures, can inform and support critical pedagogy by opening up perspectives beyond current dominant Western norms.[15] It encourages a broader recognition that prevailing

[15] This mode echoes Freire's statement (1970, p. 84): "'Looking at the past', for example,

understandings of music and music education are only some among many, holding space for people to name musical worlds where they can belong—not by simply replicating what they have learned or seen, but by imagining radically different possibilities. This mode contributes to critical pedagogy by centering contingency, advancing a commitment to seeking out diverse perspectives—including the decolonial thought that inspired Articles 2 and 3—, and thus emphasizing the need to expand one's "naming of the world" through dialogue with others.

The ontological mode builds upon post-structuralist and feminist critiques within critical pedagogy. It invites a critical examination of the values and forms of subjectivity that music education might foster—often unconsciously. By questioning central values—such as what is seen as human flourishing and whose capabilities are nurtured or suppressed—that may otherwise be taken for granted (Kertz-Welzel, 2022), this mode can contribute to holding space for increasingly caring, inclusive, and critically aware practices that seek to revise the norms and systems music education might otherwise perpetuate (Carson & Westvall, 2016; Wright, 2018).

Finally, the architectural mode allows for concreteness and forward momentum toward change. Seeking to enact change collaboratively and reflexively, it focuses on imagining and designing specific alternatives for the future, while critically considering their assumptions and consequences. Paired with approaches that look to turn possibility into action—such as the participatory action research framing of this thesis—this mode might help move utopia away from perceptions of being unrealistic or unreachable (Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Levitas, 2013). Instead, it positions utopia as a practical framework for enabling belonging by collectively reimagining and transforming music education practices and realities.

Furthermore, the synergy between utopian thinking and critical pedagogy is reciprocal. Utopian ideals have historically been co-opted to justify harmful, exclusionary agendas (Kertz-Welzel, 2022). Similarly, an unreflective approach to utopian thinking in music education may forward narrow ideals and orthodoxies that sustain exclusionary or harmful practices. Bringing the co-created and critical focus of critical pedagogy—with its emphasis on questioning assumptions, fostering self-reflection, and amplifying

becomes a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future."

students' voices—into utopian thinking might serve as a safeguard against utopian visions that uncritically impose external ideals of what the world—or music—should be. It may empower people to self-reflect, define, and help create the worlds they personally believe in.

3.5-Multiple and Distributed Knowledges: PAR as an Epistemological Position

> *PAR is more than a mere methodology; it is an approach to research or "an epistemology—a theory of knowledge—that radically challenges who is an expert, what counts as knowledge and, therefore, by whom research questions and designs should be crafted."*
>
> Fine & Torre, 2019, p. 435

Even though methodology will be discussed in the next chapter, participatory action research (PAR) is not merely a methodological choice but an epistemological and ontological stance (Fine & Torre, 2019; Lenette, 2022). It understands knowledge as constructed, relational, contextual, and embodied in people (Kemmis et al., 2014; McIntyre, 2008). Rather than viewing research as the collection and interpretation of external data, PAR positions knowledge creation as a process that must be de-centered, situated, and co-authored with others. This orientation shares ground with both critical pedagogy and utopian thinking—as well as with the decolonial, post-structural, and feminist approaches to knowledge creation that inform this thesis and its articles—yet also responds to their limitations. As Hess (2017, 2019) warns, critical pedagogy risks reinscribing dominance when it assumes the authority to name the world for others. Likewise, utopian thinking may fall short when it imagines liberatory futures on behalf of others, rather than with them.

PAR as an epistemology and methodology responds to these concerns by urging researchers to resist extractive tendencies and instead privilege the lived perspectives of participants. It calls for facilitating collaborative inquiry without claiming ownership over participants' voices—working against the tendency to filter or curate their contributions through the lens of an external researcher, and urging each person to co-craft the practices where they might belong. Furthermore, it resists consensus and embraces plurality. Aligning with critiques on critical pedagogy that forward positionality and seek to avoid consensus, PAR embraces an ethic of heterogeneity that does not seek to resolve differences, but instead holds space for tension, friction,

and resonance. Rather than aiming for synthesis, it curates meaning across diverse contributions, attending to how different voices interact, interrupt, and illuminate one another without being reduced to a single narrative. In this way—and inspired by the words of Manning (2016)—each individual's contribution through PAR may be seen as a "minor gesture": a subtle, often overlooked act or tendency that disrupts dominant (or "major") structures and opens up new potentials for thought, action, and relation, shifting how we perceive, move, and engage with the world.

PAR therefore serves as both an epistemological grounding and an ethical commitment for my research. It seeks to enable horizontal, situated, and plural approaches to knowledge-making—valuing ambiguity and multiplicity over closure in order to hold spaces where individuals are not required to conform to the values, practices, or perspectives of the norm, but may instead engage with music education and research on their own terms. At the same time, it brings together critical reflection and hopeful imagining in ways that are grounded in practice and remain accountable to those affected by its practices—anchoring the philosophical commitments of this dissertation in the everyday practices and relationships through which they take shape. As the next chapter will discuss, PAR provided a practical framework through which the theoretical arguments that inform this thesis could be put into action—not as abstract ideals, but as lived, practical interventions in the here and now—merging the theoretical perspectives of this dissertation with its methodological design.

Chapter 4: Methodology: Amplifying Softer Voices through Arts-Based Critical Participatory Action Research (ABC-PAR)

As described in the previous chapter, ontology and epistemology are inevitably intertwined with methodology—especially when working with critical, action-focused, and participatory approaches. Because my methodology is tied to how I understand knowledge and how I position myself in relation to others, I could not separate it from the values and commitments that shape this research. Developing the methodology therefore became both a deeply personal and relational process that raised many questions and demanded constant rethinking and rebuilding—adapting and growing through the process of engaging with others: How could I develop a flexible and critical methodology that holds space for uncertainty, plurality, and otherness? One that invites people to belong on their own terms? That allows the unexpected to happen—and the utopian to emerge? And that responds with care to both the potentials and dangers of participatory research?

In this chapter, I will describe my methodological exploration of these questions. First, I will describe how I drew from two subsets of participatory action research (PAR)—namely arts-based PAR (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019) and critical PAR (Kemmis, 2014)—to propose arts-based critical PAR (ABC-PAR). Second, I will present how autoethnographic methodologies (Adams et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2011), and thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022), expanded my original conceptualization of ABC-PAR to develop a methodology that can align with the specific needs, context, values, and possibilities of my research. Third, I will present how this methodology was applied in practice during the fieldwork. Finally, I will discuss some of the major ethical concerns and limitations I found linked to the methodology, and how I aimed to alleviate these challenges.

4.1-What is Critical Arts-Based Participatory Action Research?

4.1.1-PAR

Heavily influenced by the thoughts of Freire and critical pedagogy (Hall et al., 2017; Udas, 1998), participatory action research (PAR) is an approach to research committed to "democratic engagement, transparency and openness,

a strong cooperative and communitarian ethos, inclusion, and a steadfast conviction to issues concerned with equity, social justice, and sustainability" (Given, 2008, p. 602). It forwards the active involvement of those with lived experiences of a subject to generate knowledge, and to act through this knowledge to improve their world (Lenette, 2022). As a situated research "practice-changing practice" (Kemmis, 2009), PAR rejects notions of "objectivity" in research in favor of contextualized and embodied knowledge, breaching the gap between research and action. This orientation allows practitioners and/as participants to synergistically co-develop knowledge that draws from and transforms their experiences—knowledge that is relevant and impacts their present and future practices and can amplify their voices to transform the field (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019; Kemmis, 2014; Lenette, 2022; MacDonald, 2012).

PAR does not offer a series of steps for researchers to follow, but is "a living dialectical process" that blurs the categories between participants, practitioners, and researchers, through an interactive, non-linear, and holistic approach to research that braids "exploration, knowledge construction, and action" (Kemmis et al., 2014; Lenette, 2022; McIntyre, 2008). According to McIntyre (2008, p. 1) PAR approaches should include: 1) "a shared process of co-participation between researchers and participants to co-construct knowledge"; 2) "the promotion of self- and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change"; and, 3) "the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process."

4.1.2-Critical PAR

Critical PAR[16] is a subset of PAR that aims to bring together "broad social analysis, the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, and transformational action to improve things" (Kemmis 2014, p. 12). It empowers people to look "inside" themselves and "outside" toward the conditions that shape how they think, to uncover "unsustainable, irrational, or unjust" systems and structures (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 208). Deeply linked to critical pedagogy, social change scholarship, and decolonial scholarship—

[16] Critical PAR defines "critical" as a collective intention to make our practices, our understandings of our practices, and the conditions under which we practice more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive (Kemmis, 2014).

and frequently used in education—Critical PAR can offer a framework for examining the systemic and structural issues that may be limiting belonging in music education, while also holding space for practitioners and participants to re-evaluate their current practices, assumptions, and beliefs. It supports the opening of communicative spaces that challenge whose voices are recognized, who holds the space, and under which conditions—and by whom—new questions and answers are produced in the field (Kemmis, 2014).

4.1.3-Arts-Based PAR

Arts-based PAR, involves using art as a catalyst for development work in a PAR process (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019). This includes, for example, embracing artistic practices as a way of empowering participants, opening additional paths towards reflection, or facilitating a more welcoming and imaginative research environment. It embraces "the mess" (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019; Lenette, 2022) often present in artistic creation, and invites it into the reflection process, allowing for "unexpected results and surprising insights to materialize (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019; Jokela et al., 2015). Its potentialities are kismetic to the music education practitioner/researcher, since it allows those who are at the same time scholars, educators, and musicians, to more holistically make use of the unique transdisciplinary identities and expertises—which "often involves an artist's skills, a teacher's pedagogic skills, and the skills to develop methods by means of research" (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019, p. 12)—to develop unique knowledge.

4.1.4-Arts-Based Critical PAR (ABC-PAR)

By grouping arts-based and critical PAR, my conceptualization of ABC-PAR seeks to embrace the democratic approach to knowledge co-creation, and focus on action characteristic of these methods, while benefiting from how these two subcategories of PAR may catalyze and support each other. It aims to draw from the reflective nature of critical PAR to analyze both the self and the world around it, and utilizes arts-based methodologies' potentials in order to support increasingly inclusive and imaginative forms of collaborative critical inquiry.

While challenging, disrupting, and questioning are foundational to critical PAR, the constructive and creative processes within arts-based methodologies can complement these aims by enabling increasingly generative approaches to criticality. Arts-based methods can potentially prompt the imagination of utopian possibilities beyond traditional dialogic reflection;

hold space for diverse ways of knowing; and open further possibilities to belong as knowledge creators for those who reflect through embodied and artistic processes (Chemi & Firing, 2024). By pairing artistic modes of inquiry with critical dialogue, ABC-PAR seeks not only to unsettle the given, but to center the need—and open additional paths—to collectively generate alternatives to what it deconstructs in this research.

At the same time, Critical PAR's emphasis on reflexivity, awareness of power dynamics, and attentiveness to broader social structures may support and expand arts-based PAR by encouraging arts practitioners and participants to remain self-critical and open to uncertainty throughout artistic processes. Artistic practices are not intrinsically critical. As Belfiore and Bennett (2008) remind us, taking the inherently transformative power of the arts for granted risks becoming an orthodoxy. ABC-PAR forwards the importance of criticality, precisely to try and highlight the ambiguity and potential change-resistance of artistic practices (see Christophersen et al., 2023; Hebert, 2011; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021), hoping to alleviate the uncritical perpetuation of practices that may result in excluding or disempowering artistic experiences (Boeskov, 2022; Ramstedt, 2023).

Even though ABC-PAR was the central methodological pillar for my research, this methodology was never meant to be fixed and complete. Throughout my PhD process, my research methodology developed flexibly. It was shaped by the theoretical reflections in Articles 1 and 2, the collaborative research in Article 3, and the fieldwork in Articles 4 and 5. As new inspirations, challenges, and possibilities came to light, I realized that my initial conceptualization of ABC-PAR was insufficient to address my developing participatory goals and ethical concerns, and chose to expand on it by drawing from other research approaches, namely *autoethnography* and *thinking with theory*.

4.2-Expanding ABC-PAR with Autoethnography, and Thinking Together With and For Theory

Combining PAR with other research approaches can help expand its potentialities, address its inequities, promote community participation, and foster individual empowerment (MacDonald, 2012). By integrating PAR with autoethnography and thinking with theory, I aimed to develop an approach to research that—by critically and curiously looking both inward and outward—might caringly and ethically expand who gets to belong as a musician and as a

knowledge creator, while remaining wary of the pitfalls that may arise along this path.

4.2.1-Autoethnography and ABC-PAR

Autoethnography is a reflexive methodology that aims "to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005)" (from Ellis et al. 2011, p. 1). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a social approach to autoethnography that involves "researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts" (Chang et al., 2016, p. 17). Through autoethnographic collaborations, researchers aim to better understand their own personal experiences, and to extrapolate from these to better understand the culture structures and systems that surround them through the reflective potential of collaborative analysis. Researchers have used PAR and autoethnography together to foster critical consciousness, decolonize research methods, invoke embodied, affective/emotional, and aesthetic ways of knowing, give more equal significance to all collaborating researchers, foster authentic participatory engagement, and challenge tokenized or superficial participatory approaches (Phillips et al., 2022; Vang et al., 2022).

Applied in Article 3 and in the fieldwork of Articles 4 and 5, the merging of autoethnography and PAR aimed to bring the aforementioned possibilities into my research. This approach sought to draw from and value participants' unique knowledge rooted in their personal experiences—helping to legitimize alternative ways of knowing for co-researchers, contributing to the cultivation of an increasingly participatory research space in which participants may experience belonging as knowledge creators, and deepening understandings of each other's narratives, goals, and aspirations within the shared research process.

More importantly, introducing autoethnography into my research methodology was an ethical decision. By sharing my own personal experiences with collaborators—just as they were choosing to share with each other and with me—I aimed to create a less extractive and more equitable research space, one that embraced vulnerability as an ethical research practice and welcomed the possibility that others might challenge, shape, and impact my sense of self through our shared work (Lapadat, 2017; Lenette, 2022). In sharing my background, motivations, and potential biases—and inviting

participants to question and untangle my views—I sought to present myself as a historized and flawed individual in a process of growth. This was not only an attempt to destabilize hierarchies that might otherwise have positioned me as a superior figure of knowledge, but also an attempt to transparently offer context that could inform—and support—participants' critical engagement with my contingent perspectives and actions throughout the research.

4.2.2-Thinking With and For Theory and ABC-PAR

Exploration and dialogue with theory should guide the reflection processes of PAR (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019). However, how could my research be truly participatory if the theoretical underpinnings that informed it—and that would be part of our collaborative dissemination—had only been introduced, reflected upon, and understood by me?

With this question in mind, and in order to inform my work and build the theoretical baseline that should underpin PAR (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019), I began my research process with a broad exploration of literature on current practices, research methodologies, and ongoing conversations within the field of music education. This process naturally led me to concepts that bridged music education with other disciplines. As Jackson and Mazzei (2022, p. 11) state, "to open to the unthought requires transversal movements to the outside of a discipline, to encounter that which is unrecognizable." Seeking perspectives that might expand music education thought and practice—and in search of what might have remained unrecognizable to me and possibly the field—I followed these threads. Engaging with scholarship from other disciplines became a series of "chance encounter[s] that incite[s] the unthought" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022, p. 5)—not to systematically find definitive answers, but to find inspiration that might broaden my outlook, and reflect on how such perspectives could be relevant to challenging and enriching music education. As Jackson and Mazzei (2022, p. 15) suggest, allowing these new insights "to reorient my thought" and "to keep the various paths flowing and open rather than restricting them to one line."

This plural process of exploration, inspiration, and reflection—that emerged organically through engaging with the concept of artistic citizenship in Article 1—mirrors what Jackson and Mazzei (2022) describe as "plugging in", 'or "thinking with theory." Plugging in enables "putting thought in motion" (ibid., p. 86), inviting diverse theoretical perspectives to reorient thinking, expand understanding, and reimagine the world. After

writing Article 1, plugging in continued to shape my thinking—supporting dissent and plurality of thought, and positioning engagement with diverse perspectives as an opportunity for growth. It informed the development of Article 2, where I brought the ideas of Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid into conversation with current Western music education scholarship. Gradually, plugging in became not only a tool for reflection, but also a practical and ethically guided response to the complexities of participatory research that had been present in my thinking from the outset—and that were becoming more pronounced as my fieldwork unfolded.

The knowledge each of us develops and assimilates through our lives and work—academic or otherwise—shapes how we think, act, and relate to the world. As Kemmis (2009, p. 9) describes, changes in the discourses that inform and reflect our thinking ("sayings"), our behaviors ("doings"), and the social interactions between research participants ("relatings") are deeply interconnected. As my fieldwork unfolded, I came to recognize that the ideas I had developed during the first phase of my PhD—about citizenship, music education, philosophy, and so forth—were not only shaping my own thinking and writing, but also, through my words, subtly influencing the shared PAR deliberations with collaborating music educators and participants. These theoretical voices, embedded in my practice and reflections, became powerful participants in the collaborative research process—yet they remained hidden behind me. This felt not only non-transparent, but also ethically troubling.

Like Jackson and Mazzei (2022), I began to recognize the value—and, in my case, the ethical necessity—of explicitly revealing the backstage of my conversations with theory to my collaborators. This move sought to "out" the powerful academic voices that had shaped me, inviting their critique and deconstruction. It also offered a way to introduce, collaboratively reflect on, and discuss the theoretical underpinnings that could inform our shared academic dissemination with collaborators, allowing for a more genuinely participatory research process.

This meant, for example, that when discussing experiences of belonging as artists with participants from Canto Abierto, I did not simply contribute by asking questions or sharing my own reflections during reflection sessions—which would have made it difficult for participants to identify, question, or respond to the subtle and unspoken ways, in which concepts such as utopian thinking, artistic citizenship, aesthetic music education, or expanded musicianship informed my words. Instead, I explicitly introduced my understanding of these concepts to the participants as frameworks which had

shaped my thinking—some of which I resonated with, and others which I did not—and that we could use to reorient our discussions. Together, we explored participants' experiences through some of these different theoretical lenses. In doing so, each framework became more clearly positioned as contingent rather than authoritative, inviting a multiplicity of thoughts to coexist (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022) and inspiring new possibilities for saying, doing, and relating that informed the actions we pursued.

This process soon ceased to be led by me alone. Participants began sharing their own knowledges—academic, or not—to inform our shared collaborations. It became standard practice for each of us to introduce—and collectively think with—the "theories" shaping our thinking. We would present our understandings to one another, discuss them together, and collaboratively reflect on how we were making sense of our music education experiences through these frameworks. For instance, one participant from Canto Abierto with a background in psychology, introduced Kern et al.'s (2020) understanding of belonging to rethink our collaborative reflections—which became central to our discussions and to my own research. Similarly, one of the artists in Landsby Akademiet introduced Matarasso's (2019) ideas on personal artistry to help us reconsider how we were engaging with the local community.

Moreover, since PAR challenges the assumption that scholarly knowledge is the most valuable form of knowing (Lenette, 2022), and because theory and practice are intertwined rather than separate entities (Manning, 2016), co-researchers were empowered to share other forms of non-academic knowledge that shaped their thinking for us to think with. This included knowledge they had come to trust and live by—drawn from personal experience, family, culture, tradition, and context. For example, a participant from RePercusión San Cristóbal brought in her understanding of embodied practice from circus studies to articulate her views on the role of the body in instrumental education and reorient our discussion on music education practices.

This process highlighted that working with practitioners and participants who are not academic experts in music education does not mean they are not experts in their own fields and lived experiences. Nor does it mean they cannot engage with, reflect on, or critically grasp academic discourse. By embracing co-researchers as co-developers in the process of thinking with theory, I aimed to foster an increasingly participatory research methodology—co-informed, co-owned, and grounded in shared reflection—that respects co-researchers'

diverse knowledges and capacities, challenges hierarchical understandings of knowledge creation, and opens space for new perspectives to transform both our shared thinking and my own.

The collaborators' diverse backgrounds—spanning different academic fields, cultural and social contexts, ages, genders, and so forth—enriched this process. Their contributions expanded our reflections across disciplines, invited decolonial perspectives on what music is and how it might be taught, and brought in insights that often surprised and challenged us. These plural perspectives—that were collectively introduced, debated, and critically engaged with throughout the research process—generated new insights and theoretical understandings, which in turn led to academic publications. In this way, thinking with theory also became a methodological approach for collaboratively developing new knowledge informed by the diverse knowledges of all co-researchers through participatory research—*thinking together for theory*.

4.2.3-ABC-PAR + Autoethnography + Thinking Together With and For Theory

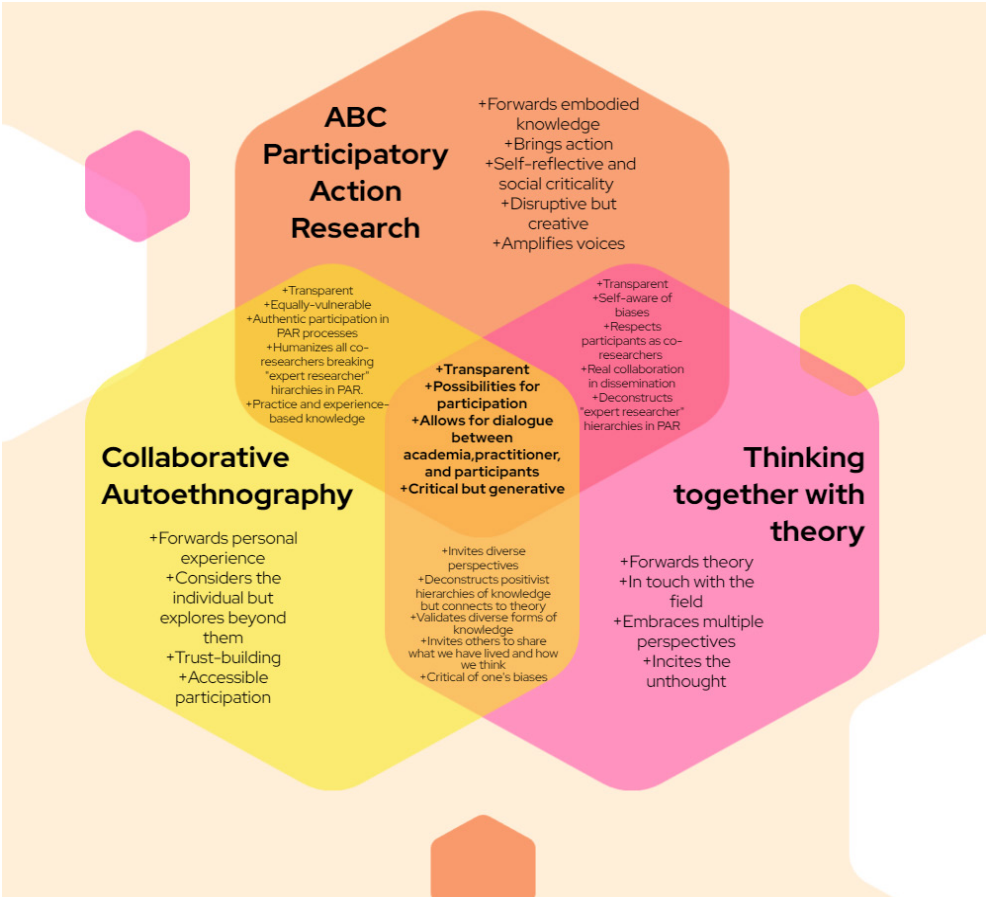

Figure1- Potential contributions of bringing together these methodologies

Even though no research methodology can be entirely participatory or fully ethical, the figure illustrates how the three methodological pillars guiding this work—ABC-PAR, collaborative autoethnography, and thinking together with and for theory—were brought together in an effort to contribute to the development of an increasingly ethical methodology. Together, they sought to hold a space where participants could belong as knowledge creators on their own terms, enabling diverse voices to engage in dialogue, and fostering a more holistic impact on music education practices and scholarship.

These methodologies converged not only in the fieldwork but also in the design of this thesis. Writing Articles 1 and 2 became not only a process of exploring the theories I would later bring into dialogue with co-researchers,

but also a path toward transparently sharing, both with collaborators and with the readers of this thesis, my understandings of the theoretical groundings that shaped my perspectives. Meanwhile, the collaborative autoethnographic process in Article 3 supported my efforts to remain self-critical and reflexive—both in relation to my co-researchers and to those engaging with this thesis. In this way, the design of the thesis itself became an extension of the methodology developed for my fieldwork in Articles 4 and 5, emphasizing an ethical and transparent stance not just toward co-researchers, but also toward readers.

4.3-ABC-PAR in Practice: Discussing the Fieldwork

There is no fixed formula for designing or implementing participatory action research (PAR) (McIntyre, 2008, p. 2). Both PAR and arts-based methodologies require flexibility and responsiveness, often guided by intuition and situated judgment (Jokela, 2008; Jokela et al., 2015). Accordingly, the methodological form of my research shifted, and was collaboratively adapted, to better align with the specific contexts, interests, and needs of each initiative and its participants (see Table 1 and Article 4, 5 for details on each specific methodology).

Despite these differences, a series of values and practices echoed throughout my fieldwork, offering a fluid yet unifying framework that evolved alongside my research. Informed both by the theoretical discussions on method presented in this chapter, as well as participatory and arts-based empirical publications (e.g., Asakura et al., 2019; Patel, 2022), my research included iterative and often overlapping processes of (a) *observing and experiencing the researched initiatives,* (b) *critically and collaboratively reflecting on the initiatives and proposing actions for change through dialogue and through the arts,* (c) *implementing these changes*, and (d) *proposing new directions for exploration and transformation* that unfolded in the following way:

- The research process started with sharing an introduction of backgrounds, intentions, potential research interests, and values with the future co-researchers. As part of this introduction, I presented myself and my research and extended an invitation to collaborate—opening space for dialogue about how we might move forward together. I outlined my proposed methodological approach and introduced common practices and possibilities within PAR, framing these as flexible and contingent, and explicitly inviting participants to question and contribute to reshape them. While introducing PAR, I paid particular attention to ethical challenges linked to this methodology

(see Lenette, 2022; Kemmis, 2014) and invited participants to share in the commitment of working through them from the outset—challenges that could already begin to limit possibilities for horizontal research from this first meeting.[17]

- Following this first meeting, I joined the researched activities as a participant and/or facilitator. This meant, for example, singing or playing the cajón alongside other participants, supporting facilitators on piano during Canto Abierto and RePercusión, or taking part in workshops with Landsby Akademiet. This approach aligns with calls within PAR for researchers to engage personally and relationally with the practices they study, offering their full presence and engagement to the co-researchers and researched activities (Kemmis, 2014; McIntyre, 2008). It reflects a conscious departure from stances of detachment, or disinterested observation, in recognition of the ethical and epistemological demands of a methodology that values mutual involvement, and co-learning (Ibid; see 4.4.5.1 for discussion on limitations). While participating in the researched activities, both co-researchers and I sought to stay vigilant, observing and reflecting on our research questions through the embodied experience of making music together. These activities were documented through fieldnotes in my journal, as well as video and audio recordings. While I held primary responsibility for the documentation process in each of the collaborations, many participants also contributed with their own notes and materials (Table 1).

- Observations from the musical activities were later brought into shared reflection sessions, held separately from the researched musical activities (Table 1). These PAR sessions were collaborative spaces grounded in critical dialogue and collective reflection, where we shared observations, engaged with each other to explore the research questions, suggested actions to enrich the activities, reflected on previous changes, and collaboratively identified new directions for

[17] Even though aligning the research with our shared interests and negotiated methodologies was my goal, I have to problematize the possibility of doing so. The constraints of my PhD allowed me to pivot the research interests only partially, since it still had to at least partially align with the agenda of my PhD. Furthermore, the power imbalances in the group that positioned me as "the expert researcher"—even when I specifically tried to challenge them—probably stopped some participants from voicing their interest, or offer alternative ways to work together, even when I explicitly aimed to address and share these potential issues from the start (see also section 4.4.5.1 for further discussion on these limitations).

exploration (Kemmis, 2009; Lenette, 2022; McIntyre, 2008; see 4.4.3 for ethical discussion on co-facilitation).

To foster transparency, examine both individual and shared assumptions, and embrace a plurality of perspectives, we often brought in narratives from our personal backgrounds and made explicit the knowledges that informed our thinking. This practical use of autoethnographic approaches and thinking with and for theory as extensions of the PAR process, brought our observations into dialogue with our prior embodied experience and theoretical insights, allowing for more holistically informed and interconnected forms of reflection (see 4.2).

In an effort to support "qualitative and interpretative forms of inquiry that are accessible, comprehensible, and immediately responsive to the needs of groups that use them" (Given, 2008, p. 602), and embracing the "messiness" that Lenette (2022) identifies as intrinsic to participatory methodologies, we approached data generation, analysis, and the development of conclusions as relational and interwoven processes—shaped by the group's evolving interests and conversations, and responsive to the shifting dynamics through which co-researchers made sense of their own realities. Grounded in shared narrative inquiry, problem-posing dialogue, and collective reflection (Kemmis, 2009; Lenette, 2022; McIntyre, 2008), we brought forward our diverse observations and sought to engage one another with presence and care in critical questioning. As new narratives and concerns emerged, we analyzed and made sense of them together—looking "for trends, for themes, and for insights triggered in others" (Bray et al., 2000, p. 93). This involved analyzing conversations as they unfolded through dialogue, by revisiting transcripts and fieldnotes from earlier sessions to rethink them in light of new perspectives, and by engaging with relevant scholarship to challenge, support, and deepen our interpretations through thinking with and for theory. We worked inductively to identify resonant meanings across our perspectives, and continuously revisited and reshaped our evolving insights as part of an ongoing, reflective dialogic process (Kemmis, 2009; Lenette, 2022; McIntyre, 2008).

During the last minutes of each session, we summarized our discussions and updated our developing findings. The sessions were documented through audio recordings and fieldnotes. Between

sessions, I took responsibility for reviewing the transcripts, identifying themes that might have escaped our conversations, or quotes that needed clarification, and bringing these back to the group to prompt further reflection in the next sessions. Participants had access to the transcripts and often joined me in this process.

- Arts and music became catalysts for exploring co-researchers' experiences, fostering trust, and offering new pathways for communication and reflection (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019). These artistic processes organically unfolded within the regular music-making sessions of the researched initiatives—where co-researchers engaged with arts and music in familiar ways, now re-framed through the lens of our research. This shift in perspective invited new ways of experiencing, relating to one another, and acting during music-making, which in turn opened up new potentialities for the research itself. It enabled us to surface insights that did not emerge through dialogue alone, to embody the challenges and possibilities raised during reflection sessions, and to experiment with our proposed actions for change on a practical basis (e.g., Article 4, Shared-Action-1). As the research methodology evolved, and in light of the impact these artistic processes had on the development of our work with the first two collaborators, I proposed opening additional spaces for artistic experimentation and shared reflection as an integrated part of the research design (see Article 5).

- Actions for change took two interconnected forms. First, each reflection session became, in itself, part of our transformative actions (Kemmis, 2009; Onsrud et al., 2022). We experienced these sessions as interventions that could "change the way people think about and talk about their world (sayings); they change the way they act in and on it (doings); and they change the ways they relate to others and to the environment (relatings)" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 9). By transforming how we thought together, these shared and critical dialogic spaces shaped our experiences and how we acted and related to one another throughout both the shared research and music activities. Second, we experimented with implementing specific changes in pedagogies and practices within the researched initiatives based on co-researchers' suggestions—for example, adjusting teaching approaches (e.g., Article 4, Shared-Action-2), or reimagining the structure of the initiatives (e.g., Article 3, Section-4). When suggestions for change required

actions beyond what co-researchers could directly implement—such as collaboration from activity organizers, facilitators, or participants not involved in our reflection sessions—we brought our ideas to them, which were often met with openness and support.

- As our research collaboration neared its end, we focused on developing our findings and making final decisions: which suggestions and insights should be shared with the organizers and facilitators to further improve participants and facilitators experiences, which themes to present in the articles, how these themes would be developed, and how to validate our findings and conclusions with all co-researchers.

After the fieldwork concluded, the process and findings were written up for publication, either with the direct participation of co-researchers as co-authors through online meetings (Article 5), or, in cases where collaborators could not—or preferred not to—take part in the writing process (Article 4), the article was written by me, then reviewed together with co-researchers online, and adapted based on their feedback (see 4.4.5.5 for discussions on authorship). In both cases, legitimacy and validity were supported through "communicative action" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 31)—meeting with co-authors to thoroughly read a draft of the publication, adapt it if needed, and collaboratively consider and validate whether the final text felt honest, clear, accurate, and appropriate to individual and collective experiences and meanings.

	Researching with	Documentation	Dialogic reflection sessions	Additional sources of data	Total transcribed hours	Arts-based reflection	Dissemination
Canto Abierto	9 choir members	Transcribed audio and video recordings, fieldnotes I held primary responsibility for documenting the process	9	Dialogue in one-to-one or small group settings Online meetings	17	Part of the musical activities	Written by me and validated by each member of the group
RePercusión San Cristóbal	10 participants	Transcribed audio and video recordings, fieldnotes I held primary responsibility for documenting the process	9	Dialogue in one-to-one or small group settings Online meetings	18	Part of the musical activities	Written by me and validated by each member of the group
Landsby Akademiet	6 art educators[18]	Transcribed audio and video recordings, fieldnotes Shared responsibility for documenting the process	14	Online meetings with co-researchers Informal meetings and shared arts-based reflection sessions with community members	33	Workshops and performances Separate arts-based reflection sessions	Co-written, and co-validated

Table1- Summary of the fieldwork

[18] Beyond the six arts educators who acted as co-researchers, insights from multiple members of the community also contributed to this research and were used to contrast and enrich our findings.

4.4-Ethical Considerations and Limitations of the Methodology

Co-production of knowledge is "ethically complex, emotionally demanding, inherently unstable, vulnerable to external shocks, subject to competing demands and it challenges many disciplinary norms. This is what makes it so fresh and innovative" (Flinders et al., 2016, p. 261). Since PAR is not just a methodology, but an ethical commitment (Given, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014), engaging with the ethics of participatory research in collaboration with co-researchers became an ongoing process central to the fieldwork that has informed and shaped the methodology presented in this chapter. To complement the previous sections, I will now emphasize specific steps that were followed to try and develop an increasingly ethical research approach, the issues that both co-researchers and I voiced as most problematic, and the limitations that we encountered while aiming to alleviate them.

4.4.1-Ongoing Informed Consent

In line with formal research and ethical demands, written consent was obtained from participants, or from their tutors if participants were not legally independent (Kemmis et al., 2014, pp. 160–162; see Appendix B). This document confirmed that participants agreed to be part of the research voluntarily, that they understood the research objectives, that they understood the data that would be stored, and that they understood their option to withdraw their consent at any time in the future. However, as argued by Lenette (2022, p. 88), when conducting PAR, formal consent demands are often insufficient, or completely "miss the point." Thus, beyond asking for written consent, from the first meeting with co-researchers and all through the collaboration, time was allocated to collaboratively explore the developing experiences of participants, revisit their willingness and consent to continue engaging or not with the research, and to explore how the collaboration may evolve in a way that they could experience as comfortable and safe.

4.4.2-An Attitude of Shared and Ongoing Ethical Reflection

As Lenette (2022, p. 42) argues, "even when academic researchers and co-researchers are committed to achieving meaningful participation, it is difficult to implement relevant strategies effectively without first engaging in transparent and robust discussions about power dynamics, research practices, and the implications of genuine participation."

In response to these concerns, co-researchers and I committed to an ongoing, shared process of ethical reflection that accompanied every stage of the research—beginning with our first meeting and continuing throughout each stage of the research. We deliberately reserved time during each of our reflection sessions and online meetings in order to collectively engage with and problematize power dynamics, communicative challenges, intersectional issues, and the conditions required to co-create caring and safe research participation. This not only resulted in shifts in thinking, but also in how co-researchers and I acted and related to each other. They changed how we interacted during the research and the musical activities, bringing suggestions such as: further embracing an attitude of uncertainty, voicing the contingency of our thoughts, explicitly emphasizing the learning that took place through engaging with others, and recognizing power dynamics as intrinsically unequal and committing to working through them (see Article 4, Shared-Action-1)

Looking to unsettle power dynamics within the group and hold space for additional voices, I additionally engaged with each co-researcher in one-to-one conversations to discuss their experiences and their perceptions on the research process, and offered anonymous channels through which co-researchers could express their views on the facilitation and research process.

4.4.3-Equal Participation

In an ideal participatory action research (PAR) project, co-researchers would engage as equal collaborators throughout the entire process—from identifying research interests to disseminating findings (Lenette, 2022; Kemmis et al., 2014). In practice, however, equal participation is not always feasible—or even desirable—due to limiting factors such as differing interests, positions, and possibilities among co-researchers; limited flexibility in the format, values, or settings of the researched initiatives; or tensions between academic demands, and forms of knowledge creation that may resonate more closely with specific co-researchers (e.g., Baird et al., 2015; Blumenthal, 2011; Lenette, 2022).

Working with people who had experienced being othered—both musically and personally (Article 4,5)—I always prioritized care for co-researchers over data extraction, the demands of the PhD, or my own goals for fully co-created knowledge. To navigate this position while honoring the participatory ethos of the project, I involved co-researchers as early as possible in designing the collaboration—exploring common interests, discussing

methodological possibilities, and aiming to co-create a research path within the constraints of our shared wishes and capacities for participation (see 4.4.5.1 for discussion on limitations).[17] These dialogic processes continued throughout the research: even after reaching agreement on key interests and methods, we repeatedly revisited and adapted research approaches, forms of participation, and the degree of involvement of each co-researcher.

This ongoing engagement not only shaped the direction of the research but also led to the development of new participatory research practices—such as increasing the space allocated for arts-based reflection throughout the research to hold space for those who did not comfortably participate dialogically, and introducing ways of thinking with and for theory that valued non-academic knowledge to invite further co-participation also during analysis, discussion, and dissemination (see 4.2). This evolution exemplifies how the methodological approach gradually shifted from striving for equal participation to seeking plural forms of participation that might enable co-researchers to engage more fully, at their own pace, in ways that felt meaningful, safe, and responsive to their individual circumstances.

4.4.4-Researcher Positionality

While participatory action research allows researchers who are external to a given community or context to become actively involved in co-developing knowledge, this requires both a commitment to becoming fully engaged participants in the research process and a heightened attentiveness to how one's own assumptions, agendas, and institutional affiliations might guide or distort the process (Kemmis, 2012; McIntyre, 2008). Inhabiting this "space in between"—fully participating as an insider while remaining an outsider to the community—is a demanding ethical position (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). It requires a commitment to reflexivity, recognizing bias, developing communication skills, and remaining critically attentive to how one's values and priorities might unconsciously shape the research process (see Kemmis, 2012; Minkler et al., 2002; Timonen, 2021).

Seeking to challenge what Kemmis (2012) describes as the role of the "external researcher"—one who merely facilitates inquiry from a distance—and to develop knowledge *with*, not *on* or *for* participants (McArdle, 2014), I engaged with my full voice, both in the research process and in the artistic and educational activities.

I made my position of power and responsibility a recurring topic of

reflection. I aimed to "show humility and be reflexive, open, transparent, and sensitive to a process of co-learning when discussing power and privilege—including acknowledging my own" (Lenette, 2022, p. 51). I focused on continuously problematizing my own privilege, reiterating the contingency of my thoughts, and inviting co-researchers to join me in questioning the structures and assumptions that might shape the research.

Autoethnographic narrations complemented these efforts by aiming to invite increased transparency, vulnerability and horizontality (Ellis et al., 2011). These efforts sought to further position myself as a flawed, and vulnerable individual in a process of becoming, moving beyond my position as a researcher, and inviting participants to share together with me in a process of mutual learning (see 4.2).

Similarly, participating in the artistic activities alongside co-researchers, where my inexperience—and, as participants joked, lack of normative musical talent—singing, playing cajón, or doing theatre, created opportunities for increased vulnerability, relational openness, and mutual learning.

I additionally encouraged co-researchers to co-facilitate our shared research processes—not seeking full equality but inviting co-researchers to engage to the extent they felt comfortable, for example by asking both each other and me questions, engaging in dialogue with each other, co-deciding the direction of our reflections, or suggesting new themes for exploration. As co-researchers took a more central role in facilitation, I increasingly stepped back from guiding the sessions and instead participated by sharing my own observations and perspectives (Lenette, 2022; McIntyre, 2008). This demanded a continuous balancing act—remaining engaged while acknowledging the power of my voice, prioritizing holding space for the voices of others, and taking responsibility for my role. I returned to this tension throughout the process, exploring and developing my approach to co-facilitation through both theoretical explorations (e.g., Waghid, 2018; see Article 2) and through practice (see Article 4, 5), and continuously renegotiating my position in dialogue with participants.

These efforts were not intended to erase the differences between us, but to engage with them—making visible the personal thoughts and experiences that would have inevitably shaped the research. By foregrounding my position and remaining accountable for its influence, I aimed to resist any illusion of neutrality (Given, 2008) and support a dialogic process in which all voices, including mine, could be situated, challenged, and engaged. In doing so, I

hoped to foster a process in which difference could be acknowledged and worked through, rather than neutralized—and where participation could emerge not despite, but through that difference.

4.4.5-Limitations of the Methodology

> *"...messy aspects are often ignored or purposely excluded from research discussions and publications, especially in relation to methodologies such as PAR. This situation usually arises for fear of discrediting the approach."*
>
> Lenette 2022, p. 67

Even though they align with the values and research questions of my research, arts-based or participatory methodologies are neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically superior to other research methodologies. One should never "assume that such methodologies can inherently eliminate power hierarchies or completely democratize ownership of data between academic researchers and co-researchers" (Lenette, 2022, p. 129). Despite my best efforts to design a methodology that could make space for increasingly diverse voices to belong, and to work horizontally and address power dynamics—both amongst participants and between participants, facilitators and researchers—these can never be fully eliminated, they impact the research process, and taint its findings. A power-neutral stance in my research would not eliminate these challenges, but ignore them. As such, in this section I bring forward the "mess." I will introduce those limitations and challenges that I—with the help of participants and facilitators—considered more prevalent in my research, aware that there might be other limitations that still escape my gaze:

4.4.5.1- A lack of horizontality and power neutrality was evident from the very first reflection session with participants. My status as a professional musician and researcher—together with other intersectional factors such as my perceived gender, race, age, and dialogical capabilities—gave a weight to my voice that deeply unbalanced our conversations. These imbalances meant that aiming to co-develop shared research interests, co-facilitate reflection sessions, design shared methodologies, or co-create knowledge—for example, by thinking together with and for theory—could never be a truly equal process. Challenging these imbalances was at times further complicated by institutional demands (see Lenette, 2022, p. 88). As an example of this, the legal and academic language used on the institutional forms

for co-researchers to sign—fully acknowledging their importance and necessity—promoted the researched/researcher dichotomy and was at odds with creating an atmosphere of proximity and vulnerability.

Similar imbalances were present for others in the group: facilitators often had a louder voice than participants; those who were more confident speakers had more influence than those who were shy or had limited dialogical tools; and those perceived as "better musicians" held more sway in discussions than those seen as "less talented" (see Article 4). From an ethical perspective, these dynamics are deeply problematic and may risk turning participatory research into a way of owning otherness—legitimizing and amplifying the voices and perspectives of only a few.

Through our collaborations, we sought to acknowledge and surface these dynamics, work through them, create caring, horizontal and representative spaces, and empower co-researchers' voices. However, such goals are unlikely to ever be fully reached (Blumenthal, 2011). Therefore, and despite the methodological efforts to alleviate these challenges, the findings presented in this research cannot claim to equally represent all participating voices, even if that was the intention.

4.4.5.2- Diversity of representation was also limited by the choice of methodology. The decision to work carefully and slowly through ABC-PAR meant that both the number of projects researched, and the amount of people in each initiative that could participate, was limited. This was especially problematic when working with Canto Abierto. In this initiative, I had the opportunity to work with only a small fraction of the participants, meaning that important and significant voices were left out of the conversation (see Article 4). The fact that my methodology allowed me to directly interact with just a few people, can put into question the representativeness of my findings. Even though there is an apparent alignment between the experiences of participants and facilitators in all the researched projects, and the theoretical explorations of Articles 1 and 2; I urge the reader to understand the knowledge presented here as situated, and critically explore its implications for their own contexts (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 68).

4.4.5.3- Limitations in both content and structure throughout the dissemination process constrained possibilities for transparency and

clarity. This is a common challenge in PAR, where the complexity and holistic nature of the method can be difficult to communicate within conventional academic formats (Herr & Anderson, 2005). While I attempt to surface the most relevant complexities—and responses—here, fully capturing them remains beyond the reach of a single chapter.

These limitations became particularly pronounced when discussing methodology as part of the empirical articles. Although autoethnographic narration and arts-based methods were employed to make space for situated and historized perspectives, these complexities were only partially retained in the published articles. Not all journals allowed—or encouraged—engagement with the depth of participants' stories and histories. While we collectively aimed to transparently share those aspects of co-researchers' backgrounds that we felt most necessary, the limited space available often meant providing only partial context. In combination with the anonymity required by some co-authors, this at times risked reducing participants to simplified labels such as 'minoritized' or 'vulnerable.'

Format constraints of empirical articles also limited opportunities to discuss methodology in depth. The approaches used in each initiative were context-specific and negotiated rather than standardized, meaning they could not be adequately referenced through existing literature. Some aspects of the methodologies were either lost during peer review or excluded due to space limitations. Even though we carefully chose what to include—based on what felt honest and transparent to co-researchers (Herr & Anderson, 2005)—this resulted in some ethical considerations and nuanced methodological decisions remaining invisible to the reader. For example, presenting our autoethnographic approaches in Article 4 would have significantly expanded the methodology section and therefore had to be omitted to make space for the reflections and experiences of the co-researchers. Similarly, although Article 5 briefly describes how we engaged with literature during reflection sessions, we did not have space to fully develop our use of thinking with and for theory.

4.4.5.4- These challenges were compounded by the evolving nature of my methodological understanding. Approaches that later became central to the methodology—such as arts-based methods and thinking with and for theory—were initially implicit in the research. They gained prominence organically through our collaborative work, but I

did not fully identify their relevance or conceptualize them until some of the research collaborations were completed. For instance, Article 4 frames our method as PAR without explicit mention of the arts-based practices that were integral to it, or the thinking with and for theory that made for increased participation—something I only recognized through post-publication reflection.

4.4.5.5- Authorship and anonymity also posed challenges in dissemination. Although I aimed to acknowledge the collaboration of all co-researchers by inviting them to be named as co-authors, this was not always possible or aligned with their wishes. Co-researchers in Canto Abierto and RePercusión San Cristóbal chose to remain anonymous due to personal, cultural, or religious reasons. We carefully discussed how to best honor their contributions, and they collectively decided not to be listed as official co-authors. As a result, my name appears alone in the byline of this article.

While not naming co-researchers who have actively contributed to and validated the research—but did not write directly in the article— as co-authors is a common practice in PAR publications (see e.g., Chan & Saidon, 2021; Onsrud et al., 2022; Timonen, 2021), this outcome conflicted with my own values for participatory research. However, I chose to prioritize co-researchers' preferences, engaging with them to ensure their voices were recognized in ways that felt most comfortable to them through the content of the article itself.

Chapter 5: Weaving the Articles Together: Two Readings

This thesis includes five articles that come together to address my research questions from multiple perspectives, *thinking together with* different voices through multiple paths. These articles not only disseminate the knowledge developed during my PhD—fostering an interplay of voices between participants, practitioners, myself, and the wider music education community—but are also an intrinsic part of the thesis itself, expanding on its processes, discussions, and findings.

My understanding of what research is—and of what this thesis could become—has significantly changed over the past three years. This shift has placed the thesis in a dual space of being, where two ways of linking the articles coexist. This chapter describes the articles and their role in the thesis through these two overlapping readings.

On the one hand, the articles can be viewed through a methodological lens aligned with my ABC-PAR approach. Article 1 helped shape the research context. Article 2 offered insights that informed the pedagogical and dialogical approaches used during the fieldwork. Article 3 built on Articles 1 and 2 by further examining structural and personal dimensions that would shape the ethos of my methodology. Finally, Articles 4 and 5 present the processes and findings from the fieldwork.

On the other hand, each of the articles may be read as thinking with a few of the myriad voices that shape this holistic field. Acknowledging the impossibility of addressing the whole, yet recognizing the unavoidable interconnection between all parts, these articles seek to exemplify how thinking with a diversity of views may invite transformation across the field—"to reorient thought… keeping the various paths flowing and open rather than restricting them to one line" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022, p. 15). In this sense, and drawing on Manning's (2016) notion of the 'minor gesture',[19] each article may be understood as enacting or tracing a subtle, situated shift—emerging from within practice—that might unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions and

[19] As defined in section 3.5: A subtle, often overlooked act or tendency that disrupts dominant (or "major") structures and opens up new potentials for thought, action, and relation, shifting how we perceive, move, and engage with the world.

practices in music education by bringing added voices into the field. These gestures do not seek to offer definitive answers or revolutionary change, but rather, I propose they may function like *retales*—a *retal* is a Spanish term to describe scraps of fabric—each carrying traces of local meaning, voice, and possibility. As retales, these articles may be stitched together in infinite ways, not seeking to form a single coherent pattern, but inviting each reader—as a fellow weaver—to explore connections that resonate with them, contributing to the shared crafting of more vibrant and plural music education tapestries.

Article 1: *Listening All Around: What Could the Fluid Conceptualization of Artistic Citizenships Do?*

Resulting from the first phase of my PhD process, this article offers a first retal that thinks together with scholars in citizenship studies. It examines possible connections between scholarship in citizenship and the arts and develops multiple, coexisting understandings of artistic citizenship by extrapolating shared challenges, critiques, and possibilities from discourses about the former into the latter.

Inspiring the first stages of my research, Article 1 opened up many of the themes that echo through this dissertation and shape the later articles. It underscores the value of criticality and of "looking around" for increasingly diverse voices to think with. By positioning not only normative understandings of the arts, but also artistic citizenships' efforts toward inclusion as inherently ambiguous, the article underscores the importance of accepting efforts toward transformation as inevitably flawed. Borrowing Haraway's phrasing (2016), this article argues for music educators to stay with the trouble and work through it—engaging with troubled practices and concepts without discarding them for their challenges nor concealing their shortcomings, but embracing and engaging with them as an opportunity for criticality and growth.

This article also opened up the notion of holistic expansion in the field, showing how conceptual, practical, and social transformation intertwine—and how holding space for a plurality of understandings and practices is necessary to support that transformation. Furthermore, it marked the first instance where my writing began to explore belonging and recognition as key aspects of this expansion toward participation and inclusion—concepts that would become central to my later work.

Following a methodological reading of this thesis, this article—together with Article 2—represents an initial step toward informing my fieldwork by

helping me to problematize and better understand the complexities of the field. Article 1 not only led me to rethink my research focus in order to develop more nuanced and relevant questions, but also offered ideas to think with during the fieldwork in collaboration with my co-researchers. Deciding to publish and include this article, results from an ethical commitment to share my understandings of these concepts—that deeply impacted my thinking—both with my research collaborators and with the readers of this thesis.

Article 2: *Decolonial voices for a caring music education: Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid.*

Resulting from the theoretical exploration that marked the early stages of my PhD journey, this article thinks together with the decolonial voices of Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid. In line with Article 1—though this time drawing from broader contexts within the education field—it offers a retal that exemplifies how looking around for new voices to think with, and engaging through diversity, might illuminate new possibilities and challenges for music education. It explores the importance of questioning what is taken for granted and opened up an attention to power, care, and positionality that continued to shape my later work.

From a methodological perspective, this article helped articulate the research and pedagogical approaches that would later guide my fieldwork. Both Freire and Waghid engage with critical pedagogy, and since PAR draws heavily on critical pedagogy, the writing and publication process offered a valuable opportunity to critically examine my thoughts and practices—both individually and through dialogue with editors and reviewers—and to share this reflection transparently with co-researchers and the readers of this thesis.

Article 3: *Rethinking "Musical Excellence" from a Decolonial Perspective: Disruptive Autobiographical Experiences Among Doctoral Scholars.*

This collaborative autoethnography thinks together with doctoral students and early career researchers in music from Eurasia, East Asia, and North America, along with a professor based in Northern Europe. Article 3 explores how disruptive autobiographical experiences might inform increasingly plural and "decolonized" understandings of musical excellence, and the practices that often result from these.

This article explores themes first raised in Articles 1 and 2 from a new

perspective. Embracing a decolonial stance, it echoes previous articles in arguing for the importance of holding space for plurality and diversity when engaging with the field. It offers different histories and different stories—as retales of experience to learn from—highlighting how each person's experiences might contribute to critically rethinking the field. It points toward how different context, experiences and musicalities might demand a plurality of understandings of music education, of musical excellence, and of the practices shaped by them—while also revealing echoes that resonate across difference. These echoes point to challenges and assumptions that may be widely shared yet often remain unexamined. The article presents a holistic interconnection between the personal and the social, and the conceptual and the practical. It centers 'belonging' as a multiple and subjective experience, shaped by factors unique to each individual, and explores how social constructs such as excellence can play a significant role in enabling or hindering that belonging.

Methodologically, Article 3 fulfills an ethical role by both exploring the challenges that may arise from normative or fixed understandings of musical excellence—which might hinder truly participatory research approaches during fieldwork—and by foregrounding the experiences that have shaped how I practice and research. In doing so, it seeks to provide context to my work and make my potential biases visible to others in an attempt to unravel them. It inspired the inclusion of autoethnographic methodologies during fieldwork, inviting further transparency of the often underplayed non-neutral voices of researchers (Lenette, 2022), and providing an additional path for all collaborators to contribute to knowledge-making through the knowledge that emerges from the unique lens of the self.

Article 4: *Co-crafting Belonging through Participatory Action Research.*

Resulting from my fieldwork in Spain, this article shares the process and findings of two participatory action research collaborations exploring the factors that might impact belonging within participatory music education initiatives. Thinking together with participants, this research offers a retal on how the voices of those with limited previous exposure to formal music education, might help illuminate new challenges, possibilities, and utopian imaginings in the field.

From a methodological perspective, this article shares the findings of

the ABC-PAR process that frames my thesis. It resulted in unraveling themes of care, power, and positionality; the relevance of socially constructed terms such as 'artists'; and the need of holding space for distributed agency in crafting music education practices where diverse musicalities might belong.

Article 5: *Co-crafting Artistic Belonging with Communities through Arts-Based Participatory Action Research*

Thinking together with a group of international arts professionals from diverse artistic backgrounds, and resulting from my fieldwork in Denmark, this article shares the process and findings of a co-authored ABC-PAR collaboration aimed at expanding belonging within arts education. It draws from—and seeks to amplify—the embodied knowledge of practitioners with years of embodied knowledge about how artistic practices could be transformed to allow for new forms of participation, and the challenges and limitations that may come with this process.

From a methodological perspective, and together with Article 4, it contributes with new experiences and knowledges to my thesis through ABC-PAR. Furthermore, it offers a retal on how the embodied knowledge of practitioners might directly inform the field. It resulted in further exploring the pedagogical implications of the previous findings of this research, unpacking themes of power and positionality through critical and caring dialogue and reciprocal musical practices, and further emphasized the need for holding space for distributed agency in guiding an expanded field where diversity might belong.

Article	Role in the method	Thinking with
Article 1	Informing theory to think with. Ethical commitment to transparency	Scholarship from multiple disciplines
Article 2	Informing theory to think with. Ethical commitment to transparency	Education scholars from different contexts
Article 3	Ethical commitment to transparency and vulnerability	The non-neutral voices of scholars from different cultures–including my own
Article 4	Co-researching through fieldwork and amplifying voices	Participants from two different music education projects
Article 5	Co-researching through fieldwork and amplifying voices	Practitioners from different artistic traditions

Table2- Summary of both readings of the articles

Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion: Toward an Integrative Approach to Music Education

When I began my PhD journey, I was expecting to uncover practical—and hopefully replicable—strategies for music educators[20] that could help foster belonging, and meaningful practices for participants[21] (RQ1). I viewed my research methodology as a way to find these answers, and I understood engaging with theory, exploring other disciplines, and delving into new ontologies and epistemologies as necessary steps to meet the formal demands of academia—a way to legitimize my research without expecting these pursuits to fundamentally re-shape my understandings of practice. I couldn't have been more mistaken.

[20] Even if Articles 1, 2 and 5 work with arts in different forms and not only music, since the thesis focuses on music education, I will focus my findings in discussing musicalities, music education, and impact for the music education field, even if some may be applicable for other forms of art.

[21] In this chapter, I refer to participants including the singers from Canto Abierto, the young students from RePercusión, and the community members in Landsby Akademiet. When speculating on the extrapolations of these findings to other contexts, this category might also apply to students in music classrooms, or other forms of participants that may work with music educators. However, I urge the reader to critically consider how and when findings would apply to their context.

My research reveals the holistic interplay not only between diverse voices but also between socially constructed understandings of music, music education practices, research, and their transformative impact on the world. These dimensions are inseparably linked—each shaping and being shaped by the others. Because of this interconnectedness, discussing any one aspect of music education necessitates engaging with the rest. Furthermore, my research reveals a deep interweaving of the research questions, the articles presented, the methodologies employed, and the conclusions drawn. Attempting to distill these findings into a linear narrative that neatly answers my research question one by one would not only be immensely challenging, but would also risk oversimplifying and distorting their broader implications.

Thus, inspired by Jackson and Mazzei (2022), this chapter does not attempt to code for sameness or unity in presenting my findings, or to independently address and resolve each research question, but seeks to curate an assemblage of meaning that remains open and partial, tracing tensions, overlaps, and resonance across difference. Rather than applying a structured thematic analysis, I worked inductively across the articles, allowing the findings to "emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238), and looking "for trends, for themes, and for insights triggered in others" (Bray et al., 2000, p. 93). The themes presented here are therefore not predefined categories, but porous and overlapping containers that hold resonances and frictions across empirical and theoretical materials, and each other. They serve as a way to bring clarity to the complexities of the research, while remaining faithful to its exploratory and dialogic nature. For this reason, I have organized my findings thematically—while keeping them interwoven and interconnected—under the following key headings: 1) Transforming Thoughts and Transforming Practices as Intertwined Processes, 2) Looking Around Through a Diverse Interplay of Voices, 3) PAR(t) of the Solution: A Self-Sustaining Transformation, 4) Aspirations and Assumptions: Risks of "Caring", "Critical", or "Aware" Practitioners, and 5) An Integrative Approach to Music Education. Within each of these sections, I present data drawn from the various empirical and theoretical explorations undertaken, connect the findings to the research questions that shaped this PhD, and trace the underlying thread that weaves these aspects together.

6.1-Transforming Thoughts and Transforming Practices as Intertwined Processes

My research findings align with scholars such as Carson and Westvall (2016), Wright (2018), and Camlin (2023), who argue that transforming music education requires more than a shift in pedagogical practices. Instead, it must involve a fundamental challenge to and expansion of how music itself is understood. Contributing to answer my main research question (RQ1), reverberating across the different researched projects, and disseminated through the findings of Articles 3, 4, and 5, my research illustrates how personal and socially constructed understandings of 'musicality', and 'musical excellence', may carry significant implications when seeking to hold space for increasingly diverse voices in music education.

The collaborative autoethnographic explorations of Article 3, and the insights from co-researchers in Articles 4 and 5, agree in describing how aligning with dominant standards of musicality and excellence may foster growing feelings of belonging. Meeting these external—and often internalized—expectations provided participants with motivation, recognition, and a sense of self-worth that sometimes extended beyond the musical, allowing them to feel belonging as musicians, as individuals, and as members of a community. Conversely, experiencing a misalignment between one's perceived musicality and given understandings of musicality—whether due to lacking the capacities, motivations, recognitions or possibilities to belong in accordance with these norms—led to feelings of inadequacy and unbelonging.

Exemplified by Chambers' disruptive experiences after her recital (see Article 3), or the narrations of singers in Canto Abierto (see Article 4) these misalignments might even lead to people feeling unmusical and broken. The tensions became particularly pronounced when personal, meaningful experiences of music came into conflict with institutional or 'expert' expectations—such as those of music educators who "know more" (Article 4). Power dynamics tied to normative and hierarchical understandings of musicality and expertise contributed to individuals questioning their musical identity, hesitating to validate their own feelings, avoiding questioning dominant practices, and holding back from proposing alternatives—thereby perpetuating both feelings of unbelonging and the practices that exacerbated them (Article 4, 5).

As Wright (2018, p. 221) reminds us, normative understandings of

musicality can "cause harm" to people "who are innately musical and who are excluded from a music education that… fails to speak to their individual musicality… or to provide them with belief in their own ability." My findings reinforce this claim, as participants described feeling unmusical or broken when their artistic expressions clashed with dominant norms. At the same time, my research also illustrates how alignment with given norms may foster musical engagement, recognition, confidence, and a sense of belonging. These dual dynamics highlight the responsibility music educators share—as recognized experts—to critically shape what being musical or excellence could mean, and, in doing so, expand or hinder who participates—and how—, and who is able to belong.

However, despite the strong influence of these concepts on participants' experiences, my research shows that music education often fails to interrogate them critically or pedagogically. This lack of contestation persisted across contexts and extended late into the participants' musical upbringings (Article 3)—even within projects that explicitly aimed to challenge dominant norms and practices within the field (Article 4, 5).

Explicitly opening the concepts of musicality and excellence to collaborative reflection among participants and facilitators during the fieldwork contributed to positioning these concepts as contingent (theoretical support in Article 1, 2; practical examples in Article 3, 4, 5), "contextualiz[ing] and de-universaliz[ing] them," and demonstrating that "other ways of being an artist are possible, and that normative depictions of artists are just a few amongst many" (Article 1, p. 94). Such a shift in thinking became a key step in reshaping how people related to music education, to the activities themselves, and to one another. These collaborative reflections challenged limiting hierarchies of expertise within the groups, and supported a growing validation of participants' unique and plural musicalities and embodied experiences.

The concept of apprenticeship explored in Article 1 highlights how people gradually reconstruct the meaning of concepts through engaging with them in practice, and how these transformed understandings can lead to changes in how individuals relate to and engage with music education, as well as contribute to gradual shifts in broader social understandings of the arts (RQ2.3). In my research, through a process of apprenticeship, co-developed practices contributed to disrupting established understandings and reinforced alternative ways of thinking about—and embodying—musicality and excellence for participants and arts educators (Article 4, 5). This reciprocal

process—where transformations in practice, experience, and conceptual understanding are deeply interconnected and build on each other (RQ2.3)—points toward a self-sustaining cycle of change that strengthens claims for a holistic understanding of music education (Camlin, 2023).

Echoing Richerme (2016, p. 85)—who argues that "analyzing how some names grant and reinforce power while others deny it serves a central role in understanding and ultimately challenging systemic inequalities"—my research shows how participants' and music educators' critical engagement with normative concepts like 'musicality' and 'excellence' can both reveal challenges within music education and contribute to alleviating them. It shows how by collaboratively analyzing and reimagining these concepts, it might become possible to offer increasingly diverse musicalities a chance to align with them—thereby extending the empowering effects of alignment and reducing the harms of exclusion.

In this way, my research joins calls in the field to broaden understandings of music education, and musical excellence (Camlin, 2023; Carson & Westvall, 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021). However, my findings emphasize the importance of moving these reflections beyond academic or expert circles and addressing them as an intrinsic part of pedagogical practice—both through dialogic conversations that expose the contingency of these concepts and through co-developed educational and musical practices that actively work to deconstruct them. Engaging through diversity helped cultivate diverse meanings and practices, opening potentials for transforming and expanding the thoughts and experiences of both participants and facilitators, and bringing gradual change to music education spaces that were experienced as increasingly co-owned (Article 4, 5).

6.2-Looking Around Through a Diverse Interplay of Voices

Building on the work of scholars who have engaged diverse voices, academic fields, and multiple perspectives to reimagine music education (e.g., Bowman, 2009, 2010; Camlin, 2023; Carson & Westvall, 2016; Elliott et al., 2016; Kenny, 2021; Westvall & Akuno, 2024), my research provides empirical and theoretical support for not only how conceptual and practical transformations in music education may progress hand in hand, but also how a diversity of perspectives might help expand the boundaries of what music education may be—and, consequently, who gets to belong (RQ1).

My findings show that encounters with differing perspectives—whether conceptual, embodied, or contextual—often acted as pivot points that disrupted habitual ways of thinking and doing for both participants and music educators. Entering into dialogue with difference, both caringly and critically, did not merely bring new knowledge to the research; it invited shifts in orientation that allowed participants and facilitators to question taken-for-granted practices, reimagine how they might engage with music education and with each other, and respond to these new possibilities (Article 3, 4, 5).

Contributing to addressing Research Question 2.1 (RQ2.1), holding space for transdisciplinary concepts (Article 1) and theoretical insights drawn from different contexts (Article 2), offered important points of encounter with the unfamiliar, challenging our thoughts, and inviting in perspectives that might otherwise have escaped shared reflections—limited as they were by our backgrounds, roles, and partially shared contexts. These concepts informed reflection sessions, bringing additional perspectives to think with, and contributed to shape the suggestions that were later implemented in the researched initiatives. This was exemplified, for instance, by how the exploration of artistic citizenship as an ambiguous and fluid concept (Article 1) prompted reflections on the risks of inclusion efforts in Canto Abierto; how the introduction of the pedagogy of rhythmic care (Article 2) inspired practices aimed at addressing power inequalities in Landsby Akademiet; or how the thoughts of Kern et al. (2020) and Matarasso (2019)—introduced by co-researchers—pervaded both Articles 4 and 5.

The embodied knowledge of facilitators and participants (RQ2.2) played an equally vital role in bringing in diverse perspectives. Participants contributed with their embodied knowledge as unique musical individuals—with their own musicalities (Wright, 2018), learning styles, and critical perspectives informed by contexts beyond music education—raising challenges and unearthing potentials that facilitators had not previously noticed or imagined. Similarly, facilitators drew from their experiences as arts educators—often grounded in different artistic fields and informed by embodied experiences across various practical contexts—sharing their insights to shape and inform the reflection sessions, the activities, and the thoughts of their peers and participants alike.

Waghid (2020, p. 305, in Article 2, p. 5) reminds us that people "may not be able to liberate themselves—or others—alone," and suggests that care and criticality must be extended toward voices dissonant from our own, "through dialogue that invites us to be touched and transformed by others in their

otherness." Supporting these theoretical explorations, my empirical research shows how participants and facilitators were challenged and transformed through caring and critical encounters with unfamiliar perspectives—revealing assumptions and possibilities that had previously escaped attention. Engaging with diverse perspectives brought into focus how expansion and transformation of the music education field is a process that cannot be done alone (Kenny, 2021), and helped cultivate an attentiveness to difference, care, uncertainty, and criticality that embraced "dissent and reflection as positive forces for growth" (Article 4, p. 18).

However, engaging with diverse perspectives was not transformational from the start, and did not in itself guarantee these hopeful outcomes. In the projects studied, moments of change emerged not simply through the presence of difference, but gradually developed as this difference became accompanied by an evolving attitude of care, vulnerability, uncertainty, and a willingness to be opened and affected by others—allowing them to "take us out of our structure" (Article 5, p. 29)—that was slowly and collaboratively co-constructed through the research process (see Article 4, 5 for pedagogical examples of how this happened).

Through caring engagement, transdisciplinary texts and diverse embodied knowledges acted as what Ellsworth (2005) and Kenny (2021) call "pedagogical pivot points," creating encounters with an "outside world"—through dialogue and musical exchange—that allowed participants and facilitators to re-engage with their "inside world" and transform their own practices and assumptions.

As Camlin (2023, p. 94) suggests, engaging with dissenting perspectives can "help provide a rich territory in which different ideas about music can be engaged in a common discourse," opening space for "new or unheard voices" and expanding both the discourse and the "community of practitioners and practice." My research shows how expanding thinking through engaging with difference might enable new thoughts and practices to emerge—practices in which more people may experience belonging and take part in shaping the direction forward. This, in turn, may lead to further openings for participation, meaningful engagement, and belonging, creating potential for self-sustaining, ongoing processes of expansion and change.

6.3-PAR(t) of the Solution: A Self-Sustaining Transformation

Contributing to answering the main research question of this PhD (RQ1), the findings from co-researching with participants from Canto Abierto and RePercusión (Article 4), as well as arts educators from Landsby Akademiet (Article 5), highlight that the most impactful step toward transforming thoughts and practices in music education projects, might be the incorporation of spaces for collaborative critical reflections, and shared research as standard and integral components of music education practices.

Aligning with the theoretical explorations of Article 2, and echoing research on the empowering potential of collective reflection and co-created knowledge (Asakura, 2019; Patel, 2022; Onsrud et al., 2022), participants in Landsby Akademiet, RePercusión, and Canto Abierto described how the research process affirmed their voices, deepened their sense of ownership, and nurtured agency. The reciprocal and critical nature of the shared reflection sessions—collaboratively seeking to hold space for each participant's voice and to caringly yet critically engage with each other through dissonance (see Article 2 "Attentive and caring dissonance")—supported practitioners and participants in cultivating an expanding sense of belonging: personally, artistically, and as co-creators of knowledge (Article 4, 5).

This growing sense of belonging sparked a ripple effect: as participants felt more seen, heard, and valued, they became increasingly willing to shape and guide practices on their own terms—challenging entrenched hierarchies and power dynamics, and sparking further engagement both in the musical activities and the research process (Article 4, 5). At the same time, facilitators found their artistic and pedagogical approaches enriched, stretched, and sometimes unsettled by participants' expanding and often dissonant contributions—revealing new artistic expressions and pedagogical directions. This mutual transformation gave rise to a self-renewing cycle of transformation from within, in which each new or amplified voice not only further contributed to holding space for itself within the practices, but also reshaped and expanded these practices in ways that made space for others—allowing a growing number of unique voices to meaningfully engage, inviting new critical lenses to question underlying assumptions, and unearthing ever-expanding possibilities for artistic and educational practice. As this ongoing process unfolded, it extended both the reach of music educators' practices and the potentially transformative impact of the arts to an ever-widening spectrum

of voices.

Furthermore, this momentum extended into participants' relationships with peers. Echoing the autoethnographic reflections in Article 3—where music education practitioners describe how experiencing belonging after moments of unbelonging might awaken a deeper sensitivity to others' exclusions and inspire a desire to open space for their belonging—participants in Canto Abierto and RePercusión began actively attending to one another. They became increasingly aware of how diverging perspectives might be silenced and worked to create shared spaces where contingency and uncertainty were embraced as vital conditions for growth. Holding space for belonging thus became a shared, ongoing effort—rooted in care and openness—to welcome difference and hold space for others to belong as well (Article 4, 5). As more participants experienced this sense of belonging, many took on the responsibility of continuing this work, sparking an expanding, self-sustaining cycle of transformation.

All of these rippling effects support Carson and Westvall's (2024, p. 14) suggestions on how co-created processes can "provide a sense of belonging that becomes an important impetus for continued engagement", how "collaborative artistic experiences" can open up "new modes of expression" for practitioners through a process "that mutually benefits the artist, their community, and society", and how this process may even "become self-sustaining, in a sense, sparking other new collaborations and co-creative endeavors going forward." My research offers empirical and theoretical grounding for how this potentially synergistic and self-sustaining interplay might unfold—between expanding belonging within artistic practices, enriching the artistic expressions of both participants and facilitators, and broadening the impact of collaborative artistic initiatives.

Yet for such self-sustaining momentum to emerge, there must be an initial spark—a shift that catalyzes the process. In this research, these catalysts were the shared recognition that music education is an ambiguous and flawed practice that necessitates ongoing development, the shared intention to bring about this change, and the growing recognition that such change could only be brought about in collaboration *with* others. This shift in stance from trying to build counter-practices for others, to asking what it would mean to build practices with them (Article 4)—what Carson and Westvall (2024) refer to as a "shifting the center" of educational practices—required moving beyond personal comfort zones and "re-learning" how to practice music with each other—not by making space for others within established structures and

practices, but by co-crafting practices where people might comfortably belong on their own terms (Article 4, 5).

What emerged was not a sudden or isolated transformation, but the result of an intentional and cumulative shared process that snowballed, supported by co-crafted musical and research practices. In RePercusión, this shift resulted in participants' suggestions to lead warm-ups and take on teaching roles (Article 3). In Landsby Akademiet, it was reflected in the spontaneous takeovers of workshops, rehearsals, and performances during the final days of the intervention (Article 5). These experiences exemplify a shift in participants' attitudes—from quietly listening, learning, and following instructions, to coming to voice as both artistic and epistemic contributors whose perspectives increasingly felt to belong.

6.4-Aspirations and Assumptions: Risks of "Caring", "Critical", or "Aware" Practitioners

As Laes and Westerlund (2017) caution, marginalizing experiences may persist even in music education spaces explicitly designed to elevate and include diverse voices. The ambiguous potentials of music—and the need to critically engage with this ambiguity—were evident to all the collaborating arts educators. However, my research shows that even facilitators deeply committed to care and transformation may struggle to recognize when their practices fall short of those intentions. Moreover, it reveals how awareness of music practices' potential for exclusion and inequity—and being committed to addressing them—may, paradoxically, obscure ongoing disruptions and the need for further change.

In connection with one of the researched initiatives, an arts educator with decades of experience facilitating participatory artistic projects stated: "They are woodworkers, bankers, office workers, etc. We are artists. We do what we do, they do what they do." The rigid dichotomy this statement established between "us" as artists, and "them" as non-artists was both "surprising and unsettling" to the facilitators of the project. The fact that this was stated by a person who the facilitators saw as a role model for their practices, who considered the statement unproblematic, and responded defensively when questioned about it, only deepened this statement's impact, turning it into a recurring point of discussion in our reflections throughout the project.

This moment led facilitators to reconsider their own pre-existing identities as caring, critical, or inclusive practitioners, wondering whether

such self-perceptions might have already masked challenges and obscured exclusions within their practices. It led to reflections on how closely facilitators' professional self-worth could be tied to the results of their work in bringing transformative change to people through the arts, and the risks of adopting a "savior complex" that might prevent them from noticing further work to be done, or from recognizing the unintended consequences of their own actions.

Similar dynamics surfaced in Canto Abierto, where—due to challenges related to power and communication, and despite the facilitators' best intentions—practices intended as caring were experienced by participants as uncomfortable or even violent, without them initially voicing their discomfort (see Article 4). When, as a result of the research process, the choir singers eventually shared their disruptive experiences, the facilitators were deeply surprised and unsettled by what had gone unnoticed, and even "felt personally hurt by the statements" (facilitator of Canto Abierto). This response may help explain why participants initially chose to withhold their critiques (see Article 4), and suggests that participants recognized how strongly facilitators' professional identities and sense of self-worth were tied to being caring, critical, and providing positive experiences. As was the case with Landsby Akademiet, the facilitators' commitment to fostering positive experiences through the arts may not only have made it more difficult for them to recognize persistent issues, but also become a source of pride that hindered their ability to acknowledge when their efforts were not received as intended.

Through shared reflection, all the music educators who collaborated in this research recognized similar experiences: a self-perceived awareness of the field's challenges, a commitment to addressing them, and a varying sense of self-worth tied to contributing to change—often unnoticed before the research. While these dispositions may appear constructive, they can begin to solidify into a static identity—one in which the educator sees themselves as already critically aware and already bringing transformative change. This, in turn, may prevent them from noticing the impacts that are undesired and the challenges they do not yet recognize.

Over a decade ago, Belfiore and Bennett (2008) warned of the orthodoxy surrounding the transformative power of the arts and argued for the need to remain critically aware of its ambiguity. My research suggests that a new orthodoxy may be emerging—one in which, as music educators have become increasingly aware and informed, their belief in their own critical and caring disposition becomes an identity marker of self-worth that potentially obscures

the need for ongoing reflexivity and slows further transformation. Echoing the dangers of all-inclusive understandings of citizenship obscuring inequities and work to be done (developed in Article 1), and supporting scholarship arguing for the risks of tokenized inclusion (Biesta, 2009; Laes & Westerlund, 2017, p. 42), such self-perceptions may paradoxically result in tokenized forms of change—silencing deeper criticality and ultimately perpetuating exclusion, unbelonging, and/or uncaring practices in the field.

6.5-An Integrative Approach to Music Education

The complexities of expanding a plural and holistic field are not limited to the attitudes and practices of facilitators—they echo throughout this research. While my findings offer both empirical and theoretical support for how transformation in music education can potentially emerge—and even self-sustain—through co-developed, diverse conceptual and practical shifts, they also highlight the limits of these efforts. As exemplified by the ambiguous outcomes of our proposed actions for change within RePercusión (Article 5, Shared-Action-2)—where even in the later stages of this research, and informed by it, the practices we co-designed still felt disruptive for some and, at times, gravitated back toward familiar norms—carefully co-developed approaches sometimes fall short.

These contradictions are not merely practical, they are also structural and epistemological. Fully understanding and responding to a holistic field would require attending to an overwhelming web of intertwined perspectives: personal, social, and political contexts; individual musicalities, experiences, and stories; uneven and multilayered distributions of power and belonging; and more. These complexities mean that the holistic nature of music education will never be realized or addressed in practice, and suggest that a truly caring practice that fully supports every unique individual may never be entirely attainable. With these limitations in mind, not everyone will experience having the capacities, motivations, recognitions or possibilities to belong as artists—and it's likely this will always remain the case.

It is in response to these conditions—and bringing together all findings presented in this chapter—that I propose 'an integrative approach to music education'. Here, *integrative* refers to "combining two or more things in order to make them more effective" (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2025). Rather than the all-encompassing connotations of 'holistic', 'integrative' serves as a reminder to remain aware of the inevitability of unawareness—and to embrace it not as a flaw to be corrected, but as an opening for growth. Just

as identifying as critical, caring, or aware can solidify into a static identity that limits reflection; or how positioning social change as the sole goal of music education might place unreasonable pressure on educators that can limit their practices and impact (Kertz-Welzel, 2022); framing one's practice as holistic may produce similar unintended effects. It may lead to a sense of self-righteousness that obscures blind spots; an overwhelming pressure to live up to unattainable ideals; or a sense of inadequacy and ethical discomfort in light of the many external factors shaping one's practice, yet lying beyond one's control.

An integrative approach to music education, then, invites practitioners to embrace the paradox of working within a holistic and interconnected field while accepting that their awareness and reach will always be partial and that their practices remain ambiguous. It calls for relinquishing the burden of striving for an all responsive, fully inclusive or all-aware practice, not as an excuse for complacency, but as a way to sustain a critically engaged, evolving stance. Rather than seeking closure or perfection, it asks educators to stay with the discomfort of ambiguity—to recognize that exclusion, contradiction, and imperfection will persist, no matter how reflective or well-intentioned their efforts become. The task is not to solve it all, but to keep staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) and work through it: to co-craft, to co-care, and to remain open to growth through dialogue *with* others. Even if no amount of shared effort or criticality can eliminate exclusion or guarantee belonging, these practices remain essential. In this view, transformation may not come through resolution, but through the shared and ongoing effort to hold space—imperfectly—with others to belong.

6.6-Putting it Into Practice

Within these constraints, proposing fixed methods or universally applicable practices becomes not only impractical but conceptually contradictory. This aligns with Kertz-Welzel's (2022, p. 152) suggestion that "in music education today, it might not be so much about inventing new methodologies or activities, but most often about a new framework." While no single approach can fully address the complexities outlined above, my theoretical and empirical work points toward music-pedagogical values—either discussed earlier in this chapter or developed within the articles—that may offer a framework for the gradual expansion of belonging within an increasingly plural music education field. What follows is a summary of some of these insights, paired with practical examples of how the findings of this research materialized

in situated and inevitably imperfect efforts—not as definitive or replicable models, but as grounded insights to contribute to the development of a flexible framework that may inspire others pursuing similar goals. In order to enrich current practices and unearth new ones for music education, expand its musical, personal and social impact, and caringly enable increasingly diverse voices to belong, my research identifies potential in:

(1) ***Holding reciprocal music education spaces where facilitators and participants are both inviting and being invited into each other's musicalities*** (see Article 2 for theoretical grounds; Article 4, 5 for practical examples)**.** This might mean co-developing pedagogical practices, co-creating music together, and/or alternating who gets to lead during shared music education encounters. It moves beyond offering opportunities for inclusion by adapting given practices, pursuing externally defined goals, and/or aligning with externally-defined aesthetics, and instead moves toward co-composing, co-performing, or co-deciding on diverse practices that expand from multiple pedagogical and musical centers—"teaching not about but with, and by, people and practices that form a counter-narrative to dominant and normative discourses in music education" (Laes & Westerlund, 2017, p. 42).

These values took form in my research, for example, through the ways arts educators co-created performances and workshops with community members—at times leading, and at times being led by participants' musicalities, both creatively and pedagogically (see Article 5, Shared-moment-1). They also may be exemplified in how the facilitator of RePercusión opened space for student-led teaching to develop alongside his own exercises, allowing participants to develop practices where their musicalities could belong on their own terms—and, in turn, drawing from these contributions to reimagine his own approach. (See Article 4, Shared-Action-2)

The diversity of participants' and facilitators' backgrounds further enriched this shared process, bringing a broader variety of ways of imagining and engaging with music, and critical lenses. These experiences emphasize the potential of not only engaging with diverse participants, but also introducing partnerships and interdisciplinary collaborations into music education practices—for example, by including workshops or visits from arts educators in other fields—that may open new possibilities, stimulate new thinking, and expand practices.

(2) ***De-centring—without withholding—the voices of music educators, and aiming to respond to imbalances in power*** (see Article 2, Attentive and Caring Dissonance, Rhythmic Care, and Ubuntu Care; Article 4 for examples in practice). Echoing the words of Elliott and Silverman (2015, p. 138) and Silverman (2022a), this involves music educators acting as "co-workers and co-researchers." It implies teachers co-learning with students, while positioning their musicality and practices as evolving and contingent—not concealing their own musical voice, but offering their experience and knowledge openly, while acknowledging it as one path among many.

Being present as co-learners may allow music educators to de-center their voices by showing that musicality is always in development and that also recognized experts grow through engaging with the valuable musical voices of others. This stance signals to participants that they are not only heard, or taught, but valued as sources of artistic growth, triggering a snowball effect that may promote deeper engagement and belonging, enriching the experiences of both participants and facilitators.

In practice, these values might lead music educators to share their ongoing learning process openly: showing vulnerability, acknowledging flaws, and sharing development in their artistic practices; drawing inspiration from participants' contributions; adapting their practice in response; and making visible how their artistry is shaped through these encounters. At the same time, educators may offer their musical voice fully to participants—not to assert authority, but to invite mutual enrichment and to show care and respect by engaging with them as equally valuable artistic voices.

Music educators thus bring their artistic and pedagogical experience to support and "harmonize" (Article 5) with the developing musicalities of participants—always with the awareness that they may not know the destination, nor the best path forward, for each individual. They offer their experience of having walked along multiple trajectories of musical development, with multiple participants, as part of a reciprocal process—caringly challenging, expanding perspectives, and opening up new, previously unthought possibilities. In doing so, they attempt to resist stagnation in artistic practices—including their own—and teach through example that while musical paths may be diverse, they still demand dedication,

learning, and transformation. Their artistic and pedagogical insights are not offered as fixed models or imposed directions, but as potential resources that participants may draw on as they explore their own paths. Facilitating plural musical development means that teaching technical skills and musical knowledge becomes a way to expand participants' expressive vocabulary—contributing additional colors to each person's unique and evolving musical palette, which they may choose to use, adapt, or leave aside. In doing so, teaching musical skills may support experiences of belonging for participants—expanding their competencies to belong as artists, while affirming that what it means to belong as an artist, and the skills and knowledges this may involve, can take many evolving forms.

Such work not only demands an attitude of uncertainty, but a careful and ongoing balance of remaining aware of the weight facilitators' voices might carry as experts, naming this power, and working through it in relation with others (see Article 2, 5 for how this may be navigated). Across the cases, these dynamics unfolded in moments where educators moved flexibly between roles—sometimes leading, sometimes following, and sometimes engaging in co-led processes to support participants in developing musically on their own terms.

The application of these values can be seen in Article 4 (Shared-moment-1), where arts educators co-created with community members—inviting them to lead creatively and pedagogically, and explicitly showing that they were learning from them. They contributed musically and artistically with the same openness and commitment as in collaborations with other "professional" artists: fully and unhidden. Arts educators challenged participants and shared their own artistic opinions while positioning them as contingent, maintaining awareness of their positional power. As proposed in Article 2, the values underlying this dynamic may also be relevant in other contexts. For example, in higher music education, it might mean educators bringing their own practices—compositions, performances, etc.—into the space not only as models, but as part of the educators' own artistic practice—wishing to grow musically by being challenged and enriched by students' perspectives. In doing so, music educators may embody an attitude of deconstruction of hierarchies and excellence that embraces continuous growth with others, and where being a teacher,

student, and musician are not fixed roles but interwoven aspects of an always unfinished process of artistic becoming (Article 2).

(3) ***Explicitly allocating time within music education practices to collaboratively discuss and engage with power, understandings, practices, and interpersonal relations:*** My research illustrates how all the aforementioned suggestions are complex, context-dependent, and intrinsically flawed: reciprocity does not dissolve the power and responsibility held by the facilitator; aiming to address power does not guarantee its dismantling; efforts to harmonize with others may still override their voices; and co-leading does not automatically result in horizontal spaces. Responding to the limitations of understanding complex and interwoven music education practices, how others experience them, and which possibilities and challenges they hold; this research identifies how these tensions cannot be resolved in isolation and must instead be explored together *with* those involved. Echoing the words of Elliott and Silverman (2015, p. 138), this may require creating spaces where educators and participants become "co-creators of knowledge, as well as co-workers and co-researchers" in rethinking assumptions and practices.

Thus, my findings emphasize the importance of engaging collaboratively and explicitly in dialogic processes to surface new perspectives, co-develop practices, and co-create spaces where people can share their experiences and navigate care and power together. These should not be treated as separate add-ons or one-off efforts, but as integrated and recurring moments of shared meaning-making within music education activities—responsive, relational, and power-aware spaces that adopt an attitude of uncertainty with others, acknowledge the impossibility of arriving at definitive solutions, and invite criticality and difference as opportunities for gradual growth (see Article 4, Shared-Action-1).

In order to foster transformative change to the music education activities and the experiences of participants, my research highlights that such spaces should not only discuss current practices or propose alternatives, but also collaboratively and continuously engage with the power relations embedded in the group (see Article 2, 5)—including those tied to dominant understandings of music and excellence. They should support the co-creation of caring relationships in which dialogue can emerge, and where care is understood as a developing,

plural, relational, and reciprocal process in which all participants are "stakeholders in the process, who possess voice toward the ultimate goal of caring" (Silverman, 2023, p. 35, see also Article 2, 4, 5). And, importantly, they must remain open to questioning their own formats and limitations, continuing to surface new challenges and possibilities well beyond the suggestions outlined here.

These shared dialogic spaces may take many forms and be adapted to each context. For example, in regularly scheduled activities—like Canto Abierto and RePercusión—reflection sessions may be held to wrap up at the end of the shared music making and promote an attitude of care and ongoing development (see e.g., Article 4). In shorter or sporadic formats—such as performances or one-time workshops—they may be part of an introduction, enabling a space where participants are both informed of the goals of the educators, and potentially more eager to engage and take risks (see e.g., Article 5). In institutional contexts where more time and continuity are available—such as higher music education institutions—it might involve co-research modules, dedicated to students and educators collaboratively deconstructing given concepts, power structures, and practices (see Article 2 for theoretical support, Article 3 for inspiration on a possible methodology to do so).

Beyond expanding who gets to belong, challenging normative assumptions, and potentially empowering participation in musical experiences (Articles 4, 5), explicit and open dialogic engagement contributes to creating an ethical space of transparency. It allows music educators to openly share their intent to challenge existing norms and practices, clearly informing participants about the process they are invited to take part in, and helping to develop safer experimental spaces where goals, interpersonal dynamics, and expectations may be collaboratively contested and explored.

Chapter 7: Contributions and Limitations of the Study

In this final chapter, I will summarize the contributions of my research organizing them as: theoretical/conceptual contributions for the music education field, contributions for music education practice, and methodological contributions. I will continue by reflecting over the limitations of my study. Finally, I will present potential areas of interest for future research inspired by this PhD process.

7.1-Theoretical/Conceptual Contributions to the Music Education Field

Through the exploration of the connection between scholarship in the fields of citizenship and the arts, my research has contributed to conceptualizing artistic citizenship fluidly (Article 1). A fluid conceptualization of artistic citizenship moves away from proposing a fixed definition of the term and holistically embraces the bridge between disciplines—such as sociology, political sciences, and the arts—that this multidisciplinary term provides. As described in Article 1, this approach to understanding artistic citizenship may have the potential to provide additional tools for critical reflection in music education, to offer more inclusive and diverse definitions of artistry, and to enable additional paths for bringing change to normative understandings of citizenship and the arts. More importantly, this conceptualization of artistic citizenship seeks to highlight the potential of broadly looking around through diversity—drawing from other disciplines and other sources of knowledge for new and inspiring insights to expand what music education might become.

Resonating with the process of looking around to expand understanding, criticality and inspiration, the exploration of Freire and Waghid presented in Article 2 contributed to my conceptualization of 'a reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care'. Exploring Freire's pedagogy from a decolonial perspective and drawing on the underrepresented pedagogical perspectives of Waghid within Western music education, this pedagogy aims to inspire music educators with additional perspectives to think with—to recontextualize their inherited thoughts and pedagogies, and to understand their practices as contingent. Exploring themes of power, care, diversity, and dissonance in education through both Freire's and Waghid's work; a reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care contributes to framing music education as a shared, de-centered,

and reciprocal process where teachers and students embrace both learning from, and teaching each other as necessarily synergistic and complementary. It forwards the potentialities of embracing an always uncertain and curious approach to teaching/learning that navigates between the known and the unknown, and the self and the other, through dialogue and dissonance as a means to deconstruct sedimented knowledge and hierarchies in music education.

Finally, my research contributes to both advancing and challenging holistic understandings of the music education field with the conceptualization of an 'integrative approach to music education'. This conceptualization advances multidimensional, intertwined, and relational understandings of music education (e.g., Camlin, 2023; Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Westvall & Akuno, 2024) by offering additional empirical and theoretical perspectives that support viewing music education as an interconnected and multilayered discipline in which practice, concepts, and context dynamically interact to shape the pedagogies and experiences of facilitators and participants. In response to this complexity, an integrative approach to music education emphasizes the need to draw from diverse perspectives, modes of inquiry, and voices—not only to expand the field without constraining what music education might do and for whom, but also to recognize challenges and limitations that cannot be fully understood in isolation or when looking through a slit.

An integrative approach to music education also contributes to problematizing holistic conceptualizations of the field. It emphasizes how, even if music education might theoretically be a deeply complex and interwoven practice, limitations—in awareness, communication, representation, and so forth—mean that not all perspectives or moving parts can be fully grasped or taken into account, and that the layered nature of music education may never be entirely understood, enacted, or addressed in practice. In line with my empirical and theoretical findings, an integrative approach to music education emphasizes that if these limitations are not highlighted and embraced, music educators might either unreflectively self-identify as fully critical, caring, or aware—a static identity that hinders growth, and criticality; feel overwhelmed and discouraged by the unattainable task of becoming fully aware of the possibilities, and challenges of their practices; experience inadequacy when they perceive themselves as falling short; feel powerless in the face of the countless external factors impacting their practices that are beyond their control; or even feel unethical—unable to fully address the personal, social, and musical impact of their practices.

An integrative approach to music education seeks to highlight and embrace the practical complexity, limitations, and processual effort needed to sustainedly and sustainably aim to expand and transform the field.

7.2-Contributions for Music Education Practice

Joining calls to understand music education as a de-centered and reciprocal process (e.g., Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Kenny, 2021; Silverman, 2022a), my research highlights the potential—and offers situated examples—of pedagogical approaches where educators and participants are mutually invited into each other's musicalities. These practices may shift who gets to lead during musical and pedagogical encounters, who shapes the direction of the shared work, and whose artistic and pedagogical visions are foregrounded.

Across theoretical discussions (Article 2) and practical applications (Article 4, 5), my research suggests that music education may benefit from a reciprocal process of co-learning, where participants are treated as fellow artists in becoming. Educators might rhythmically move between sharing their own evolving practices and inviting participants to contest, reshape, and enrich them—actively voicing and demonstrating how they are learning through interaction—and offering their own personal and contingent artistic and pedagogical knowledge as resources for participants. This involves engaging fully with participants' valuable contributions, aiming to support their artistic development through mutually enriching critique—without overriding their voices—while remaining attentive to the power dynamics embedded in the educators' position. Artistic and pedagogical contributions are thus offered not as fixed models to be followed, but as living possibilities that participants may draw from, reinterpret, or reject as they shape their own plural musical paths. This approach may increase possibilities for diverse musical belongings and challenge hierarchical and normative understandings of musicality by supporting multiple unique and evolving artistic trajectories, positioning engagement with diverse musicalities as a generative force for collective growth, and affirming the importance of musical development for every artist—regardless of their experience or role.

Finally, my research underscores the value of embedding collaborative, dialogic processes of participatory reflection as an integral part of music education practice—not only within formal research but as an everyday pedagogical commitment to shared growth. Dedicating time and space to shared reflection on reviewing given understandings, revising and reimagining musical practices, pedagogies, interpersonal relationships,

and power dynamics can contribute in supporting care, critical awareness, responsiveness, and the emergence of co-developed and non-assimilative pedagogies. As developed in Chapter 6 and Articles 4 and 5, these processes of co-reflection and pedagogical co-design hold potential to enrich educators' practice—by opening up new perspectives and possibilities—while strengthening participants' sense of belonging and co-ownership—and catalyze a snowballing transition toward increasingly co-developed and democratic music education spaces.

7.3-Methodological Contributions

By aiming to bring both the critical and the generative forward, and increase possibilities for access in participatory research, my PhD process resulted in the development of arts-based critical participatory action research (ABC-PAR). Deriving from merging critical action research and arts-based PAR, ABC-PAR contributes to the action research field by combining both dialogic and arts-based modes of critical reflection, looking to provide additional points of access to research that more participants and practitioners can resonate with. It draws from the creative and utopian nature of arts-based research approaches to collectively uncover new and unexpected possibilities for participatory inquiry, while highlighting the need for remaining critical and situated when doing so. Due to its kismetic alignment with the transdisciplinary identities and expertises of music educators—their artistic skills, their pedagogical skills, and their critical and reflective skills—and music education participants—with their own artistic, pedagogical, and reflective skills, knowledges, and experiences—this approach to research could be particularly effective in amplifying the voices of those with embodied knowledge, but limited representation in music education academia.

My approach to utilizing 'thinking together with and for theory' and autoethnography in combination with PAR—and the exploration of the challenges in participatory research that triggered this methodological design—argues and advocates for the need of expanding what are considered valid or valuable approaches to inquiry when looking to develop increasingly transparent, ethical, and horizontal research methods. This combined methodology aims to enable historized researchers to be increasingly transparent not only to readers, but also to their co-researchers. It contests, and moves away from impersonal and objectivist claims of knowledge creation, and instead aims to embrace transparency in sharing its situated and relational process. It invites co-researchers to bring forward their knowledges

and experiences to discuss, think with, and inform not only the research process, but also the disseminated products, thereby opening a less tokenized participatory research approach where co-researchers are more ethically informed and have increased agency in shaping the research they co-develop.

Finally, the dangers of self-defining as critical, inclusive, caring or ethical, that my research has identified, are not only relevant for music education, but might also contribute to sustaining a more critical attitude in participatory research. They can help illuminate the dangers that might come from believing that participatory methodologies will result in equal participation, in amplifying voices, and in care, and urge researchers to stay vigilant and aware, striving for—but never assuming—growth through a shared process that will—and should—never be complete.

7.4-Limitations and Areas for Future Research

7.4.1-Limitations to My Limitations

Even though the methodological limitations have been discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I would like to begin this section by emphasizing that the impossibility of creating a perfectly critical, all-aware, truly participatory, or completely inclusive music education practice that my research identifies, also applies to my methodology and my own research. This means that even though I conscientiously worked to be as aware and critical as possible—not only on my own but also through engaging with the expanded thoughts and experiences of others—I am certain that there are limitations to my methodology that still escape my attention, and are therefore not addressed in my methodological discussion. Just as certainly, there are limitations to my research that I am still unaware of and thus will not be discussed in this chapter. As such, I invite the reader to not take what I write here as final, but to share in the process of striving to notice that which still remains hidden.

7.4.2-Limitations to a Holistic View of the Field

Following this train of thought, aiming for a plural approach to research and for a holistic view of the field is a process that is intrinsically flawed. Compared to the hypothetically possible approaches to research I could have followed—the number of potential projects I could have engaged with, the multiplicity of aspects impacting (or resulting from) music education I could have explored, and the diversity of voices I could have included—my research remains a situated and selective inquiry, and my perspectives are restricted by

this limitation.

Furthermore, the holistic approach of my research—choosing to engage with a broad spectrum not only of voices but also of concepts—combined with its participatory nature, and my commitment to 'thinking with and for theory', involved a conscious surrender of control over the theoretical foundations informing the work. This methodological decision means that I could not limit the introduction of complex concepts to only those I could fully develop within the scope of this thesis. As a result, certain nuanced concepts had limited space for exploration in this dissertation and were instead engaged with through the articles, footnotes, or references. For instance, while the concept of 'care' is taken up in Articles 2 and 5, as well as in footnote 14, a more bounded methodological approach might have allowed for a more central treatment of this concept within the dissertation.

7.4.3-Limitations of Positionality

Limitations of perspective similarly impacted my findings. Even when I aimed to transparently draw clear threads for the reader from the fieldwork to conclusions, even when I closely engaged with co-researchers in exploring the findings of my articles, and regardless of the critical perspectives that co-researchers, supervisors, editors and reviewers, and colleagues contributed to sharpen and challenge my thoughts and findings, no knowledge is neutral and the findings that I present in this thesis are colored by the connections that I was able to make as a flawed and historized individual during these three years. Transparency in presenting my method, the theories that inform my research, or even the personal stories that might impact my perspectives are an attempt to remain critical and work with this unavoidable limitation, but they do not eliminate it.

7.4.4-Limitations to Dissemination

Both looking to publish within the format constraints of specific academic journals, as well as choosing to publish a few of the articles in journals that may give exposure to my findings in academic circles where I believed could be especially relevant—where they would both challenge and be challenged by readers and editors, and not just "preach to the choir" of those music educators that resonate with my proposed approach to research or whose thoughts would easily align with my findings—meant having to engage in challenging conversations with reviewers and editors, that, in some cases, resulted in compromising the language, format, or even needing to narrow the

content that was shared through dissemination.

7.5-Areas for Future Research

The point of departure for an integrative approach to researching music education is that research and knowledge in the field will never be complete. As such, there is always more work to do. My PhD process and findings highlight the potential to keep widening the research lens through working with more people and projects, exploring new connections, or pursuing additional approaches to research. Within this intrinsic need to continually widen the scope, my research points to several potential directions that I find particularly relevant for future exploration:

Conceptually, the exploration of artistic citizenship that culminated in Article 1 illuminates the unexplored possibilities that might come from looking around to other disciplines to bring new perspectives, challenges and potentials to the music education field. As argued in this article, not only could further research develop other artistic citizenships by looking at different aspects of citizenship—-for example exploring what an environmental or diasporic artistic citizenship would look like—but exploring additional possible connections between music education and different disciplines might bring new and important inspirations to the field.

Similarly, Article 2 only explored the inspirations that could be drawn from two specific scholars from a myriad of possibilities to choose from. Further research into other educators, looking to bring their diverse perspectives of what music and education could—or should—look like could help inform and expand the field. Pursuing research that amplifies decolonial views—especially if carried on by or with (co)researchers from different contexts and traditions—could be especially relevant to expand the field and challenge that which might be taken for granted.

Even if pedagogies should be context-based and no general suggestions could ever be given that would universally apply to every music education practice, there is important value in sharing the learnings that come from researching any specific project. Collaborating with new educators and participants in new contexts would bring new inspirations and possibilities for music educators to learn with, would help position any specific pedagogy as contingent, and gradually expand the pedagogical practices that can be imagined.

Methodologically, my research identifies a need to keep exploring how to increasingly amplify and bring additional voices into academia through participatory research. Even if the methodology followed in this dissertation was experienced as accessible and horizontal by co-researchers, this is never a perfect process and there are important limitations still to be addressed. Furthermore, this methodological work needs to be disseminated to impact not only the musical field, but also in other fields, to continue expanding and challenging what knowledge and academia can be, how it works, and who it includes.

Finally, to continue addressing the complex and interconnected questions of the music education field, I propose that there is potential in designing research projects that combine wide-lens approaches with more focused, in-depth inquiries. While a fully holistic exploration of the field may be impossible, collaborations among multiple researchers—each bringing different perspectives and research approaches, some looking broadly and some looking up-close—might gradually integrate new pieces into our understanding of music education without losing sight of the tapestry that constitutes this holistic field.

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Appendices

Appendix A-Publications

Article 1: Listening All Around: What Could the Fluid Conceptualization of Artistic Citizenships Do?

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Listening All Around: What Could the Fluid Conceptualization of Artistic Citizenships Do?

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Abstract

This article explores and develops possible additional understandings of the term *artistic citizenship* as: 1) a lens to promote critical reflection; 2) a developing inclusive artistic identity; and 3) action for change. First, I provide a general overview of artistic citizenship in order to familiarize the reader with its current definitions and critiques. Second, I propose and develop three possible complementary understandings of the term by drawing parallels between different aspects of scholarship in citizenship and in the arts, exploring existing connections between the two fields, and developing new links between them by extrapolating relevant shared challenges, critiques, and possibilities from discourses about the former into the latter. Finally, I discuss how other conceptualizations of artistic citizenship could have been possible, and how replicating the processes presented in this article with other multidisciplinary terms—that link music with different fields of knowledge—may expand their possibilities as evolving, multifaceted, flawed, and "full of potential" assets that can keep enriching music education practice and scholarship.

Keywords

Artistic citizenship, multidisciplinarity, artistic identity, inclusive artistry, the arts in society

How could frozen concepts and ideas stay relevant in societies that keep changing if they stop adapting? How could they reach their full potential without exploring different perspectives or being influenced by the world around them? In this essay, I aim to expand and develop a fluid understanding of artistic citizenship by exploring the potential lying in the bridges between disciplines that this hybrid term, which links citizenship and arts together, can create if understood fluidly.[1] This text is written with the hope that examining the interesting parallels between the complex and problematic concepts of "citizenship/citizen" and the equally problematic Western conceptualizations of "the arts/artist"[2]—both of which artistic citizenship brings forward—can provide important expanded perspectives in music education, scholarship and practice.

I begin by giving a general overview of artistic citizenship in order to familiarize the reader with its original definitions and critiques. I then propose and develop additional possible complementary understandings of the term by drawing parallels between aspects of scholarship in citizenship and in the arts, exploring connections between the two fields, and developing possible new links by extrapolating relevant shared challenges, critiques, and possibilities from discourses about the former into the latter. My goal is not to argue for or against artistic citizenship, thoroughly review or contrast all its existing definitions, develop new fixed or rigid conceptualizations, or invalidate established ones; rather, I aim to showcase how the process of examining the term from multiple points of view—that can coexist and enrich each other—may contribute to understanding its possibilities as a multifaceted, evolving, fluid, and flawed concept that keeps providing important challenges, questions, and potentials. I propose this text trusting that it can exemplify how listening all around to other disciplines for new inspiring sources of reflection might help developing more diverse, hopeful, and critical paths forward for artistic practices.

The Artistic Citizen

As a relatively new and evolving concept, artistic citizenship does not have a fixed and established definition, and new conceptualizations of the term are still being discussed and developed (Thompson-Bell 2022). While most definitions of artistic citizenship focus on the common themes of personal and communal flourishing, social goods, participation, and social responsibility (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016), there exist significant differences in phrasing, focus, and priorities. To familiarize the reader with the most common understandings

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of the term, I divide these definitions into two general currents based on their focus: The artist as an artistic citizen, and a society of/with artistic citizens. Rather than placing each definition or scholar in just one of these categories, I use this classification to clarify the main values of artistic citizenship. As such, definitions from the same author might be found in both categories.

Definitions of the artist as an artistic citizen set their focus on the individual "artist," with different ways of defining "artist" depending on the author. They explore both the artist's value—reimagining what the artist can personally contribute to society—and the artist's social and ethical values—bringing forward the ethical and social repercussions and responsibilities derived from, and implied in, the artist's personal practices as an active agent for social good through the arts. An example that showcases these values is Bowman's (2016) definition of artistic citizens as "socially engaged, socially aware, and socially responsible. Artistic citizens—as distinct from 'mere' artists—seek not just to produce better art but to use their artistic pursuits to change themselves and the world for the better" (66). Similarly, Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman (2016) wrote: "Artistic Citizenship focuses on the social responsibilities and functions of amateur and professional artists and examines ethical issues that are conventionally dismissed in discourses on these topics" (back cover).

Alternatively, definitions that argue for a society of or with artistic citizens focus on the empowering and transformative potential that participating and interacting with the arts can have as means for social and communal flourishing. These definitions move their focus away from the individual "artist." Instead, they center the value and repercussions that reimagining the role that artistic practices, including citizens' everyday interactions with them, could have for transforming and improving society more broadly.[3] Examples of definitions forwarding these values include: "This citizenship chooses art as a form of playful creative action, creating beginnings that engage with the public sphere, explore the world, expose the private, position subjects, and raise questions that test new possibilities" (Caris and Cowell 2016, 467) and "pursue lifelong and life-wide fulfillment and flourishing through making and partaking of the arts and, in doing so, to live a 'good life,' a life of meaningfulness and significance for themselves and their communities" (Silverman and Elliott 2016, 81).

However, neither of these sets of definitions are free from controversy.[4] On the one hand, they can be criticized for their reliance on terms such as "social good" or "personal improvement," which are not universal. As such, they might encourage the reader to forget that "it is not clear what the just society is—neither in general nor in music education .... and we might well discover that we

do not all agree in our visions, even though we might have thought we would" (Kertz-Welzel 2023, 7). This can be especially worrisome given that social good and personal improvement are frequently externally defined,[5] normative terms that follow without questioning established definitions of what "good life" or "good society" mean. These dogmatic understandings can result in upholding a social status quo that often enables discrimination, inequalities, and the silencing and alienating of minorities.

Another point of controversy is that these definitions may instrumentalize the arts, keeping "limited attention to artistic concerns" (Gaunt et al. 2021, 5) and, in some cases, removing "the art" from considerations about the arts' value and ignoring its possibilities as a sanctuary away from the world (Biesta 2019; Kertz-Welzel 2022). Furthermore, they can instrumentalize artistic practices as "always good" tools for personal and communal thriving, often taking for granted positive extrinsic values of the arts. Assuming such unproven positive values ignores research arguing that artistic practices can at times maintain or worsen the status quo that they aim to contest (Boeskov 2018; Bowman 2010).

Furthermore, the wording of artistic citizenship and the contexts in which people often wield the term can unwillingly reinforce the dichotomous distinctions between artist and non-artist. Discourses on artistic citizenship are often presented—usually by art scholars, renowned academics, and professional artists—in specialized journals and books, artistic institutions, conservatories, and other exclusive cultural and academic settings. Even when they explicitly attempt to challenge commonplace understandings of terms such as artist—"conventionally used to designate special creative and productive skill, exceptional fluency in or mastery over materials, or extraordinary imaginative capacity" (Bowman 2016, 65)—or audience—that promotes "hierarchical relationship between artistic producer and aesthetic respondent .... that is not universal, nor is it necessary" (Bowman 2016, 65)—these insiders' position as recognized artists or preestablished experts within the field, together with the deeply entrenched normative meaning of these words, and the exclusive and elitist context in which these discourses are often presented, might reinforce the exclusions that artistic citizenship is trying to challenge. It can unwillingly perpetuate normative and narrow understandings of who and what an artist is, placing the ability and responsibility (Bowman 2016) for leading social change through the arts in the hands of just a privileged few.

While these critiques do not invalidate the values that artistic citizenship can bring and has brought to Western societies, they provide important opportunities for discussion and reflection, enriching the concept. Given the bridge

that artistic citizenship creates between citizenship and the arts, and the parallels between the challenges that pervade both of these terms, I suggest that it should be possible to draw from literature about citizenship to enable new learnings for the arts by exploring the following: how scholars have adapted their conceptions of citizenship to tackle similar critiques to the ones affecting artistic citizenship; how this has brought new points of view, objections, and discourses for the field of citizenship; and how this process can be extrapolated and applied to develop new possibilities and challenges for the arts. Following this train of thought, I propose and develop additional complementary conceptualizations of artistic citizenship with the aim of expanding, updating, and further discussing its challenges and potentials. Specifically, I put forward artistic citizenship as: 1) a lens to promote critical reflection, 2) a developing inclusive artistic identity, and 3) action for change.

Artistic Citizenship as a Lens to Promote Critical Reflection

Citizenship is a term often related to matters of political rights, duties, and formal membership (Delanty 2003; Elliott, Silverman and Bowman 2016; Tully 2014), and it is therefore typically connected to issues of exclusion and marginalization (Tambakaki 2015; Yarwood 2014). This means that being a citizen can be understood as a privileged status that entails a series of rights and duties and excludes those who the state defines as non-citizens: individuals with no voice, protection, or rights for participation. By being associated with the concept of citizenship—even if it attempts to do so just metaphorically—artistic citizenship risks bringing these issues and limitations to itself, to the conceptualizations of "the arts" with which it gets intertwined, and to artistic practices. Drawing from literature about citizenship, Bradley (2018) argues against the language of "artistic citizenship" by stating that it is "inextricably linked to concepts of nation, statehood, and exclusion" (84). While a strong deterrent against using this nomenclature, understanding the negative normative meanings attached to troublesome terms and associating them with specific conceptualizations of "the arts" could also have a potential upside for the implementation of more critical and caring artistic practices.

Regardless of whether we associate them with "citizenship," common Western understandings of "the artist" (Assefa 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández 2008) already exhibit parallels with the aforementioned issues pervading "citizenship," including underpinnings of exclusion, elitism, unbelonging, and lack of

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formal recognition. Since these matters are unavoidably present in many artistic practices, considering them should be imperative in the implementation of initiatives that, by remaining aware of these important challenges, are caring towards their participants.

The term "citizenship" can magnify otherwise partially or completely overlooked challenges within artistic practices. It can promote critical reflections and provide a body of literature that dives into, expands, and attempts to find alternatives and solutions for the similar predicaments impacting both of these terms. When shared, discussed, and disseminated, these reflections have the potential to raise awareness, impacting the thoughts and practices not only of scholars but of arts practitioners, leaders of cultural institutions, and policy-makers.

These potentials are not just hypothetical, but already being realized in multiple contexts. Texts such as Bradley (2018) and Caris and Cowell (2016) exemplify how connections facilitated by artistic citizenship promote criticality and enrich scholarship in the arts. They showcase how the field of "citizenship" can inspire important discussions, critiques, and insights in a way that promotes reflection, foregrounds caring for participants and practitioners, and brings critical perspectives for artistic practice and education. Additionally, symposiums, such as the one described by Thompson-Bell (2022), exemplify how this criticality not only impacts scholarship but can also reach music practitioners, educators, leaders of conservatories, and policy makers.[6] In these gatherings—which directly involved decision makers and practitioners currently working in the field in the reflection process—questions on citizenship identity prompted discussions about artistic identity, inequity, and whose voices are being excluded from the arts. Furthermore, the addition of artistic citizenship themes to the curricula within arts education centres and conservatories, such as the artistic citizenship project-week at the Rytmisk Musikkonservatorium in Copenhagen, engages students directly in these discussions. In this pedagogical initiative teachers and students collaboratively aimed to revise artistic citizenship—and the baggage that the term carries—as a gateway to critically review and reconsider the role and potentialities of their own artistic and educational practices.[7]

Having the additional critical tool for reflection that artistic citizenship can provide becomes especially relevant for a field in which, as stated by Belfiore and Bennett (2008), believing in the transformative power of the arts has become something close to orthodoxy. Regardless of the fact that in recent years claims for criticality within arts-scholarship have risen to a point in which "the

need for reflective practice has become almost a cliché" (Bowman 2009, 4), the need for criticality has not diminished. Dominant discourses still forward the unquestionable belief that the arts always function as a positive agent for social transformation, often clouding the judgement of practitioners, participants, and outsiders alike.

It is important to clarify that the potential for critical reflection invoked by "artistic citizenship" does not invalidate or negate any of the aforementioned pitfalls associated with the term, but rather coexists with them. Using "artistic citizenship" can promote feelings of exclusion, worsen experiences of unbelonging, and feel harmful to people who experience discrimination or marginalization (Bradley 2018). As such, the term should not be forced upon anyone, adhered to unreflectively, or wielded as an Excalibur of righteousness and truth for the arts. However, using the term both caringly and critically, embracing the value lying in its negatives, shortcomings, and criticisms while also embracing the richness and knowledge that can be bridged over from the field of citizenship to arts practices, might encourage revision and ease forward motion.

The connection between citizenship and utopia also strengthens the claims for conceptualizing artistic citizenship as a tool for critical reflection. Scholars such as the sociologist Levitas (2013) and the political scientists Goodwin and Taylor (2009) have proposed the use of utopian thinking for analyzing the current state of our world and envisioning new possibilities towards a better future. Citizenship is a prime example of how utopian values—regardless of historical and widespread understandings of utopia as unrealistic or unobtainable (Kertz-Welzel 2022; Levitas 2013)—can promote the critical revision of reality and enactment of change. Not disregarding that much remains undone, what were considered impossible utopian egalitarian or feminist ideals for citizenship in the past,[8] might be slowly growing to become more widely spread in many contemporary societies (Fernando et al. 2018). By linking citizenship and artistic practices, artistic citizenship facilitates learning from the transformative power that utopia has had in citizenship scholarship and action as well as extrapolating and applying these potentials to the arts. It highlights the potential of using utopian thinking as an effective tool for change in artistic fields, promoting the use of critical, yet idealistic reflections to uncover new paths forward.[9]

At the same time, the connection between citizenship and utopia can warn against the dangers of unthoughtfully following externally imposed ideals. Just as groups have used utopian ideals of citizenship to promote fascist and discriminating agendas (Kertz-Welzel 2022), dogmatic ideals and orthodoxies in the art—such as narrow or elitist depictions of what the arts and artist are—can

promote harmful (Wright 2019), dangerous, and negative practices and beliefs (Hess 2019). In order to alleviate some of these issues and foster a safer path for critical utopian thinking in the arts, I suggest that developing an increasingly fluid and diverse definition of artistic identity might first be needed. A more inclusive understanding of artistry could empower people to believe in their own agency to self-reflect "as artists," opening up increasingly accessible spaces for dialogue and dissent. It could not only relieve the dangers of following dogmatic ideals for individuals, but also introduce new critical voices and utopian perspectives into the field, widening and expanding who artists are and what artists can do.

Artistic Citizenship as a Developing Inclusive Artistic Identity

As shown by Blacking's (1973) research and in the work of Dissanayake (2006), there exist cultures in which the category of artist applies to nearly all members of society. Since common Western depictions of artists as elitist, exclusionary, and individualistic (Assefa 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández 2008) are not universal, it should be possible to challenge and contest them. However, how can the arts be disconnected from such entrenched uninviting and restricting meanings? Through exploring how scholars have attempted to separate "citizenship" from its exclusionary normative understandings, it might become possible not only to extrapolate more inclusive understandings of what artistic practices can be, but also to learn from the challenges and potentials that can arise during this process.

Scholars, including the sociologist Delanty and the political philosopher Tully, propose inclusive definitions of citizenship, describing it not only as a legal status but also as a constructivist learning process mostly performed through patterns of socialization developed during everyday activities (Delanty 2002, 2003; Tully 2014; Warming 2012). Delanty (2003) wrote: "Research has documented how citizens learn citizenship, which mostly takes place in the informal context of everyday life and is also heavily influenced by critical and formative events in people's lives. Citizenship is not entirely about rights or membership.... It concerns the learning of a capacity for action and for responsibility but, essentially, it is about the learning of the self and of the relationship of self and other" (602).

Scholars also explain that these everyday interactions not only include political participation, but also participation in other social and cultural settings (Rovisco 2019; Tully 2014). For example, Tully (2014) described citizenship as

praxis in context: "Rather than looking at citizenship as a status within an institutional framework backed up by world-historical processes and universal norms, the diverse tradition looks on citizenship as negotiated practices, as praxis—as actors and activities in contexts" (35).

These conceptualizations of citizenship emphasize shared lived experiences and togetherness as constituting pillars of the citizen's identity, focusing on the process of "citizen becoming" instead of the status of "citizen being." By doing so, they have the potential to facilitate a feeling of belonging in otherwise excluded individuals. Moreover, these conceptualizations blur the line between politics and non-politics. By avoiding the previously discussed issues of exclusion and marginalization related to definitions based on formal rights, they can potentially include people who either rejected or were unable to legally partake in political activities (Rovisco 2019).

Nevertheless, stating that citizen becoming might be defined through relationships and interactions instead of institutions does not guarantee a feeling of belonging in individuals. Even within inclusive conceptualizations of the term people who experience marginalization or social exclusion might still feel like non-citizens. However, foregrounding a plural understanding of the process of citizen becoming places more agency both to identify as a citizen and to define what citizen means on the individuals and less on institutions. It allows for more diverse and flexible definitions of citizen that people and communities might keep transforming and adapting, diminishing the rigidness and exclusion derived from the dominant legal and institutionalized definitions of the concept.

Artistic citizenship provides a bridge to extrapolate these alternative conceptualizations of citizenship. Music educators, practitioners, and students can use them to develop increasingly inclusive conceptualizations of "artist" that shift the focus from the exclusion and dichotomies common in the Western category of "artist-being" to an ongoing process of "artist-becoming" developed through everyday interactions. Music therapists and educators commonly claim that "everyone is an artist" (Stige 2021, 91). Supporting this statement with insights from inclusive citizenship contextualizes it by highlighting that, rather than a fixed concept, "artist"—like "citizen"—can support multiple meanings that go beyond normative understandings of professionalization or skill.

Dewey (1934) argued that artistic creation results from continuous and ongoing experiences in everyday life; these everyday informal events constitute a vital part of creative artistic processes. If everyday experiences[10] constitute the raw materials needed to create and connect to artistic works and processes,

then the embodied knowledge needed to "be an artist" is not an exclusive asset held by a privileged few, but universally learnt through everyday interactions. Furthermore, even if one only considered commonly accepted forms of Western art, constant exposure to everyday stimuli provides meaningful sources of artistic knowledge for the learning and building of one's artistic identity. From films to music to photography to paintings, artistic engagements and participations constitute part of everyday routines. Individuals experience them when walking to work while listening to music, watching TV or a film when resting at home, or seeing beautifully crafted images in advertisements. These artistic interactions can inadvertently create a significant amount of intrinsic artistic knowledge[11] that individuals can later perform in a multitude of ways, from singing, painting, or writing to cooking or choosing clothes.

Extending these parallels between inclusive citizenship and the arts, I propose that artistic citizenship could be understood as an ongoing, inclusive, everyday-learned and everyday-performed process in which individuals' personal, social, and artistic identities develop through the arts during daily life experiences. This approach to conceptualizing artistic citizenship as a *developing* artistic identity—that is "two-fold developing" by both constantly developing through ongoing interactions and by developing more inclusive understandings of what "artistic" means—is full of potential. It could blur the lines between formal and informal artistic participation by placing artistry in everyday life. It could tackle the artist/non-artist dichotomy by turning "artist" from an identity into an accessible ongoing process. And, by placing the artistic voice for creation and participation within the reach of everyone, this conception of artistic citizenship could lift the ability and responsibility for determining the role of the arts away from the shoulders of the previously "few chosen artists," distributing and sharing it with others in a more universal way.

By placing artistic knowledge in personal experiences and everyday informal interactions, this conceptualization of artistic citizenship does not take away from the relevance of formal artistic training, but could synergize with it by. It could tackle issues of accessibility by tearing down barriers of entry to arts education, counteracting discourses of genius and perceived elitism, and turning arts training into a more diverse, welcoming, and accessible space where those who choose to can focus on expanding and nourishing their personal artistry.

Nevertheless, inclusive claims for artistry or artistic citizenship can also be problematic. Since "no conceptualization of artistic citizenship can be infinitely inclusive" (Bowman 2016, 77), it becomes especially relevant to examine the

limitations and flaws of all-inclusive notions of artistry. By drawing from literature that problematizes inclusive notions of citizenship, artistic citizenship can also raise awareness about some of the possible pitfalls and challenges linked to developing inclusive definitions of the arts.

Drawing on Tambakaki's thoughts (2015), I propose that critiques of inclusive citizenship can warn about the risks associated with forgetting unequal participation and cancelling "non-artist" as an analytical category. Expanding the understanding of what an artist is to an all-inclusive identity risks becoming oblivious to issues of exclusion, marginalization, and accessibility. Tambakaki (2015) noted that "non-citizenship is not just a necessary category, but also a useful one. It alerts us to the exclusions, inequalities, marginalizations and naturalisations that accompany citizenship politics" (930). Consequently, the category "non-artist" can warn and remind about issues connected with marginalization and unequal participation in artistic practices. Stating that people have the knowledge and possibility to express themselves artistically is not the same as saying that everyone has the same possibilities and skillsets[12] to do so. From this perspective, the category of non-artists should include not only people who cannot create or partake in art, but also individuals lacking the means or time to focus on creating or performing, considered unskilled, denied recognition or access by arts education institutions, left behind by genius narratives, with unheard or unrecognized voices, or without the agency and resources to participate. Understanding non-artist as a non-dichotomous spectrum that intersectionally considers these and other forms and degrees of exclusion can expand people's understandings about the multiple factors limiting artistic accessibility and participation. It turns "non-artist" into an analytical category to inspire new artistic practices and policies that can revise and resist inequalities.

Scholarship on citizenship also notes the importance of considering the lack of personal and social recognition of the individual as an artist. Being recognized is essential to the feeling of belonging in citizenship (Delanty 2003; Warming 2012). This not only refers to formal recognition from a state, but also to being valued and recognized by others and the community, as well as the personal feeling of belonging for each individual (Honneth 2003, 2006). Similarly, the possibility of feeling belonging as an artist often lies beyond both the individual and the theoretical potential for artistic knowledge or expression. It is a negotiation between the individual who identifies and feels that they belong (or not) as an artist and the society that acknowledges them (or not) as one. Defending an all-inclusive artistic identity risks ignoring external factors, such

as recognition from the community, institutions, and society, which strongly contribute to feeling like and belonging as an artist. Even if everyone has the same possibility for participation in the arts, and even if everyone values their own artistic selves and artistic creations, people may still feel like non-artists who do not belong when their artistry is marginalized, depreciated, or unrecognized.

Critiques of citizenship also illuminate dangers related to the primacy of the arts and eliminating the choice to not be an artist. As Wright (2019) observed, "Ethnomusicologists and anthropologists from Blacking (1974) onwards have concluded that being human is being musical" (218). Equating musicality with humanity becomes harmful when people understand "artist" as an exclusionary and exclusive identity. By placing musicality as intrinsic to being human, claims such as this one may lead to the alienation or even mistreatment of people who do not identify as artistic, making them feel broken and less than human. At the same time, by automatically including everyone as artists, these discourses may force people into an unwanted identity. Just as people may choose to reject being considered citizens as a way to oppose the rights, responsibilities, or stigmas associated with citizenship (Tambakaki 2015), "non-artist" can also exist as a way of not conforming to specific definitions of what being an artist means. From this perspective, choosing to name oneself a "non-artist" can become an empowering self-identification, a self-imposed title to protest against and defy established one-way road definitions of the arts, while claiming for more diverse understandings of what artistic practices and artistic identities can be.

Luckily, the aforementioned challenges pervading inclusive definitions of "artistic" might not be unavoidable or universal. Since they result from specific normative understandings about what art and artists are, acting critically and slowly bringing change to the construction of these understandings might gradually open new possible paths forward.

Artistic Citizenship as Action for Change

Scholarship on citizenship can also illuminate additional implications for the language of "artistic citizenship" to act and transform the world beyond the theoretical. When exploring "global citizenship," Tully (2014) described how the conjunction of the words "global" and "citizenship" creates a new concept that, while related to established historical uses of these terms, can challenge both their normative use and the practices connected to them. He stated that "The creation of the conjunction 'global citizenship' could be seen as a prime example

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of the innovative freedom of citizens and non-citizens to contest and initiate something new in the practice of citizenship" (6).

Tully (2014) defended that "initiating something new" becomes possible because diverse understandings of "global" and "citizenship" exist, and the normative language attached to them is just one choice amongst many. By choosing to link "global citizenship" with diverse practices and understandings that diverge from dominant meanings of modern citizenship—those based on "membership codes, rights, duties and institutional preconditions" (9)—people can contextualize and de-universalize them. Tully wrote:

> The kind of critical attitude that accompanies practices of diverse citizenship and contextualizes or 'provincializes' modern citizenship and its universalizing language… frees us from the hold of the globally dominant language of modern citizenship as the pre-emptive language of disclosure of all forms of citizenship and enable us to see it as one language among others. In so doing, it de-universalizes modern citizenship (for, as we have seen, its claim to universality is internal to the globally dominant language of modern citizenship) and de-subalternizes other modes of citizenship (discloses them in their local languages and histories). Modern citizenship can thus be put in its place as one singular (and imperious) mode in a global field of diverse alternatives. (10)

Understanding that "global," "citizenship," and "global citizenship" can take diverse and complex meanings opens up a path not only to reconceptualizing them theoretically, but to transforming how people perform them. Tully (2014) stated that "This pragmatic linguistic freedom of enunciation and initiation—of contestability and speaking otherwise—within the weighty constraints of the inherited relations of use and meaning is, as we shall see, internally related to a practical (extralinguistic) freedom of enactment and improvisation within the inherited relations of power in which the vocabulary is used" (5).

He explains that language users learn how to use and perform a concept via "apprenticeship," which involves: connecting it to the practices that give it name in their everyday life; contrasting their similarities and dissimilarities with their personal already-stablished understanding of the term; and enacting these concepts practically in their daily life in accordance with this understanding. As such, a person gradually learns what being a citizen means via encountering the use of the word in their life, contrasting their current understanding of what a citizen means to the new situation where the language is used, adjusting their idea of what being a citizen entices, and then acting as citizens in accordance with this transformed understanding. Since "global" and "citizen" accept different meanings, when people choose to enact their "pragmatic linguistic freedom of enunciation and initiation, of contestability and speaking

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otherwise" (Tully 2014, 5) to use "global citizenship" in reference to diverse practices that move away from normative and dominant meanings of citizenship—such as citizenship as a developing and inclusive identity—they not only change the definition of these words, but also change what acting as a citizen can be, who citizens are, and what they can do in the world.

Drawing on Tully's assertions, I propose that "artistic citizenship" has a similar potential. As previously argued, the terms "artist," "citizenship" and "artistic citizenship" also involve multifaceted understandings. By linking the language of "artistic citizenship" to diverse meanings and to alternative artistic practices that move away from dominant depictions of Western artistry as elitist or exclusionary, people can contextualize and de-universalize them. This shows that other ways of "being an artist" are possible and that normative depictions of artists are just a few amongst many, opening the field to new possibilities and perspectives. This change in understanding can go beyond both words and theory (parallel with Tully 2014, 5), acting to transform artistic practices.

In parallel with citizenship, people learn who an artist is and how to "be artistic" themselves via apprenticeship. A person gradually learns what being artistic involves by encountering the use of the word in their everyday life, contrasting their previously established understanding of what being an artist means with new situations, adjusting their personal ideas, and then deciding how to "act artistically" in the world (or decide not to do so) in accordance with this transformed understanding. As such, when a participant encounters the words "artistic citizenship" tied to an artistic project that chooses to speak otherwise—by, for example, challenging exclusion through contesting the nature of excellent music or valuing participants' artistic voices and artistic personas as meaningful in their diverse forms—their understanding of "art" and "artist" expand. This changes both how they relate to their own artistic-self and to the arts in their everyday life, in the process transforming what they can do through the arts in society.

Furthermore, because of the two constituting words of "artistic citizenship," these transformations not only impact people's understandings and enactments tied to the term "artistic," but also how they understand and perform "citizenship." As such, choosing to use artistic citizenship facilitates that values emphasized through artistic practices can impact society beyond traditionally artistic contexts. Just as using "artistic citizenship" risks bringing issues of privilege or exclusion to the arts (Bradley 2018, 84), linking artistic citizenship to artistic practices in which people remain critical and caring, aware of diverse

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voices, and concerned with inclusion and agency can make these experiences and values expand into and transform performances and understandings of citizenship. Opening up paths for more diverse, caring, and inclusive forms of artistic citizenship may therefore foster more diverse, caring, and inclusive citizens and societies. This showcases not only that "through music it is possible to imagine an alternative social model" (Levitas 2013), but that through critical and caring artistic practices it is possible to start enacting this transformation.

This might appear to be a small and maybe meaningless effort in comparison with the historic and constant everyday exposure to commonplace normative understandings of these terms. However, opening up a small crack in the entrenched uses of these concepts and linking them to new hopeful experiences—even if only for a moment—can make a difference. It might turn utopian[13] possibilities in both arts and citizenship into a reality. It is a step towards transforming the world through words and artistic practices, making "choosing to name it artistic citizenship" in itself an act of activism.

Conclusions

This article has explored and developed the term artistic citizenship to argue for how notions of citizenship can provide new avenues for critical discussions, imaginings, social repercussions, and practices in the arts. However, these enriching potentials are not unique to the analysis and reconceptualization of artistic citizenship. The same process could be replicated with other multidisciplinary terms and other transdisciplinary connections, further expanding artistic practices with new insights and possibilities. Moreover, the three coexisting depictions of artistic citizenship that I presented are not the only possible ones. They exemplify just a few of the extra possibilities that can be enacted through exploring artistic citizenship fluidly. Therefore, they are not meant to be understood as absolute, fixed, or uncontestable, but to showcase the added value that multidisciplinary terms can provide when not put into a box and not adhered to unconditionally.

There is much that artistic practices, including music making, can address.[14] The conceptualizations presented in this article tackle issues of inclusion, elitism, multidisciplinarity, and subjectivity in the arts. However, drawing from other important aspects of citizenship—such as its connection with environmental issues or diaspora—and extrapolating them to the arts could have fostered other possible conceptualizations of artistic citizenship addressing different, yet just as important, issues. Inspired by Goble's (2015) use of "musics,"

this multiplicity of coexisting definitions creates multiple coexisting "artistic citizenships" that are not only possible, but desirable. It promotes understanding each possible lens for looking at artistic citizenship as partial, updateable, and context based. It embraces the troubled, complex, and sometimes paradoxical nature of the concept. "Artistic citizenship"—as well as "citizenship" and "the arts"—can be at the same time critical and utopian, hopeful and harmful, a tool for social change or a sanctuary to escape from the world. Accepting this ambiguity[15] and plurality of meaning allows ideals to remain relevant and keep evolving, expanding, and adapting to the different contexts, needs, and goals of the people who can learn and make use of them. It opens the possibility to learn from more diverse sources of knowledge and to explore nuanced and troubled concepts and ideals without being forced to dogmatically accept or totally reject them, curiously listening around for them, discerning the notes that resonate with each of us, and using them to inspire the writing of the passages that are yet to come.

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Notes

[1] A fluid concept evolves and adapts. It is not fixed or static but has multiple possible understandings that coexist. Like a body of water, a fluid definition might not allow one to build a rigid and eternal structure on top of it, where it can forever stay immobile, but it can create a space in which new ideas are born and evolve, where new discussions and new life—that might eventually move completely out of this water—can keep developing.

[2] This article considers art and artist as concepts co-constructed between individuals and society (see section on Artistic Citizenship as a Developing Inclusive Artistic Identity) that accept multiple, diverse, and coexisting possible understandings. It is therefore counterintuitive for this text to bring forward any set definition of these concepts. However—and even though this text does not aim at promoting them—"common Western conceptualizations" of the arts and artists (Assefa 2015, Gaztambide-Fernández 2008) will be relevant to some of the discussions that will be presented. For a more historical exploration of the connection between the arts and citizenship, see Wiles (2016).

[3] What improving and positively transforming society means varies for each author. However, themes such as community building, inclusion, personal and communal flourishing, etc. seem to be important for most scholars. In the next section of the text possible critiques derived from these statements will be discussed further.

[4] These critiques brought forward by different scholars are nuanced and complex. Since it goes beyond the scope, and outside the focus, of this article to thoroughly explain them, I encourage the reader to further explore the original texts that are referenced to get a deeper understanding of these interesting discussions.

[5] The meaning of "good life" or "good society" is not a universal but socially constructed. What these ideas mean is often not decided and reflected upon by each person, but it is stablished by society, by politics, by the media, etc. and in many cases just assumed as a given by the individual.

[6] This report is a summary of a multidisciplinary forum that brought together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers from different fields to discuss themes related to artistic citizenship. It was followed up by different online meetings (one of which I attended) that included the insights of people not involved in the original meeting and where artistic citizenship inspired critical discussions on the role and state of the arts. This report concluded with a series of recommendations for arts practitioners and institutions, including: promoting transdisciplinary partnerships, arts education centres rethinking the skills that adaptable graduates should develop, and promoting an ethic of care towards their graduates.

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[7] I have facilitated lectures on artistic citizenship with an international group of students in which the term—and the natural adversity that it produced in international students who do not feel that they are "citizens" (even though as a European I have many rights and privileges in Denmark, I am myself not a Danish citizen, with no right to vote in this country)—brought forward inspiring considerations about the elitism and exclusion that might also be linked to the arts.

[8] Such as universal vote or legal access to equal rights.

[9] The connections between utopian thinking and the arts are too extensive to be described in this text and are explored in Alexandra Kertz-Welzel's (2022) inspiring book, *Rethinking Music Education and Social Change*.

[10] These include everyday exposure to any source of artistic inspiration and life events, such as our interactions with others, our culture, our personal feelings and experiences, as well as inspiration from nature, the environment, or other non-human phenomena.

[11] This is supported by research findings showing that even before any artistic training has taken place, individuals exhibit a significant innate artistic knowledge (Bamberger 2003).

[12] I used the word skillsets, instead of capabilities or talents, to describe that people have different skills or unique characteristics—different ways of being musical—that are diverse and cannot (or at least should not) be hierarchized.

[13] Here I am playing with the double meaning of the word, transforming what are considered "just" utopian possibilities now—meaning unobtainable—into real utopias.

[14] To showcase some of the ideals and values that music can strive towards refer to the MayDay Group's (2021) Action Ideals.

[15] This wording was inspired by Boeskov's (2022) article "Ambiguous Musical Practice: Rethinking Social Analysis of Music Educational Practice."

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Article 2: A reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care: The decolonial voices of Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid

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A reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care: The decolonial voices of Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid

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Abstract

This article explores the link between the voices of Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid and their potentialities for music education, focusing on the overarching themes of (a) criticality and scepticism in collaboratively reviewing learned oppressions, (b) the teacher-student/student-teacher as a hybrid category, (c) the importance of dissonance and presence in a caring dialogical education, (d) the potentials of rhythmic care in music education, and (e) ubuntu care: the self and the other. This text concludes by briefly proposing the concept of 'a reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care', and its possible application to Nordic music education contexts, as a way to incorporate the inspiration drawn by the philosophies of these two scholars on a practical level.

Keywords: *music education, decolonial, critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, Yusef Waghid*

Introduction

As Mateiro and Westvall (2016) observe, music educators often teach through "the lens of values and beliefs that they are accustomed to" (p. 157). Such lenses are shaped by a range of influences: personal histories, educational experiences, cultural and social contexts, exposure to specific musical practices, and so forth. These factors play an important role in shaping how music and music education are understood and practiced. They might bias music educators' perspectives on our own practices, and even limit our imaginations on what music education could become.

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How could music educators challenge assumptions that are so deeply integrated in who we are? How to contest that which might be taken for granted? Decolonial perspectives may expose us to unfamiliar ways of thinking, informed by multiple traditions and contexts. They might inspire us to consider the world differently, and can therefore become invaluable assets for not only challenging and widening our gazes, but also creating more caring and inclusive practices in the process.[1]

This article brings forward the thoughts of Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid—two decolonial education scholars—seeking to highlight the importance of rethinking educational perspectives for any decolonial endeavours (Manthalu & Waghid, 2019), and the specific potentialities of bringing diverse pedagogical perspectives to the field of music education through decolonial thinking. This text will start with a brief introduction of both of these academics, and their relevance to music education. Then, I will introduce and build upon their thoughts focusing on the overarching themes of (a) criticality and scepticism in collaboratively reviewing learned oppressions, (b) the teacher-student/student-teacher as a hybrid category, (c) the importance of dissonance and presence in a caring dialogical education, (d) the potentials of rhythmic care in music education, and (e) ubuntu care: the self and the other. I will conclude by conceptualizing a 'reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care', and its possible application to Nordic music education contexts as a way to incorporate the inspiration drawn by the philosophies of these two scholars on a practical level.

Throughout this exploration it is important to acknowledge my own position as a privileged author and the risks that come with writing decolonial texts from such a position. As Bradley (2012, p. 675) notes, quoting postcolonial and anticolonial scholars may inadvertently absorb their voices into a monologue shaped by the privileged author: "I decide what is quoted, who is quoted, and how those quotes are utilized." As such, I deem it necessary to emphasize here that this text reflects my own interpretations of these authors' work and how I see their thinking relating to my background and context in music education.

Paulo Freire and Yusef Waghid as decolonial voices for music education

There are two sides to decolonizing education: (a) critiquing dominant Eurocentric pedagogical models, and (b) re-imagining what alternatives to these models could look like (Mbembe, 2016). It is a political process that challenges unjust, unreflectively imported, and taken-for-granted traditions in "an individual and collective journey to oppose undesirable practices" (Waghid, 2023, p. 184). Both Freire and Waghid address these perspectives

1 This article follows Wiredu's (2002) definition of decolonization as "the elimination from our thought of modes of conceptualization that came to us through colonisation and remain in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices" (p. 56).

by bringing critique to common Western educational paradigms, problematizing issues of inertia, tradition and power, and offering unique alternative paths to flexibly and collaboratively reimagine our pedagogies.

Brazilian educator and philosopher Freire is considered either a direct precursor to the decolonizing movement; or one of the first decolonial education scholars (Morán Beltrán et al., 2021). His approach to critical pedagogy is one of "mental decolonization" (Mayo, 2022, p. 2276), urging teachers and students to resist imposed colonial educational practices, to combat stagnation and collaboratively oppose alienation (Morán Beltrán et al., 2021).[2] His work inspired and supported academics in postcolonialism; critical pedagogy; post-structuralism—including Waghid (2019); as well as music education scholarship.

Music educators and academics have engaged with Freire's critical pedagogy in a variety of ways, both theoretically and practically. Some have explored its implications for music education and practice (e.g., Abrahams, 2007; Hess, 2017; Schmidt, 2007). Others have critiqued and challenged its assumptions within the music education context (e.g., Hess, 2017, 2019). Freire's ideas have been drawn upon to connect with currently relevant frameworks such as Artistic Citizenship (Narita, 2024), and even extended into discussions about how Freire might have responded to new possibilities like social media in music education (Coppola, 2021). Together, these contributions suggest that Freire's work has become a familiar point of reference in Western music education: one that has been echoed across decades and continues to inspire critical and creative reimaginings today.

Because of this familiarity, Freire's thoughts might provide an accessible entry point to this article for Western music educators and scholars.[3] Since his pedagogy has already been explored thoroughly within the field, and is too wide to address in this article, this text does not aim to go into all of Freire's philosophy in depth or fully review his impact on music education, but introduce those principles of decolonial education that resonate with both of the explored scholars, and that inspired the conceptualization of a 'reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care'. This decision has the goal of presenting a clear and relatable thread that connects Freire's familiar thoughts with Waghid's underrepresented conceptualizations; amplifying and exploring how Waghid's work draws from, aims at expanding, and challenges some of the shortcomings of Freire's pedagogy and its impact on music education; and positioning Freire as a pioneer of and inspiration for decolonial pedagogy.

As one of South Africa's current leading scholars in education, Waghid's decolonial thoughts lean and build on Freire's by bringing more contemporary influences into dialogue, including postcolonial, feminist, and poststructuralist scholars. His decolonial

2 Freire conceptualized critical pedagogy as a deeply political and social, problem-based and dialogical approach to education that inspired teachers and students to emancipate themselves from their mental oppressions through naming and transforming their world (see e.g. Hess, 2017, 2019; Silverman, 2022).

3 Even if his pedagogy principles have not yet impacted some important music education contexts (Rinholm et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2005; Slamkowski, 2020).

approach to education embraces a "fused understanding of knowledge that looks beyond essentializing what is indigenous as separate from universal/global" (Waghid, 2023, p. 184). By bridging African philosophers; international decolonial scholarship; and Western academics, Waghid facilitates access to diverse perspectives in education that still resonate with voices more often referenced by Nordic music education practitioners and scholars. Furthermore, his original conceptualizations of *caring dissonance, rhythmic care and ubuntu care* (Waghid, 2019), present unique perspectives that could expand current discussions and challenges in the field. Regardless of these potentials, and despite his close to 400 publications (Waghid, 2021, p. xxxi), his thoughts are still almost completely unheard amongst Western music educators, scholars and practitioners.[4] As is the case with Freire, this article is not able to introduce all the work of this prolific scholar—which expands over multiple subjects and is inspired by many other influences than Freire—but instead focuses on the aspects of his pedagogy that resonate with the theme of the text.

Freire (1921-1997) was a philosopher and educator responding to the oppressive and colonial educational and political context of 20th-century Brazil. Waghid is a contemporary education scholar working in post-apartheid South Africa. Even though their historical and cultural contexts differ—and may seem distant from each other and from the diverse field of contemporary music education—both embrace fluidity in how their ideas can be understood and applied across contexts. This becomes a necessity when looking for perspectives that can serve as a source of inspiration, reflection, and dialogue for the variety of practices, contexts, and needs existing in the field of music education. However, context matters. Both of these authors urge scholars and practitioners to not blindly accept and import their thoughts uncritically; but to remain open and reflective (Waghid, 2023), flexibly and sceptically considering and learning what is relevant to their own situations and times.

Following this thinking, the reader is invited into my process of interpreting and learning from these inspiring academics through this text. Each of the following sections presents my interpretation and introduction of these scholars' ideas, explaining how their perspectives relate to and build upon each other across different themes, and expanding on how I personally reimagine their pedagogies in relation to current Nordic music education contexts. Thus, I urge the reader to draw from and share in this process, to personally and sceptically consider Freire's and Waghid's situated knowledge—as well as the proposals I present here—without taking them as absolutes, and to reimagine them in their own context. As Freire stated: "I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow American educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and rewrite my ideas" (Freire & Macedo, 1998, p. 6).

[4] Excluding some recent efforts to start to introduce his decolonial perspectives into Western education (Waghid, 2023), practically nothing can be found of his work within music education scholarship in Europe or North America.

Criticality and scepticism: collaboratively reviewing learned oppressions

As a shared "practice of noticing and attending to representations, ideologies, and discourses" (Hess, 2019, p. 36), Freire's pedagogy follows parallel ideals to the aforementioned two sides of decolonial pedagogy, bringing forward awareness and transformation of the established, and the implementation of alternatives for change. Freire states that students come into the classroom full of truths and falsehoods that must be critically reflected upon, and corrected (Freire, 1970). To do this, Freire urges teachers and students to name and transform their world through dialogue and problem-posing pedagogies, collaboratively exploring their realities and the structures and systems that enable or constrict their experiences. However, teachers facilitating students recognizing their own oppression can be problematic. Freire's pedagogy has been challenged by scholars both in the music field (e.g. Hess, 2017, 2019) and in the field of education (e.g. Beckett, 2013; Ellsworth, 1992) for issues such as not paying enough attention to the learned oppressions of the teachers; owning otherness by ignoring teachers' and students' different positionalities; diminishing the importance of power dynamics in pedagogical encounters; and even promoting the same structures that critical pedagogy aims to liberate students from.

Waghid (2019) expands on Freire's approach to reviewing learnt oppressions by further emphasizing that this process requires recognizing the different positionalities of students and teachers, both teachers and students cultivating an attitude of scepticism and humility towards what is known, and a willingness to reinvent what each of them may be taking for granted. In developing the concepts of caring dissonance, rhythmic care, and ubuntu care—each of which will be introduced later in this article—he highlights the importance of embracing diversity when navigating power and difference in pedagogical encounters. These three concepts emphasize the productive tension between the self (the centre and the known) and the other (those outside oneself who can never be fully understood)—a tension that, according to Waghid, can become a valuable resource for growth through difference and diversity, as we "expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humaneness so as to inform and enrich our own" (Sindane, 1994, as cited in Waghid, 2020, p. 305). He reminds us that educators may not be able to liberate themselves or others alone, but suggests that by extending care and criticality toward voices dissonant from our own; and through dialogue that invites us to be touched and transformed by "others in their otherness" (Waghid, 2020, p. 305), educators may be able to contest what we take for granted and open up possibilities we might not have seen alone.

Reviewing and being liberated from learned oppression may be especially relevant for music education. Even though scholarship in the field calls for expanding what music education can be—to reach new contexts and resonate with new voices (e.g. Camlin, 2023; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021)—it still remains a change-resistant field (e.g. Christophersen et al., 2023; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021), where "hegemonic" practices continue to shape which "kinds of musical knowledge and experiences receive greater attention"

(Carson & Westvall, 2016, p. 40). These "hegemonic" practices often self-perpetuate, at times causing "harm" to individuals "who are innately musical" yet excluded from forms of music education that "fail to speak to their individual musicality" or support "belief in their own ability" (Wright, 2018, p. 221).

Building on Freire's call to name and transform the world through dialogue; and Waghid's emphasis on collaborative care, scepticism, and dissonance; music educators may be urged to reflect on how their own perspectives might unconsciously dominate even well-intentioned efforts to change. Transformation, then, is not only about expanding existing practices, but also about reviewing learned oppressions, decentering dominant perspectives, and reaching out toward others in their otherness—those who may see, experience, or imagine music differently—for collective liberation and growth.

Through such encounters, music educators might support others in unlearning socially constructed assumptions about what music is and who it is for, while simultaneously disrupting the limitations of our own frames of reference. Dissonant voices may help reveal what often remains unnoticed and offer radically different possibilities that might not be imagined in isolation, through a process that invites a form of mutual liberation: expanding educators' awareness while enabling new practices of music education to emerge in alignment with diverse experiences and values. Freire and Waghid may remind us that to make transformation possible, the first step may be to critically confront and unsettle dogmatic and conservative approaches to education.

Banking education and the teacher/student dichotomy

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire is critical of what he describes as *banking education,* a unidirectional teaching approach that considers teachers' knowledge as "… a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (1970, p. 72). For music education, a banking approach to pedagogy could make reference to practices in any musical genre where 'experts' teach 'correct' musical skills to the student according to fixed, uncontestable, and often revered repertoires and teaching methodologies. As described by Schmidt (2005, p. 3), these pedagogical approaches, often disconnected from students´own musicalities and interests, continue to "impart Westernised concepts and ideologies … based on the respect for expert knowledge and the obliteration of cultural and social constructs … according to Freire's criticism, to foster the reproduction of dominant ideals, while alienating dialogue and critical inquiry".[5]

Banking approaches to education and colonial education go hand in hand (Mayo, 2022). They can create a hierarchical view of knowledge and people; place knowledge as

[5] This approach to education is not necessarily always negative. El Sistema is an example of a troubling, both positive and negative project within music education that even though it might not connect with the students' musical world and even though it might approach music in a hierarchical way, still has managed to bring certain positives to some of its participants (Baker, 2016).

a fixed commodity owned by a few that disregards the contexts and personhood of both teachers and students; turn education into a lifeless and uncreative process that dehumanises students; and make learning into an alienating experience that is void of any impact or relatability with the student's world (Freire, 1970, 1996). These issues might be even more relevant when they make reference to music education, which includes practices that are not only creative, but are also closely related to identity expression and formation, and where personal experiences and vulnerabilities are often exposed.

In order to contest a banking approach to pedagogy, Freire claims that "education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (1970, p. 72). He proposes an approach to education that is based on dissolving this teacher/student dichotomy, and that centres *dialogue* and a *problem-posing* pedagogy. He describes teaching and learning as reciprocal practices, where hybrid teachers/students and students/teachers grow through collaboratively giving and receiving, and learning and teaching, at the same time.

Waghid (2019) expands on this idea by highlighting that reciprocal pedagogies are only possible if both students and teachers recognize their own fallibility. This calls for teachers and students to approach knowledge with humility, to challenge hierarchical understandings of knowing, and to recognize each other and their perspective as contingent, flawed, and incomplete entities in an always unfinished process of becoming.

Foregrounding dialogue, describing a more horizontal approach to musical access, challenging hierarchical understandings of musical knowledge, and defending an innate and valuable musicalities present in people are not unheard of within Western music education: From Small's (1998) concept of musicking to Turino's (2015) thoughts on participation; to contemporary discussions on innate artistry (Matarasso, 2019) and diversity in musics (Carson & Westvall, 2016), multiple scholars challenge elitist and exclusionary understandings of expertise, agency, and participation in the arts. However, defending a dialogical and reciprocal pedagogy of music might still sound problematic to music educators raised in the common master-apprentice or hierarchical approaches that are still perpetuated in many Western music education contexts (Christophersen et al., 2023; Rinholm et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2005).

Aligning with the thoughts of Carson and Westvall (2024), engaging in a shared and co-creative approach to teaching does not necessarily conflict with the development of musical knowledge, skills, or craft. Instead, it can support the development of both teachers' and students' musicalities by opening up new forms of expression that enrich and expand their thinking and practice. This requires "shifting the centre" of pedagogical practices and "re-learning" how to pedagogically engage, potentially beyond current "comfort zones" (Carson & Westvall, 2024, p. 14).

Supporting dialogic and reciprocal pedagogies, where teachers demonstrate a predisposition and humility to learn from (or more accurately, *with*) students, may foster this

synergistic shift. Dialogue is central to caring, as it facilitates communication in a safe setting and allows vulnerabilities to be openly shared (Noddings, 2002). By advancing dialogue, music education might enable practices that value the specific voices and skills of each student and teacher, evoke their potentialities, and promote a shared and safer movement beyond their comfort zones (Waghid, 2019). Through a shared dialogic process, teachers and students recognize that in artistic learning, even in the most established genres, there is space for expressing identity, subjectivity, and personal growth and that as unique individuals with diverse experiences, they all can bring new perspectives and valuable contributions to the evolving field of music.

This mutual exchange creates opportunities for teachers and students to be caringly and critically challenged, to encounter new ideas, and to grow through exposure to different musical voices, turning differences and diversity into invaluable assets for musical growth. It does not oppose learning a given repertoire or musical skills, but empowers students and teachers to be attentive and reflective in pedagogical encounters, considering their practices and growing through the friction of contesting what is established; while challenging themselves and each other to name and transform what is relevant to their world.

Attentive and caring dissonance

Diversity of perspectives makes dialogue more enriching. Being fully immersed in, and open to the dissonant views of others can reveal new possibilities, and help reconsider the views that one was taking for granted. Freire's critical pedagogy claimed that teachers' and students' should dialogically develop a new view, one they can share (Beckett, 2011a, 2011b). However, attempts for consensus might ignore the different positionalities of teachers and students, silence minority voices, and not consider the unequal power between participants inherent in any pedagogical encounter (Weiler, 2003). Drawing from renowned feminist scholars and care ethicists and writers, Waghid (2018) complements Freire's perspectives by exploring the implications of a dialogical education that caringly embraces and explores the role of dissonance.

Nuraan Davids and Yusef Waghid (2017) relate dissonant pedagogical encounters to an enactment of discomfort, practical criticism, and scepticism; where teachers and students challenge and provoke each other and develop thoughts and ideas together. This implies teachers not only listening to and developing the students' views, but also teachers presenting their own thoughts to the students, inviting these thoughts to be contested, and self-learning through the process.

However, for learning to take place, challenge and scepticism are not enough. Waghid (2019) describes how learning through dissonance requires (a) loyalty to one's own ideas: to argue for them, put them in dialogue with the ideas of others, and enrich oneself and others through the friction; (b) the humility and flexibility to allow one's thoughts to be changed (otherwise self-learning and growth would not be possible); and (c) the awareness

and uncertainty to understand that diverse perspectives can co-exist with each other, thus removing the need for consensus by recognizing that ideas are always situated and transforming, and therefore not absolutely true for different people and contexts. An approach to education that embraces dissonance in this way makes teachers and students more deeply immersed in the deliberation and more present in the moment, opening up new possibilities for incitement and transformation (Waghid, 2018). Furthermore, Waghid states that this practice of dissonance in pedagogical encounters is a form of *care* and *respect* for the students. By being fully present in the pedagogical encounter, as well as acknowledging the students' ideas as valuable, teachers recognize students as equally intelligent individuals that can enrich the teacher's thoughts. Waghid states this is of utmost importance since "… failing to do so would be to treat students disrespectfully, i.e., without empathetic care" (2019, p. 65).

I suggest that embracing Waghid's pedagogy of attentive and caring dissonance within music education would mean teachers—and not only students—arriving in the classroom with the intention to radically learn, and willing to put their own pedagogical and artistic practices up for contestation. Music teachers following this pedagogy would not only listen to the students' music, provoking and constructively critiquing their work to help them develop; but also expose their own musics and/or opinions to the scrutiny of the students—while being fully present in the encounter—in order to develop themselves. By recognizing the students as individuals with valuable voices to learn with, this approach to pedagogy may facilitate more horizontal interactions between teachers and students, diminishing strictly hierarchical understandings of excellence in music. It could additionally reduce rejection to critique, showing that even those recognized as experts in the field are always "artists-in-becoming": constantly searching for and learning from the dissonance of encountering the diverse voices and opinions of others.

Furthermore, by highlighting that teachers should actively and fully engage with their own thoughts, opinions, and musics to recognize students as equally capable musicians to learn from, a pedagogy of caring dissonance may also problematize overly passive approaches to facilitation. Teachers attempting to create a safe and caring space, and avoiding overpowering the voices of the students, should not necessarily oppose bringing their own full voice to a pedagogical encounter. Facilitators guiding students with open questions without directly contesting them, or avoiding presenting their own contrasting opinions to students, might make facilitators feel that they are diminishing power imbalances, reducing friction, and creating a more neutral and inviting space for students to grow. However, according to Waghid, facilitating in this way might actually be more violent (Waghid, 2019). It implies teachers forfeiting, or at least limiting, the opportunity to be contested against or be taught. By placing themselves as impersonal facilitators, teachers might be unintentionally implying to the students—and maybe to themselves—that they have little to learn from them. It can be a way for the teacher to assert their own power by

aiming to reduce it; placing their own ideas, music, and knowledge above the students'; condescendingly undervaluing their voice; "disrespectfully" (Waghid 2019, p. 65) talking down to individuals who already have a present artistic voice; and perpetuating a hierarchical approach to music education.

Rhythmic care

Embracing a pedagogy of dissonance can be problematic. Even if one aims to develop a horizontal approach to teacher/student relations, power dynamics in pedagogical encounters still exist and must be cared for. Even though challenging the others' voices might be considered a form of care and respect for them, it can also be felt as discouraging or dominating. Dissonance, especially when done without care, can limit the ability of people to fully express and develop their thoughts or to reconsider them. It can silence and overrun voices before they have the time to fully develop, and it can hinder the creation of a truly open space to be exposed to new ideas.

In connection with these challenges, Waghid develops the concept of *rhythmic caring* (2019). Based on the premises that caring is both relational and reciprocal, Waghid describes caring in pedagogical encounters as a rhythmic process where teachers and students must elastically move from being fully cognizant of themselves, to centering the others; from what is known, to what is new; and from positions of care and empathy, to moments of non-inclusion and even lack of empathetic care. In relation to caring dissonance, rhythmic care can be practically explained as a cyclical approach to dialogic education where teachers and students repeatedly shift between the following positions, pedagogically dancing in a rhythmic manner:

1. First teachers and students *momentarily* suspend their dissonant opinions and criticisms in order to remain truly open to becoming transformed by the thoughts of others. Withholding one's thoughts and temporarily being open to "recognize something which one disagrees with" (Davids & Waghid, 2017a, p. 174) opens up a space in which one may be touched by different perspectives, avoiding premature judgement and stopping the hasty dismissal of new ideas (Waghid, 2019). In line with definitions of attentive and caring dissonance presented in the last section, Waghid sees this form of detachment and lack of engagement as a temporary withholding of presence and care. Nevertheless, when paired with the following step, he argues that this temporary (or rhythmic) reservation of one's empathetic care, contributes to developing a generally more caring pedagogy.
2. Following this temporary suspension, teachers and students re-engage fully with their own perspectives and opinions; critically putting their thoughts in dialogue with others' perspectives; dissonantly caring by being fully present while challenging each other; and inviting personal and collective transformation through this friction.

This cyclical process where teachers momentarily suspend their judgement of students' views to later on engage in shared deliberation allows for students to develop a free flow of ideas that can question, enrich and challenge the teachers' thoughts. It allows learning from dissonance, but creates a space where more eloquent and justifiable articulations can be made, engenders opportunities to "question and be questioned simultaneously and, to rupture and be ruptured" (Davids & Waghid, 2017b, p. 10), and enables individuals to momentarily grow free from the weight of the thoughts and care of others, without ever being fully or permanently detached from them. A rhythm is thus set between reserving empathetic care and caring dissonance; and this rhythmic shift in focuses and attitudes contributes to develop an overall caring pedagogical encounter.

I believe that the concept of a pedagogy of rhythmic care is especially inspiring for music education. On the one hand, by momentarily withholding their opinion, music teachers would open up a space for students to develop their own artistic personality, while at the same time allowing for the possibility of new inspiring musics coming from the students to occur. Additionally, by temporarily reserving their artistic opinion, the teacher would prevent the risk of their artistic voice—potentially charismatic, passionate, and charged with the power imbalance that comes from being recognized as an expert by the students—over-impacting or masking the voices of the students. On the other hand, bringing challenge and dissonance to the pedagogical encounter rhythmically would still allow criticism and growth to happen. Teachers would still be able to impact the voices of the students once these are developed. At the same time, students would have the opportunity to challenge the teacher's thoughts—creating a more horizontal pedagogical space and helping the teachers grow—once their own unique musics and opinions have had time to be established. This brings a balance to music education where students learn from the expertise, artistry and technical prowess of teachers and other students, while still leaving space to develop their unique musicality and identity.

Ubuntu care: the self and the other

The African term ubuntu is complex, multilayered, and there is no clear agreement about its conceptualization (Bennett, 2023; Venter, 2004).[6] Waghid's particular conceptualization of 'ubuntu care' naturally builds upon the arguments presented in this article, and might therefore be within the reach of this text. Following these arguments, I will now introduce how Waghid's specific approach to 'ubuntu care' aligns, enriches and builds upon his and Freire's thoughts on education, as well as my interpretation of some of its potential to inspire extended paths for music education.

[6] Since Venter (2004) wrote about the vagueness of the term, conceptualizations of the term have developed and become more refined. For an updated extended list of references to relevant scholars in the field for further reading on a general understanding of ubuntu refer to e.g. Bennett (2023).

Closely related to the themes of attentive caring and dissonance, Waghid explores the notion of *ubuntu*—"an African dictum for human interdependence" (Waghid, 2020, p. 300)—that he establishes as a formulation of an ethic of care (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012, p. 6) and as a pedagogical philosophy to strive towards. To establish the pedagogical possibilities of ubuntu, Waghid (2020, p. 304) refers to three dimensions of the concept: (a) ubuntu as individuals having a voice to name and change the world, (b) ubuntu as co-belonging where people of "what-ever identity" share their common humanity to transform the world, and (c) ubuntu as attentiveness to others and otherness, in relation to dialogue and deliberation. These dimensions resonate with some of the themes already introduced in this article.

Waghid's depiction of ubuntu centres the importance of access, diversity and mutuality. It highlights how naming and transforming the world is a process that demands reflection, participation and dialogue by all. It forwards the importance of attentiveness and openness to diverse voices, embracing dissonance and deliberation, no matter how dissonant and uncomfortable these voices might turn out to be (Waghid, 2019). Furthermore, it inspires people to be caring and attentive in these deliberations, considering power, rhythmically exposing oneself to others and encountering others in their otherness, without appropriating it to "encounter the difference of their humaneness so as to inform and enrich our own" (Waghid, 2020, p. 305).

As depicted by Waghid, ubuntu has the potential to accentuate the importance of access, participation, openness to diversity, and considerations of power in music education. It highlights the right for all voices, in their diverse musical forms, to engage in deliberation regardless of how diverse, uncomfortable or dissonant these turn out to be. For music education, Waghid's dimensions of ubuntu care might aid in recognizing the musical voices of all individuals as important and valuable, no matter how much they might diverge from normative understandings of musical or excellent. It could also help in acknowledging the agency and need for all voices to enrich music education by co-naming and co-transforming its practices, ways and goals, including those voices that may be currently marginalised or excluded from the conversation; and regardless of how much these voices might differ from the established practices and understandings in the field. Finally, ubuntu care in music education could aid in deconstructing normative understandings of hierarchies and excellence in music by embracing attentiveness to power, diversity, and otherness as a necessity to combat marginalizations, inequalities, and stagnation in the field.

In this way, Waghid's ubuntu care reminds us that finding a path forward for music education is a collective endeavour—and not only the privilege and responsibility of practitioners, students, or scholars within the field. It inspires respect and value for different perspectives in music, and for diverse forms of being musical, while promoting awareness of the structures and ways that enable or hinder these musicalities from being heard—both inside and outside the music classroom. It encourages people to "encounter others in their

otherness" (2020, p. 305), utilising these differences as teaching experiences, and as possibilities for self-transcendence (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012, p. 13).

Inspiring a reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care

I would like to conclude by proposing how the pedagogies of these authors could come together in what I will conceptualize as a 'reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care'. This concept emphasizes reciprocity by promoting a strong focus on teachers and students coming into a pedagogical encounter to both give and receive in order to develop themselves and others. It draws on Waghid's notion of rhythmic care by encouraging participants to temporarily embrace different roles and pedagogical positions, caringly and rhythmically considering the power dynamics that will still be in place. A reciprocal music pedagogy of rhythmic care seeks to embrace the differences of others in their otherness to collaboratively create a situated practice that may fluidly adapt and grow; that embraces loyalty to the known, but where everything can be challenged and negotiated to match new ideas and the ever-changing needs of people and contexts; and where agency, deliberation, dialogue, and dissent are embraced as tools for collective growth.

For teachers, this approach to music education foregrounds the importance of entering the classroom not only with a desire to give to students, but also with an openness to grow and gain for themselves. Inspired by Waghid's use of dissonance as a positive term, I describe this as a self-ish pedagogy—one that emphasizes teachers' care for their own pedagogical and artistic development alongside their care for students and their musical growth. Rather than seeing self-development as separate from or in conflict with care for students, teachers' commitment to their own artistic and personal growth can synergize with their care for students' development. This reciprocal approach can help create more horizontal spaces in which both teachers and students are present, invested, and immersed in shared learning during the pedagogical encounter (Waghid, 2019).

Inspired by the concept of rhythmic care, this pedagogy invites teachers to bring their own practices into the room and place them in dialogue with students' practices: at times, presenting and standing by their own musical perspectives; at other times, withholding judgments and remaining open to transformation through encounters with students' musics and ideas. By moving between these positions to both teach and learn, teachers dissonantly care for themselves and for students by challenging and being challenged by the students, respecting them as equally valuable voices to support shared learning. Through these reciprocal processes, students' growth may support the growth of teachers, and vice versa. As their voices develop through shared pedagogical encounters, both students and teachers offer one another increasingly richer perspectives to learn with. This approach underscores that everyone's practices are incomplete and continually evolving in a process

of becoming, emphasizing the importance of carefully engaging with others' voices as a way to resist stagnation. It positions students' uniqueness and otherness as assets for collective growth regardless of experience or expertise. In doing so, a reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care may help challenge fixed teacher-student roles and disrupt banking models of education.

For students, this pedagogical approach may support a stronger sense of belonging as valuable individuals and artists, fostering greater agency, contributing to deeper learning, commitment, and well-being (Allen et al., 2021). Being eagerly listened to, and being actively learned from, by those who they consider experts—or in line with Freire and Waghid's thoughts, being shown care and respect by the teachers—might teach students openness, and humility, and motivate them to be fully present in pedagogical encounters. Such recognition could help cultivate increasingly horizontal learning spaces that not only inspire students to develop their unique artistic identities, but also prompt them to exert agency and challenge established norms, allowing new ideas to emerge. Having new voices that are heard—and that dare to dissent—is essential for reviewing learned oppression and resisting stagnation in both artistic and educational realms. These shifts may benefit students individually, while also pushing the musical field forward toward what is yet to come. Furthermore, having the agency and responsibility to "name their world" and to be active participants not only in their own education, but also in their teachers' growth, might contest modes of education as a capitalist transaction in which students merely purchase knowledge from teachers (Rinholm et al., 2023). Instead, it positions music education as a shared and collaborative endeavor in which teachers and students co-develop their own and collective musicalities.

From a more practical perspective, I suggest that a reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care could be applied to enrich various Nordic music education contexts. While conservative approaches to music education have been, and are viewed as problematic in Nordic countries (Sandberg-Jurström & Monica Lindgren, 2022), research shows that hierarchical master-apprentice traditions remain dominant, and often continue to shape music-teacher education (Christophersen et al., 2023; Rinholm et al., 2023), as well as higher music education institutions (Bull, 2019; Ramstedt, 2023). Often described as "conservative, prescriptive and change resistant" (Christophersen et al., 2023, p. 8), these pedagogies are self-perpetuating. They may promote narrow understandings of musical excellence, constrain music educators' capacity to envision change (Christophersen et al., 2023; Rinholm et al., 2023), and even enable marginalizations and abuse (Ramstedt, 2023). Because these hierarchical pedagogies are embedded in the institutions that prepare future educators and musicians (e.g., Christophersen et al., 2023; Rinholm et al., 2023), their influence may extend across many music education contexts.

A reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care, and the thoughts of Freire and Waghid that it draws from, might offer a constructive alternative to challenge the aforementioned issues,

and complement practices in these contexts. First, by highlighting master-apprentice traditions as colonial forms of education, it challenges their perceived universality and repositions them as one option among many. As a situated, dialogic pedagogy that embraces dissonance and deliberation, it invites both teachers and students to reflect on, question, and transform these inherited norms. In doing so, this pedagogy supports new visions of change and the development of alternative practices, offering additional ways to potentially resist the self-replication of conservative pedagogies within change-resistant contexts. Second, a reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care seeks to embody the deconstruction of narrow understandings of excellence. A co-learning model in which teachers enter the room not only prepared to teach but also eager to learn from students destabilizes hierarchies not only in pedagogy, but also in how knowledge and excellence are defined. By valuing the encounter with diverse voices as essential to artistic and pedagogical growth, it invites more inclusive and pluralistic understandings of music. Importantly, it may do so in a way that is compatible with the values of teaching craft and excellence that often exist in many higher music education institutions, just demanding subjectivity, plurality, and diversity in co-negotiating the definition of these words, and the methods to reach them. Finally, seeking to foster increasingly horizontal learning environments, attending to power dynamics and imbalances in teaching, and offering tools to work through these dynamics, a reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care may contribute to preventing some of the marginalisation and abuses that still often surface in these music education contexts (Ramstedt, 2023).

On the other hand, hierarchical teaching approaches might be dominant in some contexts, but are not universal. Nordic practitioners and academics are already trying to actively contest and transform hierarchical or disempowering traditions and practices. Dialogue, reflection and distributed agency are gradually being implemented, even in traditionally change-resilient contexts (e.g. Ski-Berg & Stabell, 2024). Calls for embracing disruption, loosening teacher/student dynamics, collaboration and co-creation are sprouting in research and in practice, from music-teacher education and higher music education (e.g. Christophersen et al., 2023; Rinholm et al., 2023; Ski-Berg & Stabell, 2024), to youth centres and community-based inclusive music practices (Boeskov, 2023). Scholars and practitioners call for alternative pedagogies that "are fundamentally different from the master-apprentice approach and its associated hierarchical notions of expertise that position the educator as the gatekeeper of knowledge and skills … monitored and developed through experimentation and collaboration … not only tolerating, but also actively seeking discomfort" (Christophersen et al., 2023, p. 21). A reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care aligns closely with such values. Even if this pedagogy demands flexibility and reflection—and therefore resists proposing fixed, one-size-fits-all solutions—it may offer inspiration for music educators working in different contexts and seeking to answer these calls.

The principles of a reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care could, for example, inspire music-facilitators working in youth centres to more actively share their own musical practices and opinions with their young participants. This might contribute to position participants as peers to learn with, contesting hierarchical understandings of excellence, while promoting experimentation, co-creation, and collaboration.

This pedagogy might similarly hold potential to inspire teachers working within higher-music education contexts to experiment with rhythmic approaches to dissonant deliberation. This may offer additional pedagogical tools to navigating criticality, care and power, supporting the shared development of pedagogical spaces that seek to caringly embrace and work through discomfort.

A reciprocal pedagogy of rhythmic care might also inspire researchers and scholars in the academic field. This pedagogical stance supports embracing participatory approaches to research that might include under-represented voices in knowledge creation in order to expand criticality and introduce new perspectives that could challenge stagnation and unlearn oppression. It forwards the need of researching *with* others to actively disrupt cycles where practices and knowledge are shaped by those trained and socialized within the very colonial systems they seek to contest.

Conclusion

As stated by Bradley (2012) "A decolonizing philosophy avoids presenting itself as a source of answers, or a substitute for other's philosophical engagements. Rather, it displays an ongoing and relentless curiosity about all forms of knowledge production, including those within music education and including its own" (p. 694). With this text, I have not aimed to give a fixed solution of how music education should be carried out, neither have I attempted to present one universal interpretation of the thoughts of these two authors, or how their thoughts could be extrapolated to all music education contexts; but to invite the reader into a process of exploring how the works of these two prolific scholars could hopefully and curiously inspire music education to move forward. The "journey to oppose undesirable practices" (Waghid, 2023, p. 184) through decolonial education resonates with current discussion regarding social justice in the arts. However, knowledge cannot be categorised under just one umbrella term. The thoughts of these decolonial scholars, read through a 'decolonial' perspective, not only expand 'social justice in music conversations' with under-represented and enriching perspectives, but also remind that inherited pedagogies, and the limitations and challenges they may bring, are never universal. No matter how extended or resilient to change they might be, learned educational values and methods are just a contingent few, amongst the possible many.

Freire and Waghid inspire us to remain collectively self-reflective and aware through dialogue with the other. Through criticality and deliberation, they inspire to collaboratively look for a balance between openness and scepticism, learning and teaching, and giving and receiving in pedagogical encounters that foregrounds how caring for the students, for societies, for music, and for one's self-growth and well-being are synergistic and unavoidably interconnected. Their pedagogies might transform being a person, a teacher, a student, an artist and a researcher, into more sustainable hybrid complimentary categories, where teaching becomes an invaluable, always-ongoing, learning and researching tool to develop as an individual and an artist through dialogue and connection with the other, bringing added meaning to teaching, and inspiring us to think of being an artist, a teacher/student and a researcher as a fluid, synergistic, always unfinished, process of becoming.

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Article 3: Rethinking “musical excellence” from a decolonial perspective: Disruptive autobiographical experiences among doctoral scholars

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Rethinking "musical excellence" from a decolonial perspective: Disruptive autobiographical experiences among doctoral scholars

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Abstract
This collaborative autoethnography was developed by recent doctoral students in music from Southern Europe, Eurasia, East Asia, and North America, along with a professor based in Northern Europe. Our primary research question is *"What can disruptive autobiographical experiences teach us about the implications of the decolonization movement for redefining "musical excellence" in higher music education?"* The co-authors interviewed each other for their respective personal narratives on this theme, then collaboratively coded, analyzed and developed their results and interpretations. Four sub-questions served as prompts: (1) What was your gateway into music and how did the music learning-tradition that you were exposed to affect your development as a musician? (2)

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In what ways was the concept of "musical excellence" a part of your (early) development as a musician? (3) How does the concept of "musical excellence" impact how being an "artist" is defined by you and people around you? (4) How did this perception of "what is an artist" affect your musical path (and even how others perceive your career)? We share our findings and discuss implications in terms of possible innovations to higher music education, definitions of "musical excellence," approaches to evaluation, and the role of competition in education.

Keywords
Artistry, autoethnography, competition, decolonization, excellence, higher education

Introduction

According to an entry for Decolonization in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, "decolonization and its place in higher education are a subject of significant interest in both social movements and scholarly critique across the globe" (Stein & de Andreotti, 2017, p. 370). Indeed, the *decolonization* movement is rapidly gaining interest in a variety of social science and humanities fields worldwide, particularly as scholars reflect on how higher education may better reflect the needs of a changing society. The authors of the above entry define *decolonization* in education as:

> an umbrella term for diverse efforts to resist the distinct but intertwined processes of colonization and racialization, to enact transformation and redress in reference to the historical and ongoing effects of these processes, and to create and keep alive modes of knowing, being, and relating that these processes seek to eradicate (Stein & de Andreotti, 2017, p. 370).

Since much of the world was colonized by Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries, higher education in general, and many higher music education programs in particular, still tend to emphasize Eurocentric and even elitist views of music that were inherited during a colonial period, with relatively little space offered to other ways of understanding and making music. Music education philosopher Deborah Bradley was early to note the relevance of the *decolonization* movement for music education more than a decade ago (Bradley, 2012), and the implications for global music history studies were also soon included in a research handbook (Hebert & McCollum, 2014). Since that time, studies have demonstrated various ways the characteristic concepts and methods of decolonization can be applied to music education and research, including in higher education contexts (Chávez & Skelchy, 2019; Hess, 2015; Kallio, 2020; Prest & Goble, 2021; Rakena, 2019; Rosabal-Coto, 2019; Sandoval, 2016; Stanton, 2018). Decolonization is also prompting efforts to reconsider such fields as intercultural musicianship and philosophy of education from a more global perspective (Hebert, 2023; Östersjö et al., 2023), and is increasingly a concern for policy discussions in higher music education in Europe and elsewhere (AEC, 2021).

The decolonization movement is understood to offer potentially fruitful opportunities to critique existing practices and reflect on alternative ways of defining "musical excellence" in higher music education. As Yusef Waghid explains, "a decolonized notion of philosophy of education would encourage educators and students to be reflective about themselves and remain open to their encounters with others in the world" (Waghid, 2023, p. 179). A decolonial perspective suggests that further studies are needed to clearly illustrate forms of enduring coloniality in situations that shape musicians in the context of higher education, including reflections on what is (and is *not*) valued, and what might be changed to enable a more inclusive, robust and comprehensive approach to

higher music education. In this research, the authors–recent doctoral students and doctoral graduates in the field of music– collectively aim through *decolonial self-reflection* to learn from "disruptive" autobiographical experiences, specifically, memorable events that served as defining moments in the establishment of their own professional identities as performing scholars. Our focus on *disruptive experiences*–sometimes even called "epiphanies" (Eury & Hawk, 2023; Rapley, 2018; Yacek & Gary, 2020)–resonates with what educationist Andrea English has described as "discontinuity in learning" (English, 2007, p. 133). Indeed, we see such "disruptions" as insightful occurrences during one's development in which new realizations about the nature and value of education as well as problematic issues in educational approaches, become more apparent.

Background and Purpose

This article developed from an interest in contributing to the growing corpus of research and scholarship on how higher music education may become more relevant and effective. In recent years, researchers have endeavored to develop a clearer understanding of how musicians develop artistic expertise (Rink et al., 2017), aimed to clarify intercultural notions of "musicality" (O'flynn, 2005), and proposed ways of restructuring higher music education for improved inclusivity and equitable outcomes (Sarath et al., 2017; Stepniak, 2022; Thomson et al., 2023). Researchers have also endeavored to devise more appropriate and effective ways of teaching diverse musical traditions and practices in higher education (Coppola et al., 2020) as well as decolonized methods for experimental intercultural music projects (Östersjö et al., 2023).

Inspired by the notion of decolonization, as well as value of reflecting on disruptive experiences, this article shares findings derived from collaborative auto-ethnographic writings developed by recent doctoral students and doctoral graduates in music from four different regions of the world: Southern Europe (Spain), Eurasia (Russia), East Asia (China/Australia), and North America (Canada), in cooperation with a professor based in Northern Europe (Norway). Our primary research question is ***"What can disruptive autobiographical experiences teach us about the implications of the decolonization movement for redefining "musical excellence" in higher music education?"***

The co-authors of this article first met in June 2022 at the Bergen Summer Research School where they were part of a course titled "Inequalities in Higher Education and the Arts." The first four authors were among the 109 PhD candidates admitted to one of the six courses at this research school from all parts of the world, representing 40 different nationalities. The authors became acquainted through discussion of shared readings on decolonization, and engage here in "decolonial reflections," by which we mean reconsideration of Eurocentric educational foundations and practices (Kingsbury, 2010; Nettl, 1995), in light of decolonial critiques, including non-western educational philosophies and related arguments (Hebert, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2020). Our objectives were to consider how the notion of "'decolonial imagination' that combines social and cognitive justice with existential justice" (Fúnez-Flores, 2022) might apply to our own "disruptive" autobiographical experiences, surmising that collaborative autoethnography (CAE) would be an ideal method for development of our study.

Method

Methodology

Autoethnography is a reflexive methodology that is increasingly accepted in the field of music education and may be understood as "an autobiographical genre that connects the personal to the

cultural, social, and political" (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009, p. 7). It has been adopted by researchers from a range of disciplines, including ethnomusicology, to introspectively explore both personal and professional lives in music. Our inspiration to employ autoethnography derives from the work of Carolyn Ellis (e.g. Ellis et al., 2011), as well as notable ethnomusicology monographs such as Rice's (1994) *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music*, Faulkner's (2013) *Icelandic Men and Me: Sagas of Singing, Self and Everyday Life*, and various other publications that model this approach (e.g. Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; Gilbertson & Hebert, 2021). Autoethnographers both "retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis et al., 2011, n.p.). Autoethnography thereby enables scholars to use data from "their own life stories as situated in sociocultural context in order to gain an understanding of society through the unique lens of self" (Chang, 2018, pp. 6–7).

Participants

The co-authors are a diverse group of performing scholars from diverging musical and cultural backgrounds:

Lu Liu is a China-trained *pipa* performer and Australia-trained scholar who received her PhD in ethnomusicology from one of Australia's leading universities in 2019. She now works as a university lecturer in Australia, where she teaches, conducts research, and directs the Chinese Music Ensemble as well as the Non-Western Instruments Principal Study Programs.

Sergio Garcia-Cuesta is a PhD fellow and Lektor at one of Denmark's music conservatoires. With degrees in rhythmic music, jazz performance, and a Master degree in Music Education—from Spain, Ireland and Denmark, respectively—his teaching and research interests include accessibility, meaningfulness, care and feeling of belonging within musical practices.

Laura Chambers is a classically trained flutist who works as a soloist, orchestral and chamber musician in a variety of musical genres with ensembles across North America. In addition to her performances, workshop leading and private teaching, she is a PhD candidate at one of Canada's leading universities, where she researches the recontextualization and sustainability of classical music in today's world.

Sergej Tchirkov is an accordionist, curator and researcher based in Bergen, Norway. Educated at the St. Petersburg Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, he lectured on contemporary music at the Moscow Conservatory and held the position of deputy artistic director at the Studio for New Music before moving to Bergen. He is currently teaching and pursuing a PhD project in artistic research at one of Norway's main universities.

David G. Hebert is a full professor of music with one of Norway's largest university music education programs and simultaneously holds academic posts in other countries. The other four authors who collaborated for this autoethnography–current doctoral students and recent doctoral graduates–met through one of his online doctoral courses.

Procedures

Our original data source for this collaborative autoethnography (CAE) consists of written representations of personal memories from the four participant co-authors' lived experience. Each of the four participant co-authors wrote about their own experiences, and each interviewed one other co-author to help uncover and document their respective personal narratives in relation to our primary research question, and a fifth author (professor) later collaborated in the analysis and write-up of the article. We agreed on the following four sub-questions as prompts for the interviews and

narrative development: (1) What was your gateway into music and how did the music learning-tradition that you were exposed to affect your development as a musician? (2) In what ways was the concept of "musical excellence" a part of your (early) development as a musician? (3) How does the concept of "musical excellence" impact how being an "artist" is defined by you and people around you? (4) How did this perception of "what is an artist" affect your musical path (and even how others perceive your career)? The entire process took nearly 1 year. From December 2022, months after the course where they first met ended, five of the doctoral scholars from the course began meeting online (Zoom videoconferencing) about once every 2 months. First, they developed self-reflections to share with each other, then by Spring 2023 each interviewed another co-author to generate additional data. Soon the professor was invited to join the writing project and encouraged the doctoral scholars to develop both more extensive holistic biographical sketches and episodic narratives of notable memories from their musical development as additional data sources.

Data Coding and Analysis

In collaboration with Hebert, we used descriptive coding and inductive thematic analysis to identify specific statements and phrases from the corpus of both (a) interview transcriptions (each of us interviewing another co-author) and (b) autobiographical reflections (both holistic and episodic narratives) that were ultimately grouped into themes represented by this article's subheadings. We emphasized selection of interview excerpts that we interpreted as revealing both diverse contexts and unifying examples of underlying values attributed to the culture of higher music education. Like other CAEs in music, our analysis was developed "dialogically" with extensive mutual discussion and revisions, which is in "contrast to a single-person autoethnography" (Gilbertson & Hebert, 2021).

Interpretation, Ethics and Collaboration

We note that "CAE emerged in response to concerns about colonialism," and it aims to challenge the norms of research practice and representation by disrupting canonical narratives and breaking the silence around understudied, hidden and often sensitive topics (Adams et al., 2021, p. 41). The factor of "power sharing," as identified in the book *Collaborative Autoethnography* distinguishes CAE from traditional (and colonial) research practices by eschewing the hierarchical power imbalances between "researcher" and "subject," thereby aiming to place all members of the research team on equal footing, which has ethical advantages (Chang et al., 2013, p. 28). We agreed that individuals or institutions would remain anonymous and collectively scrutinized the data to ensure nothing was revealed that might raise ethical issues. We aimed in this article to remain true to the egalitarian spirit of autoethnography described here while collaborating as co-authors situated in distant locations, most of whom have only ever met online. Still, life changes inevitably led to some complications during the writing process. Two authors became mothers while codeveloping this article, and this and other extenuating factors led one author to withdraw from the project by the end of 2023. However, the other new parent remained determined to continue despite formidable time management challenges. Ultimately, the result was a gender balance of two women and two men who co-developed this article along with the professor from the online course where they all first met.

Results

We now proceed to our narratives of disruption and musical excellence, followed by analysis and interpretation of the results. We conclude with recommendations concerning ways that higher

music education may benefit from decolonial critique by cultivating alternative methods and approaches. In a short article we cannot hope to convey the rich array of episodes in our narratives, but the selection offered here highlights the kinds of reflections shared by the authors.

Musical Upbringing

Regarding her musical upbringing, Chambers wrote:

> Beginning flute at the age of 4, I remember being drawn to the sound of the flute, and the way flutists seemingly spun air magically into this rich, round-smooth tone. My parents listened to instrumental classical music in our home, and I would spend hours imagining stories to go along with these soundtracks. The flute became the vessel through which I brought to life the stories and images in my head.

Liu shared a story of an important realization reached while a young music student:

> I still recall the cozy army barracks where Mei Yu taught me, filled with the comforting scent of freshly brewed tea. Her fingers moved gracefully across the *pipa* strings as she demonstrated intricate melodies. Mei Yu was not only a talented teacher but also an elegant performer. One particularly cold evening during our lesson, as I struggled to master a challenging passage with the right hand saoxian (forceful strum), from the martial piece "The Conqueror Disarmed" ("*Bawang Xiejie*," "霸王卸甲"), Mei Yu leaned in toward me and said, "this is the first piece that will take you into the world of the *pipa*, where you'll tell stories with every stroke of your fingers." It was a profound epiphany for me, as I realized that the *pipa* was more than just an instrument; it was a vessel for Chinese stories.

However, not all our stories revealed positive early-age experiences with music. Garcia-Cuesta shared his perceived lack of musical skill while singing in choir as a 10-year-old:

> The teacher asked me to sing alone. I produced a random pitch (I could never anticipate the sound that would come out when I sang) and then tried to adjust it to match what I heard. When I saw the face of the teacher, I knew I was wrong, so I tried to keep moving the pitch up and down with no success. . . I could hear the whispers and giggles of the other children . . . I cannot remember what he recommended, but I remember the faces of the other children, how their smirks became louder, how some of them looked away in shame.

Systematic Training

Chambers chronicles how she

> . . . followed the traditional path for classical music education in North America (. . .) centred around weekly private lessons with a master teacher that evaluated [her] progress and proficiency. It also included regular participation in competitions and graded examinations based on a syllabus of standardized criteria for musical "excellence."

Tchirkov also shared a vivid recollection:

> The competition's regulations stipulated that the program for the second round must include at least one virtuoso piece, among other compositions. Together with my teacher, we selected the renowned "La Chasse" by Paganini that Liszt arranged for the accordion . . . a staple virtuoso piece that fits the

> requirement of a "virtuoso composition" often demanded by competitions. As time passed, my performance reached a level of brilliance, polish, and unwavering stability that met the stringent competition standards.
>
> However, amidst this pursuit of technical perfection, I began to sense a subtle loss of spontaneity, fragility, and the unique charm of a live concert performance. I grappled with the paradox that while achieving technical excellence and stability in a piece is a significant accomplishment, it can sometimes come at the cost of the genuine emotional connection between the performer and the audience. It was during this phase that I first started contemplating the elusive concept of perfection in music, what truly constitutes musical excellence, and who or what confers upon us the authority to label it as such.

Tchirkov's experience shares some features with Liu's intensive *pipa* training in a Chinese conservatory, with its institutionalized emphasis on technical proficiency, often contrasting with the approaches to teaching and learning associated with earlier generations. Liu wrote:

> Contemporary *pipa* music arises from a long and rich musical heritage. Yet it depends upon the concept of *chuancheng* 传承 (inheritance or transmission). Oral transmission is the traditional way of teaching the instrument and still plays an important part in modern ways of teaching. Through it, students often come to imitate the teacher's artistic personality – drawing on understandings gained through systematic and face-to-face tuition mostly conducted at the teacher's home. Teachers are like parents in the traditional way . . . I had seven wonderful *pipa* teachers (. . .) I remembered that to be able to master one single right-hand technique, [Professor Zhang] would stay in the practice room and play along with me repeatedly over a hundred times. Up to a point, I felt that I completely lost the connection with the instrument and *pipa* music itself. I felt that I was just a music technician; I would never produce the fast notes as fast as my teacher, and I would never have the power of a male performer . . . Most importantly I lost the "getaway" feeling I had when I first fell in love with the *pipa*!

Chambers also spoke to her traditional and systematic training as a young classical musician in Canada: "I started formal lessons at around 6 years old. As I learned to read music, I also internalized an understanding that part of doing 'a good job,' was correctly executing the rhythm, notes and markings on the page." However, she began to see the situation differently through some challenging experiences: "After I left the institution and began life as a professional performer and teacher, I began to deeply examine my relationship with musical excellence and these standards – to consider . . . how many of these standards were imposed upon me by the systems and institutions in which I was educated."

Ambivalence and Reflection

Garcia-Cuesta offered the following reflection from his Bachelor degree studies:

> My teacher told me that with my current level I would fail ear-training, and I would have to repeat the third year of my bachelor in jazz performance in Dublin (. . .) I had no money left to live an extra year in Ireland, and no job that I could take while studying full-time would be enough to repair and survive even for another semester. All my effort would have been for nothing. The worst part is I knew that even if I could somehow afford to stay and pay for one more year, I would most likely not be able to pass that subject even if I tried a million more times. I had worked really hard on improving, I had spent eight hours a day (beyond the time used for lessons, piano practice, etc.) just trying to practice and improve my ear training but nothing had worked (. . .) as he said that I would fail, I could see in his eyes the same look of pity that my choir teacher gave me years ago. I had a knot in my throat as I asked "what can I do?" He just said, "Maybe it is for the best. . . Maybe music is just not for you." It felt like a betrayal (. . .) that very same week I had received amazing praises from critics for my music in a videogame whose soundtrack I

> had composed.. . . now this university was saying that they would not recognize me as a musician because I did not conform to whatever they thought an excellent musician should be, because I was cut from a different cloth than what they deemed ideal . . .

Looking back on this experience, Garcia-Cuesta notes how external standards of excellence can clash not only with one's own perceived artistic excellence and enjoyment, but also cause one to question institutional legitimacy. In this case, his self-perceived ability as a composer aligned with the feedback from the reviewers of his compositions but clashed with the rejection from the conservatory, creating ambivalent feelings that transformed into confusion, dissonance, and disruption.

Despite her love for both music and the flute, by the time she reached doctoral studies, Chambers sensed some ambivalence about the emphases and methods in higher education:

> I want to clarify that I do not view my classical music education entirely through a negative lens. Being a musician who was willing to continually strive and often meet the standards set before me boosted my self-esteem throughout my childhood. As a misfit young person seeking belonging, these standards also created a defined "in-group" through which I was able to feel acceptance and connection — all of us bonded by a shared experience and understanding of striving for similar goals in the same system.

Regarding cultural identity and *folk music* traditions, Tchirkov mentioned the following:

> I am often asked about folk music in Russia. My answer is that I have no idea about what counts as folk music in Russia. The reason is simple – there are many nations living in this part of the world, and they have their own traditions, which cannot be generalized as "Russian folk music." On the other hand, there is a certain consensus. I believe, this consensus draws from (1) oversimplification and reduction of the variety of local traditions, and (2) Standards imposed by nearly 70 years of the Soviet Union. And this is only within one country, even if it is a big one! I am also skeptical towards unreflective promotion of what counts as underrepresented culture today. The key word is "unreflective" by which I mean the danger of labeling marginalized or underrepresented groups and claiming that one's identity is limited by association. The question of identification is a very personal and individual one, which means that the standards of excellence are also individual.

Discussion

Through this CAE study we were able to obtain rich descriptions of the experiences of four doctoral students from four subcontinents, all of whom are either nearing, or have already reached, the end of musical studies at the doctoral level.

Acceptance and Belonging, Despite Intercultural (Mis)Understandings

For multiple authors, there have been issues with finding acceptance in the academic music community and sensing that they are viewed as "belonging" in higher music education, and some have even taken extended breaks from music studies to explore other possible careers and life paths. Moreover, there are enduring issues in how music performances are adjudicated in this context and the attitudes associated with how certain individuals come to be recognized as extraordinary talents (Zoanetti & Champion, 2016). "Belonging" can be defined as being accepted, respected, and valued, or as "the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences" (Allen et al., 2021). Belonging is not only an important aspect of education, and artistic participation, but even a fundamental human need. Moreover, belonging does not happen in a vacuum, for it "is facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences

of the social milieu, which dynamically interact with the individual's character, experiences, culture, identity, and perceptions" (Kern et al., 2020, p. 709).

As Niknafs explains, an ideal shared among many professionals is that "music education is a lifestyle, a positive way of thinking about the world: loving the music but loving the people even more—not a thing to do but a thing to be" (Niknafs, 2020, p. 3). While speaking about a significant ensemble performance in her recent professional life, Chambers noted how through performing finally without a preoccupation with perfection, her "feelings of accomplishment were much more collective than individual – I was proud of us, of the group for persevering, for what we had created and for what we had been able to offer to the members of this community." Chambers's story also showcases how expectations of competence and skill can turn what were freeing and positive musical encounters into disruptive un-belonging experiences. In reference to the experience of her final undergraduate recital, a performance which she had felt was a success, only to receive the opposite critique from the jury As Chambers recounted: "I questioned what this meant about my prospects as a professional musician — that my first impression of that evening had been so far from the experts in the room. I struggled to make sense of that shock and dissonance. . ..it remains a sore spot in my memory." In contrast, Garcia-Cuesta's experiences showcase how lacking these normative competences to belong can produce marginalization, alienation and isolation in music education contexts: "I could hear the whispers and giggles of the other children, and I could hear in the way that the teacher scolded them, that I had done abnormally bad, that there was something to be ashamed of," leading to the kinds of feelings that could potentially even prevent a young person from pursuing a musical career: "because I did not conform to whatever they thought an excellent musician should be (. . .) because I could not hear what others could (. . .) I should just give up."

Multiple authors of this CAE report that the kind of music they perform (e.g. electronic music composition for videogames), or even their specific instrument (e.g. accordion, *pipa*, etc.) is not fully appreciated or well understood in the context of higher music education. Scholars worldwide are increasingly aware of the need to develop intercultural artistic practices with more diverse cultural content. One fruitful approach is Bartleet's (2016) exploration of the significance of *love* as a key concept in both theory and practice in the intercultural space, which sheds light on its role in fostering meaningful intercultural engagement. Liu's journey toward attaining a permanent academic role in Chinese music at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, was based on pioneering new intercultural understandings in unfamiliar settings. For years, Liu actively sought opportunities to foster dialog and dissolve boundaries through collaborations with colleagues, aiming to diversify the music canon and curriculum through intercultural exchange. As part of these efforts, she not only premiered new *pipa* works by contemporary Australian composers but also taught and mentored students from diverse backgrounds. This only came to Liu after periods of struggle and uncertainty:

> I returned to China where for the next six years I entered the business world. During this time, I removed myself from music and had absolutely nothing to do with the *pipa*. I wanted to have another life. After this long break from playing, I was able to be more objective about my involvement in music, released from the expectations of the conservatory. I was more relaxed, I started to play music from my heart, and for the first time I felt great enjoyment. I had no particular expectations and no longer cared about being judged by others. I felt free and performing became "play." I began to discover a true love of involvement in music and understand that music should come from the heart and not simply the hands (Liu, 2019).

Toward Revised Definitions of "Musical Excellence"

The common notion of excellence refers to "an inherently norm-based and merit-based concept" (Dai, 2013). The concept of excellence in music, when institutionalized, can often become disconnected from societal expectations (Gaunt et al., 2021), as well as from individual creative

aspirations (Bucura, 2021). Moreover, our stories also suggest a struggle in the experiences of developing musicians between: (1) a recognition that they are musically achieving something privately (often while "in the practice room") that is not fully recognized in the social or institutional spheres, and (2) a sense that the kinds of virtuosic technical musicianship that earn public recognition often differ from what brings personal fulfillment when musicking alone. Ethnomusicologist Killick (2006) developed a theory of "holicipation" that seeks to explain how solitary music making can be a fulfilling activity even without any need to communicate with an audience beyond oneself, yet we sense this is a rather uncommon way of thinking in higher music education, which causes us to reflect on how "musical excellence" is defined and promoted by institutions. Indeed, Chambers observed that eventually, once she finished her institutional training as a performer, that as she was able to "release my tight grip on the 'should be' and the 'correct way' – and push past the fear of not being able to meet what I had accepted as the playing standards for a 'great performance,' I began to feel free in a way (. . .) I muted my critical mind, I let go, I created, I connected, and I experienced joy."

Problems in Defining Excellence. Institutions tend to define excellence in a narrow and rigid way, often focusing on technical skills or professional standards (Dai, 2013). This limited definition may not align with the broader range of identities, values, and qualities that society deems important. As evidenced by Tchirkov: "One may be considered excellent within a certain set of standards, but those standards are only as powerful as the value you place on those who set them." This is echoed by Garcia-Cuesta's experience with university standards that made him think that the institution "would not recognize me as a musician because I did not conform to whatever they thought an excellent musician should be."

A related factor that often deeply impacts music education is the notion of *talent*. It has long been known that the common belief that exceptional musical talent is partly innate can bias the training a student receives (access, length, commitment level of supportive guidance) which can then deeply impact performance outcomes (Davidson et al., 1997). Those regarded as talented may benefit from a "halo effect" by which "impressions of the quality of a performance either overall, or against one subset of the criteria, unduly influence the scores assigned to subsequent criteria" (Zoanetti & Champion, 2016). Under such conditions, tiny imperfections in the work of those already viewed as "talented" will be overlooked as trivial and insignificant, even while the same imperfections are used as evidence of notable inadequacies when justifying why others are categorized as mediocre or "untalented."

Exclusion and Rigidity in Evaluation. The concept of excellence is often associated with notions like distinction, being the best, and exceeding normal expectations (Brusoni et al., 2014). If the criteria for excellence are exclusive or biased, certain groups and individuals may be marginalized (Pritchard et al., 2015). Artistic expectations often include diversity, equity, and inclusivity, which may not be adequately reflected in institutional measures of excellence. As Chambers notes, she was surprised "how different the aspects of music I valued were from those valued by my institution."

Institutions may use standardized metrics or rigid evaluation criteria that do not account for the evolving nature of individual and societal needs (Brophy, 2019). Chambers's example paints a vivid picture of the disappointment a musician can experience. When describing her final exam and the contrast between what she felt was a good performance and the negative evaluations from the jury, she writes, "the moments of beauty and freedom I had felt, seemed to fade away, and what was left was a highlight reel of every missed note, poorly executed rhythm, or memory slip." The feeling of isolation is also evident in Liu's description of her studies in Australia. Her example

illustrates how challenging it is to navigate a different cultural and institutional framework: ". . . with each misstep, I felt a growing sense of isolation." These examples highlight a disconnection between what institutions perceive as excellent and what individual students need. The societal perspective on the same problem is reflected in Garcia-Cuesta's experience of first performance of his composition, a happy and motivating one, not due to institutional standards but because he felt accepted by the audience: "As I looked behind and listened to the congratulations from the other students, I felt understood and accepted."

Overemphasis on Competition and Short-Term Outcomes. Institutions may prioritize short-term goals, such as rankings or immediate financial gains, over long-term development of students (Hazelkorn, 2015). Societal expectations often emphasize sustainability, ethical considerations, and community well-being, which may not be adequately considered in institutional measures of excellence. The long-term perspective is illustrated by Liu's example, where she reminisces about her initial experiences with the *pipa*. Thanks to her engaged teacher, she came to understand that a musical instrument is not merely a tool: "I realized that the *pipa* was more than just an instrument; it was a vessel for Chinese stories. At that point, I felt that I had a long and interesting journey ahead of me."

Institutions often emphasize competition, which can prevent exploration, creativity, and personal artistic development (Powell, 2023). This remains true, even while competitive events are also credited with raising public interest in musical achievement and may even be seen as inextricable from some forms of musical heritage (Hebert, 2019). Societal expectations tend to include a greater emphasis on cooperation and collective well-being, values that are increasingly supported by education in general. Clearly, competition embodies a complex paradox for higher music education, since its educational value is dubious, yet it is an obvious component of many professional music traditions. Chambers noted how she had "done well in competition and gained admission into youth training programs with students well above my age. Classical music was my superpower." In this case, positive results at competitions were empowering during her youth, although she later noticed more of the potentially negative aspects of competitive approaches.

Concluding Remarks

The decolonial critique of our CAE has determined that to ensure a more inclusive and responsive system, music institutions should regularly reassess their definitions and measures of "excellence." For example, the notion of excellence can be more reflectively contextualized depending on specific settings and situations (Bucura, 2021), as this may prevent "a lack of non-Western cultural representation, which equates to a significant cultural misalignment with wider society" (Chilvers & Liu, 2024, p. 4). Rakena (2019) describes the challenges of "training conservatory educated performers to be community music facilitators," a common problem would surely be less of an issue if higher music education was better contextualized in local communities (Hebert, 2010). Additionally, it is worth noting how the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) requires that "excellence" be understood as multidimensional, recognizing an array of contextual factors (Helseth et al., n.d.). To ensure individual creativity and align with societal values and expectations, the concept of excellence can also be reassessed in terms of focusing on artistic responsibility for creating a shared musical outcome (Gorton & Östersjö, 2016). We find that the notion "artistic citizenship" entails promising approaches in this regard that arguably call for deeper consideration in higher music education (Garcia-Cuesta, 2024).

As a limitation, we note that while technically not generalizable to a larger population, these cases nevertheless give us a clearer picture of some of the kinds of experiences that doctoral students in general may face in higher music education, particularly as we consider experiences and

impressions that are *shared* across the authors. On a hopeful note, these narratives showcase how un-belonging and disruptive experiences can be the spark that inspires a will for change. Our disruptive experiences collectively show how reflections on personal development can help teachers to understand a need to transform the world, which requires not only adapting existing systems and structures to become more inclusive but transforming them into structures that potentially would not have excluded in the first place. We anticipate future studies that similarly address these issues in other contexts, particularly the Global South, for which this CAE may serve as a useful basis for comparative reflection.

Author contributions

Lulu Liu: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing - original draft.
Sergio Garcia-Cuesta: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology, Writing - original draft.
Laura Chambers: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing - original draft.
Sergej Tchirkov: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing - original draft.
David G. Hebert: Methodology; Supervision; Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

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Article 4: Co-crafting Belonging through Participatory Action Research

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Artikkelit

Sergio Garcia Guesta

Co-crafting Belonging through Participatory Action Research

Introduction

This article shares the process and findings of a research collaboration with two main goals: (1) to develop knowledge about how music education practices might enable spaces in which participants increasingly experience belonging; and (2) to center the voices of participants as active agents in transforming their own experiences, the researched activities, and the broader field through the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Belonging may be defined as "the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 1). According to Allen et al. (2021), belonging is shaped by four interconnected dimensions: (1) having the *competencies* to belong, (2) having the *opportunities* to belong, (3) having the *motivations* to belong, and (4) having the *perceptions* of belonging. Recent research highlights belonging as a key factor in shaping whether musical experiences empower individuals and support long-term musical engagement—or conversely, lead to disruptive experiences and detachment (Liu et al., 2024). Participatory and co-creative approaches may foster belonging by allowing individuals to engage with music in ways that feel relevant and meaningful to them (Carson & Westvall, 2024). However, this kind of engagement often requires a process of "re-learning", moving beyond familiar roles or comfort zones to discover new ways of practicing and teaching music (Carson & Westvall, 2016).

Weary of how well-meaning efforts to expand inclusion might result in "one-way processes of normalization, where the marginalized are included, empowered, and taken into the center which remains more or less stagnated" (Laes & Westerlund, 2017, p. 42), this article explores music education initiatives with inclusion-oriented goals through the framework of belonging. This multidimensional lens seeks to enable a broad and nuanced exploration that centers participants' multiple and subjective experiences—potentially allowing them to explore how to meaningfully take part in music education on their own terms.

To further support this aim, the study draws on Participatory Action Research (PAR), not to research *about* but *with* participants—co-creating knowledge that values their plural and personal perspectives. In line with recent PAR work (e.g. Onsrud et al., 2022; Timonen, 2020), this approach seeks to develop "counter-narratives to dominant and normative discourses in music education" (Laes & Westerlund, 2017, p. 42), by enabling participants to take active roles in shaping both the research and the pedagogical practices they engage with.

Collaborators

This article was developed in collaboration with participants from two music initiatives in Spain, from September to December 2023:[1]

Canto Abierto (C.A): Described as "an artistic project for people with intellectual disabilities within a normalized space" (Canto Abierto, n.d.), this choir includes around 40 adult singers and had been running for over 5 years prior to our research collaboration. It publicly performs concerts multiple times a year and has been featured on radio and TV. During the three months of our research collaboration its facilitators combined a diverse range of exercises: from preparing the concerts and working on the technique of their sing-

ers, to improvisation exercises—both singing and using the body as percussion—, movement and breathing exercises—at times led by facilitators and at times by the singers—, as well as musical games.

Repercusion San Cristobal (R.S.C): "A percussion project that aims to bring music closer to a sector of society that faces major difficulties in accessing culture and education" (Repercusion San Cristobal, n.d.). This weekly cajón workshop engages a multicultural group of 4 to 10 teenagers without previous formal musical training, and had been running for a year before the research collaboration. During the research collaboration the workshop took a hands-on approach to learning cajón, teaching participants through improvisation and call-and-response exercises, integrating oral explanations into these practical exercises to build students' musical knowledge, and connecting the learnt rhythms to popular songs chosen by both facilitators and students.

Research-Facilitator (RF): Garcia-Cuesta is a music educator, researcher, and lecturer at one of Denmark's conservatoires. Their research interests include collaboratively exploring access and belonging within participatory musical practices. During the research collaboration, in addition to engaging in the research process, they joined the initiatives by singing or playing the cajón alongside other participants, and occasionally supporting facilitators—for instance, by playing the piano during warmups.

Methodology

Researching through Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR is a research methodology that empowers those with embodied knowledge of a subject to explore it, develop knowledge about it, and act to change it from within (Kemmis et al. 2014; Lenette, 2022). It challenges research/researched dichotomies through non-linear, holistic and iterative approaches to inquiry that include: 1) "a shared process of co-participation between researchers and participants to co-construct knowledge"; 2) "the promotion of self- and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change"; and, 3) "the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process" (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1).

We approach PAR not as a fixed set of linear steps, but as a flexible and context-responsive framework—one that "braids" together processes of exploration, reflection, and action (Kemmis et al., 2014; Lenette, 2022; McIntyre, 2008). Thus, our implementation of PAR became a "living dialectical process", shaped by ongoing "shared criticality," "dialogue," and "collective reflection" (McIntyre, 2008, p. 24). These collaborative dynamics enabled us to continually re-engage with and reframe methodological choices, ethical considerations, and our research goals as the work unfolded.

Due to the evolving and non-linear nature of PAR, fully capturing its ethical and methodological complexity often exceeds the scope of an empirical article. As Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest, researchers must carefully choose what to include, based on what feels honest and transparent to them. Within these constraints, our application of PAR took the following general shape:

The process began with us—RF and the participants—introducing ourselves. RF presented different examples, common practices, and possible implementations of PAR—placing emphasis on the ethical challenges often associated with this methodology (see Lenette, 2022; Kemmis, 2014). We raised questions, engaged in critical discussions, and began discussing how to move forward in reciprocal ways that might feel safe and comfortable for everyone involved.

Following this initial meeting, we held eight additional reflection sessions between September and December 2023, exploring the two aforementioned research goals, proposing

actions for change, and reflecting on their impact. Each session generally followed a flexible iterative structure including: (1) sharing and discussing data from both our observations of the initiatives and previous meetings, (2) reflecting on the impact of any actions implemented, (3) analyzing how these reflections contributed to our developing findings, and (4) identifying new directions for action and exploration. Insights were thematically summarized through collective dialogue during the final minutes of each session.

Documentation was made of RF's field notes of the researched activities and reflection sessions, and transcribed audio recordings of the reflection sessions. Participants were given access to these materials and occasionally photographed the field-note journal to support self-reflection before the next session. While participants were invited to contribute to documentation—and often did—RF was responsible for reviewing and summarizing the materials between meetings and then presenting the summaries for shared discussion.

Our actions for change took two interrelated forms. First, inspired by other PAR scholars (Kemmis 2009; Onsrud et al., 2022), we understood the reflection sessions themselves as a form of action—interventions that "change the way people think about and talk about their world (*sayings*), they change the way they act in and on it (*doings*), and they change the ways they relate to others and to the environment (*relatings*)" (Kemmis 2009, p. 9). Through these reflective interventions, participants collaboratively reframed their experiences, transformed their thoughts, and changed how they related and acted within the researched initiatives—reshaping the initiatives from within by transforming the "*sayings", "doings", and "relatings"* of those involved in them (Kemmis, 2009). Second, when suggestions for change required actions beyond the participants themselves, participants and RF collaboratively formulated proposals and took them to facilitators, resulting in practical adjustments to the activities—further enabling participants to shape how they experienced, acted in, and related to these spaces.

Data creation, analysis, and conclusions were intertwined in the reflection sessions through dialogue and storytelling. As narratives emerged, we collaboratively and dialogically explored and analyzed them by inductively looking "for trends, for themes, and for insights triggered in others" (Bray et al., 2000, p. 93) that we could reflect on together. This process involved non-linear patterns of dialogic and shared critical reflection that often meant analyzing conversations just after they unfolded, as well as going back to revisit and re-discuss transcriptions and field notes from previous reflection sessions.

The final two sessions with each group focused on collectively deciding which themes would be included in this article, how they should be framed, and validating our findings and conclusions. Due to participants' concerns with anonymity, their time constraints, and RF being the only person involved in both projects, RF took on the task of drafting the article. However, once the draft was complete, RF proposed a meeting with participants to review the text together—to ensure it accurately represented our shared reflections and process, to consider whether all voices were adequately present, and to adapt the article based on this feedback. In line with Kemmis's (2014) understanding of communicative validity, this process aimed to achieve legitimacy through dialogue—where participants personally assessed whether the article felt accurate, sincere, comprehensible, and appropriate to their circumstances.

Regardless of our intentions to create a horizontal and inviting research space, we cannot claim that our interests were fully aligned or that all voices are equally represented in the research process and in this article. As Lenette (2022) pointed out, there is a tendency for the voices of facilitators, certain participants, and especially researchers to be more prominent in collaborative reflections, and even to appropriate the voices of those they collaborate with. To mitigate these risks, we tried to stay vigilant, co-navigating the challenges by allocating time after each reflection session to bring forward issues of power,

offering one-on-one conversations outside the group setting, and providing anonymous channels through which participants could express their views on the facilitation and research process.

Written informed consent was obtained from participants, or from their legal guardians in cases where participants were not legally independent (Kemmis et al., 2014, pp. 160–162). Since the research was hosted by a Danish institution, approval from a board of ethics was not required, as it is not customary in Denmark to obtain formal board approval for qualitative research.

Considerations on Dissemination and Structure of the Article

Although RF drafted the article and connected the findings to the field, we chose to write the collaboratively generated sections using "we." This decision reflects our efforts to de-hierarchize knowledge and recognize participants' contributions. "We" here does not imply sameness, but signals a shared process and a commitment to working through the inherent imbalances between us.

Even though the participants were invited to be co-authors of the article, they collectively decided to remain anonymous. However, we still wanted their voices to be represented. As such, we present direct quotes from participants by using the codes C.A or R.S.C followed by a number assigned to each of them.

Despite the clear differences between the practices and contexts of the two projects, we chose to present the findings in a single article. Participants expressed a desire for their thoughts not to be framed solely as "the thoughts of someone who is part of a minoritized collective" (C.A.3), and emphasized the importance of showing "both the similar and different experiences that people have when trying to get into music" (C.A.6). Presenting these insights together might allow us to highlight shared challenges and systemic structures that shape musical space. However, the knowledge presented here should be understood as situated. As stated by Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 68) "We do not expect people who read our critical participatory action research story to imitate whatever we did. We expect that they will make their own wise judgments about which parts of our story might be relevant to their situations—to their stories and their histories".

In line with our understanding of PAR, we deliberately moved away from a traditional dissemination structure that separates data generation, analysis, and conclusion. As Given (2008, p. 602) writes, such rigid formats often reflect "forms of knowledge that are imbued with relations of exploitation, power, and control." Instead, we present our experiences, reflections, and findings as intertwined and overlapping, embracing the "messiness" that Lenette (2022) describes is intrinsic to—and should be forwarded in—participatory research.

As described before, given the holistic nature of PAR, it is not possible to include all reflections, actions, and findings explored throughout our collaboration in this empirical article. Instead, we now will focus on two themes that we collectively identified as especially relevant to understanding belonging. These are illustrated through selected narratives and two specific examples of actions taken during the process.

Surfaced Themes

Caring Interpersonal Relations and Belonging

Participants emphasized the importance that connecting and caring for each other had in shaping their sense of belonging. They describe performing care[2] by showing interest in each other's feelings, helping with musical tasks, or supporting one another in personal matters. Sharing music in a caring space led to feeling they belonged as "part of a community" (C.A.8). These communal moments amongst peers transformed "how the group and

the person feel, developing new connections to music and to others, strengthening the ones we already had, and improving the group not only personally, but musically" (C.A.2).

The significance of caring interpersonal relations also extended beyond peers. Participants highlighted the importance of facilitators in enabling the "caring and safe spaces" that allowed for these "meaningful connections to both music and each other" (R.S.C.3) to flourish. R.S.C's participants connected these caring and safe musical experiences with "being treated as equals" (R.S.C.3) by the facilitator, whom they perceived as a multifaceted person whose profession is music, and "not just a musician" (R.S.C.1). They emphasized him "sharing his stories, musical taste, and opinions just like any other member of the group" (R.S.C.1) without presenting them as universally true, but without withholding them either.

Fellow reflection within C.A illuminated how, probably due to the increased focus on diverse needs that accompanies musicians working with people with diverse capabilities, project facilitators show care and attention to each individual, aiming to listen and respect their different needs, and "adapt to their tempo" (C.A.1) without making them feel that they are dragging the group down. In this project, "a space centered on disability and diversity, has generated a more careful, calmer rhythm" (C.A.6) that we propose could benefit music education also in other contexts.

However, even if feelings of community and the caring attitudes of facilitators contributed to enabling mostly "safe and empowering experiences" (C.A.3), participants in both projects noted that their experiences were not always meaningful, caring, or safe. Despite the best intentions and efforts of facilitators and their peers, practices aimed at being caring were at times experienced as "uncaring," "uncomfortable" or "silencing." When discussing these disruptive experiences, participants referred to multiple moments leading to reflections on the uniqueness of each person's needs and experiences, and on the impossibility of creating a musical space that feels consistently safe for everyone. Yet, by collectively examining these disempowering stories, we came to identify how they were all connected to limitations in communication within the groups—limitations that often resulted in people "deciding what would feel safe and good for you, and get it (how actions would actually be felt) wrong, while having the best intentions" (C.A.5). As an example of this, one of the participants described how the facilitators' "inclusive exercises"—which they speculated were organized with an intention of care, contesting hierarchies, and distributing agency—actually made them feel discomfort, and that "even though I know that this was to make us feel that we take part in the leading and deciding process, in reality it turned into... they just decided what I do… and I felt like a guinea pig that was free, in the way it was told to be free" (C.A.4).

Reflecting and expanding on the previous example, participants described occasionally hiding some of their discomfort. This occurred even when they felt that facilitators "genuinely cared" (C.A.5) about their feelings—often approaching participants individually to check in, and explicitly reserving time during sessions to collectively discuss how the musical activities were experienced. In both projects, the groups aligned in explaining that, due to the facilitators' "open" and "caring" attitudes, participants sometimes avoided voicing discomfort in order to shield facilitators from negative feelings, wanting to honor their good intentions, and acknowledge their work and dedication. This tendency to protect facilitators, combined with the perception of facilitators as "musical experts" with "years of experience" who "know more" (R.S.C.4), contributed to participants' hesitation to validate their own feelings, question given practices, or propose personally empowering alternatives. As C.A.5 described: "It is hard to raise your hand and say, I am uncomfortable, or I want a solo, right? Without them validating you first. Because you are afraid of your voice occupying that space."

Shared-Action-1. Exploring how to resolve these challenges in our research led us to propose and implement several strategies to address them:

1. We proposed embracing an explicit attitude of contingency and uncertainty—both musically in the researched activities and in our discussions—by voicing moments when we saw multiple possibilities, when we didn't know, felt insecure, or had doubts. This included presenting our understandings of music, education, and each other as provisional, situated, and open to change, aiming to create space for imagining or experiencing things differently.

2. We worked to invite criticality in, by framing it as a positive opportunity for growth in our reflection sessions, exemplifying this by being self-critical of our own thoughts and positions, and by explicitly emphasizing what we learned from engaging with the diverging voices of others.

3. We sought to collaboratively and continuously acknowledge that power dynamics within the group were always unequal, and aimed to make space for voices that were less represented. This involved seeking to stay aware of the space we occupied—both musically and dialogically—questioning the power relations shaping our thinking, and seeking to notice whose voices were missing.

Even though these actions were at first perceived by participants as "broad" (C.A.3) and "abstract" (R.S.C.2)—and even though we do not believe they resolved all challenges related to power or communication—we observed how they triggered the following transformations:

1. We recognized how participants such as C.A.5, C.A.3, R.S.C.4, and R.S.C.2—who had not been very vocal in earlier reflection sessions—increasingly began to speak up, "feeling a space that was not there before" (R.S.C.4), challenging and engaging with RF and their peers, and making important contributions to both the research and this article.

2. The impact of these shared strategies was also felt in the musical activities. During the very next rehearsal after we introduced the proposals for change, C.A.1—recognized by the group as a confident singer—went over to peers who had previously expressed insecurity about singing and supported their voices by helping them pitch notes and remember lyrics. After singing, we observed how C.A.1 followed up by asking those participants how the gesture had felt, and received an overwhelmingly positive and emotional response in return.

3. Finally, these shared suggestions encouraged some participants—who as described earlier had previously found it difficult to voice discomfort—to ask RF to communicate their disruptive experiences to the activities' facilitators and organizers, who in turn responded with great care and attention.

Feeling Belonging as Artists and Developing Practices to Belong

Positioning thoughts and practices as contingent, and discussing power in our reflection sessions, set in motion a process of questioning what "being and feeling as an artist" means.[3] At first, participants referred to themes such as "being recognized by society, oneself, and others" (C.A.5), "having excellent technical skills" (R.S.C.6), and "possessing artis-

tic talent" (R.S.C.4) without questioning these terms. However, as the reflections unfolded, participants increasingly began to question these normative and pre-assumed meanings (Assefa, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008), exploring the role these might play in enabling or hindering musical spaces where unique artistries[4] can comfortably belong.

Participants in C.A described "feeling like artists by just taking part in the choir" (C.A.5). They connect this feeling with an artistic self-confidence developed due to facilitators adapting their pedagogical practices to make space for diverse forms of self-expression; the empowering and positive recognition of participants' artistic capabilities and potentials by the facilitators who they recognize as experts, whose opinions they can trust; and—in the case of C.A—the possibility of finding social recognition in the form of concerts, recordings, etc. They agree that "feeling like an artist" provides value, motivation, and meaning to their experience; it contributes to them taking pride in what they do, increases the sense of belonging to the group, raises their self-esteem, and allows them to fight social stigmas and obtain the recognition that their collective is often denied: "People have no idea what we can do, and when they hear us, it shows everyone that we can do something great" (C.A.3).

However, "conforming—or not—to what an artist is" (R.S.C.6) also led to experiences of unbelonging and alienation. Participants of both projects described feeling unmusical whenever the proposed activities did not align with their self-perceived musicalities[4]—diverse musical capabilities, goals, and/or ways of connecting to music. Regardless of both projects often feeling accessible and empowering for most—and despite the aforementioned efforts by facilitators to adapt their practices to align with the diverse needs of participants—these disruptive moments of disconnection still occurred and resulted in some participants feeling "that my voice is worth nothing, that maybe music is just not for me" (C.A.7).

Related to feeling, or not feeling like an artist, participants also started discussing public performances as ambiguous experiences. Participants highlighted how, even if the researched activities and their facilitators "can be a subversive element to hopefully hacking the system from within" by prioritizing diversity and care, public performances still mean "having to conform to what is recognized from the outside, to what society says is a good choir" (C.A.6). Balancing these paradoxical positions demanded using part of the activities' limited resources and time to align with normative values of quality in performance, "centering the immediate objective and not the long-term ones and preventing going deeper into each individual's musicality" (C.A.4). Participants also problematized how performances tended to single out some of their voices—for example by giving them solos—which resulted in feelings of jealousy, marginalization, and exclusions, and contributed to the development of a strong hierarchy among participants, where those they considered "better musicians" held very unequal power and influence over the others (C.A.1).

Discussing these disruptive experiences led us to reflect on the need to increasingly and explicitly challenge concepts such as "artistry" and "artist" in order to develop an ethical and inclusive music education space. Discussing these terms resulted in participants raising critical questions such as: "Do we keep perpetuating the same values? Which ones do we want to conform to and which ones do we want to change? When we go on a stage we have this responsibility to perpetuate or not perpetuate these ideas as a collective, but we need the previous process of actually considering these themes openly and collectively" (C.A.4).

Furthermore, opening up these terms resulted in discussing the need to question the music education practices that stem from, and reinforce these normative concepts. It emphasized the need to radically reimagine new pedagogies that may align with increasingly diverse artistries, and the importance of participants in shaping these pedagogies to enable practices where they might belong on their own terms.

Shared-Action-2. In R.S.C, the participants' desire to take a more active role in co-constructing pedagogies that resonate with their own artistries was collaboratively discussed with the facilitator, and resulted in the following actions:

1. Participants and the facilitator proposed complementing their current approach to cajon teaching with a peer-to-peer approach—where students could teach each other during part of the session. Participants describe how implementing this teaching methodology allowed them to "understand both how much they already knew and how much the others also know" (R.S.C.4), creating a more horizontal space between both participants and facilitators and challenging hierarchical understandings of artistry. This proposal also impacted the interpersonal dynamics of the group: "There is more trust within the group…And it was because of the laughter. We were teaching ourselves how to play the cajón, and from that day on things flowed. When the teacher "thing" was undone and learning became…like more fluid" (R.S.C.4)

2. Participants were also invited to lead their peers and the facilitator during the group warm-up at the start of each cajón session. This sought to give participants the opportunity to experiment with new pedagogical possibilities that could better resonate with their own musicalities, teaching in ways "professional musicians would not have thought of" (R.S.C.3)—for example, one of the participants suggested implementing ideas from her experience during circus studies into cajón exercises, and another proposed a less structured and more body-focused approach to warming up that he had learnt from his family, coming from a different culture.

These experiences had an ambiguous impact. On the one hand, they fostered a new sense of comfort and belonging that some participants had not felt before: "In music class… teachers asked me to participate in exercises that don't feel natural to me… but when we were doing this (referring to the exercise they proposed)… it was just like… relax… like I could just let go" (R.S.C.1). However, these empowering feelings coexisted with disruptive ones. For some, leading the warm-ups felt like an overwhelming and vulnerable position that "put them on the spot" (R.S.C.3), and they expressed a preference for more subtle forms of participation. Others questioned whether simply making space for experimentation was sufficient, noting that many peer-led activities replicated the pre-existing practices learnt from the facilitator.

These ambiguous experiences prompted renewed reflection on the diverse needs within a group, and how socially constructed ideas of music already shape participation—even for those with limited exposure to formal training. They supported our argument that enabling spaces where participants can collaboratively surface and challenge these concepts is essential to centering their contingency and making changes in thinking, doing, and belonging possible.

Discussion: Engaging with the field

Reflecting on Belonging and Care

Belonging is not an individual state, but a relational process, "facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences of the social milieu" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 14). In this research, we recognize how participants' experiences of belonging were closely linked to interpersonal experiences of care. However, the link between care and belonging was not straightforward. Care did not always lead to belonging, and belonging was shaped by multiple, sometimes contradictory, experiences of how care was intended, expressed, or received.

Care Leading to Belonging. Through our research, we identify how different aspects of belonging were promoted through the caring intentions and attitudes of both participants and facilitators.

Aligning with Hendricks' (2021, p. 2) statement that "meaningful musical connections are said to be forged simultaneously between people who care for one another, and between people and the activities they care about," intentions and acts of care among peers resulted in meaningful connections—both between participants and with the activity. These connections, shaped through caring interactions, supported participants' perceptions of belonging: of being seen, valued, and emotionally connected within the group. At the same time, the care they experienced and expressed strengthened their motivations to belong—to return, contribute, and stay engaged in the shared musical space.

We can also recognize how care from facilitators became an important source of belonging for participants. Aligning with Silverman's (2023) depiction of *caring about* as acknowledging different needs to be met, we identify how facilitators *cared about* participants by recognizing their needs and seeking to adapt the proposed music activities accordingly. This attention to difference shown by facilitators supported both participants' *opportunities* and *competencies* to belong, by expanding what counted as meaningful participation and creating space for multiple ways of engaging and contributing.

Our research highlights how facilitators' care—expressed through their presence not as distant experts but as vulnerable, participating humans—opened up new *motivations* and *opportunities* to belong. Scholars of care and education have emphasized that presence and vulnerability are essential to forming caring relations (e.g. Waghid, 2019), noting how facilitators who teach as whole, fallible individuals can challenge hierarchies and foster deeper connection. We observed that when facilitators shared personal experiences or expressed uncertainty, they disrupted traditional roles, allowing participants to relate to them more easily and feel they belonged *with*, rather than were merely guided *by*, facilitators.

Intentions of Care Not Leading to Belonging. Care is not care if the cared-for does not feel cared for (Noddings, 2005). As described by Miller (2021), "teachers may value care, and believe they are demonstrating responsive care, but students may not recognize the care as such" (p. 117). Aligning with these statements, our research identifies how intentions of care did not always result in belonging for participants. We identify how participants' disruptive experiences point to the difficulty of recognizing and understanding how others feel, to the unequal power dynamics present in musical activities, and to the limitations in communication that are aggravated by these factors. Our research shows how these limiting factors can result in uncaring experiences, where participants lack the perceptions, capacities, and/or motivations to belong.

Furthermore, our research shows how the desire to care for others can, paradoxically, hinder belonging. At times, participants refrained from voicing discomfort or disagreement in order to protect facilitators' feelings. While this silence may have been intended as care, it limited opportunities for dialogue and co-construction, inadvertently sustaining practices that contributed to unbelonging—the very dynamics facilitators sought to avoid. The tension between caring for others and caring for oneself became apparent, as participants sometimes prioritized the former at the expense of the latter, resulting in situations that felt uncaring for both them and the facilitators. These findings suggest that fostering both care and belonging may not only require openness to dialogue, but also a shared sense of responsibility to express dissent—recognizing, as Waghid (2019) argues, that criticality can itself be a form of care.

Caring With. Our research underscores that in order to foster belonging among diverse participants, caring should not be understood as a set of prescriptive acts, but rather as a stance that embraces skepticism about our ability to fully know others, values dissent as a

way to validate feelings and uncover new possibilities, and treats critical thinking as essential to care—reflecting key aspects highlighted in literature on care as a critical and relational practice (e.g. Noddings 2005; Waghid, 2019). Furthermore, our findings suggest the need to understand care as a reciprocal endeavor—one that supports the co-construction of belonging. This involves centering not only caring for and caring about, but also *caring with* in music education: a collective process in which all participants are "stakeholders in the process, who possess voice toward the ultimate goal of caring" (Silverman, 2023, p. 35). Belonging, in this view, becomes a process that builds on being recognized as someone whose voice matters in shaping care with others.

Expanding Understandings of Music

As Camlin (2023, p. 26) states, expanding music education "demands not only changing musicians' practices and habits, but the whole way we think about music itself, what it is for, and what we do with it." Echoing this perspective, our research underscores the importance of rethinking understandings of music—and the pedagogies that stem from these understandings—as a necessary step toward creating spaces where diverse participants can belong. This shift requires engaging with multiple, often conflicting, views of musicianship and artistry, acknowledging the plurality of what it means to be musical and the various ways in which people can connect with music (Carson & Westvall 2024; Wright 2018). As we present in this section, the ways in which both participants and facilitators understand music—its purposes, expressions, and practices—can become a central and intertwined aspect of participants' experiences of belonging.

Understandings of Artistry and Belonging. As described by Liu et al. (2024), the ability—or inability—to align with both internal and external understandings of what it means to be a musician can shape one's sense of belonging. Our findings build on this claim by showing that such alignment can generate not only belonging in the arts, but also belonging through them—where participants experienced public social validation through music participation and felt recognized as individuals, not just artists.

Yet, when participants could not see themselves reflected in dominant notions of artistry, these same norms fostered self-doubt and unbelonging—whether related to participants not having the *competencies*, *perception*, or *motivation* to belong. As Wright (2018, p. 221) warns, narrow frameworks of musicality may "cause harm" to people "who are innately musical and who are excluded from a music education that… fails to speak to their individual musicality… or to provide them with belief in their own ability". Our research suggests how internalized artistic hierarchies also silenced dialogue and discouraged participants from validating their own experiences—perpetuating uncomfortable practices and limiting the possibility for change.

We therefore argue that responding to these paradoxes requires more transparent, collaborative, and explicit dialogue between facilitators and participants about diverse understandings of artistry—and perhaps other troubled terms such as professionalization and/or excellence. These conversations, grounded in practice, may help challenge normative assumptions and support healthier, more reflexive relationships with these concepts, supporting their potential to promote belonging and mitigating their potential to harm.

This call aligns with broader efforts in the field to rethink the purposes and values of music education (Camlin, 2023; Carson & Westvall 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Westerlund & Gaunt., 2021). However, based on the impact that engaging with these terms had on the experiences of our participants, our research leads us to suggest that these conceptual discussions should be brought explicitly into practice—into rehearsals, workshops, and classrooms—, discussing them with participants, and becoming an intrinsic part of shaping a music education where diverse musicalities may belong.

Diverse Artistry and Pedagogy. As Mateiro and Westvall (2016) point out, facilitators often approach teaching through "the lens of values and beliefs that they are accustomed to" (p. 157). Our findings extend this idea by showing how even facilitators' well-intended adaptations of their current practices to expand inclusion may still be shaped by these underlying values—and thus limit belonging for those participants that do not resonate with them.

The ambiguous experiences of participants across both projects show that—even when music educators adapt their practices towards inclusion—only some participants will genuinely belong. For many, adaptation may offer a way in, but only through a kind of funnel: they may find a way to fit, but one that requires compromising belonging on their own terms. For others, whose musicalities do not resonate with the pedagogies proposed by facilitators, such adaptations may not be enough—leaving them feeling unmusical, or even broken.

As Henley and Higgins (2020, p. 213) remind us, "there are multiple ways to learn, teach and lead, and the practitioner may not yet know the best way to work with every student." Our findings suggest that co-creation of pedagogies—grounded in participants' diverse musicalities—might foster spaces where their voices and ways of being musical are not only included, but centered. These co-created spaces may not only improve the participants' experiences, but also inspire new pedagogical approaches for facilitators. In line with Laes and Westerlund (2017, p. 42), we therefore see potential in "teaching not *about* but *with*, and *by*, people and practices that form a counter-narrative to dominant and normative discourses in music education."

Conclusion: PAR(t) of the Solution

Participants from both projects echoed findings in the field, describing how reflection sessions affirmed that their voices mattered, increased their sense of ownership of the initiatives, and strengthened their belonging within the groups (e.g. Asakura, 2019; Onsrud et al., 2022).

Embodying the impact that participatory research had on their experiences, participants from both initiatives agreed that the most immediate change they would propose to expand belonging in the field is to include regular, critical, and transformative peer reflection sessions—between participants, facilitators, and researchers—as a staple of music education activities. Aligning with the previous sections of our conclusion, we suggest that these shared spaces for reflection may help cultivate an atmosphere of criticality that embraces dissent and reflection as positive forces for growth. They may improve dialogue, open discussions about how concepts such as *artistry* may hinder experiences of belonging, and invite participants to come to voice and take a more active role in co-guiding the pedagogies and practices in which they participate.

Finally, we speculate that embracing these sustained, collaborative, and critical shared spaces for growth may inspire participants, educators, and researchers to remain attentive and in motion—critically reviewing their practices and thoughts to continue developing music education spaces that resist stagnation and evolve towards belonging. While participatory research will not solve all problems, it offers a path forward: one that invites us to keep engaging with one another through diversity, embracing the challenge of knowing that final answers will—and perhaps should—never fully arrive. ■

Notes

[1] All participants in R.S.C took part in the research. For C.A, the original plan was to also research with all participants. However, as RF noticed the time constraints that they had, the need to develop smaller groups so that dialogue could flow, and the need for a slow and comfortable research pace for the participants, RF decided that they could only work with part of the group. Since RF did not know the group yet, the facilitators of the initiative suggested

which participants they believed could be comfortable participating in a shared dialogic space, and from these we worked with the participants who volunteered and could engage in the full research process. As such, the perspectives presented here include the reflections of nine C.A participants, and thus may not represent the entire C.A group.

[2] This article understands care as a relational process which, as forwarded by Fisher and Tronto (1990, p. 40)–also used in Silverman (2023)–may be defined as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."

[3] Even though being an artist, and feeling like an artist are different and complex concepts, participants often discussed them as one intertwined notion–a subjective feeling linked to external and internalized recognition of talent and skills that often draws from normative, socially constructed understandings of the arts (Assefa, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008).

[4] The use of (unique) *artistry* and *musicality* in this text makes reference to the unique ways in which each person connects to, values, and participates in, musical or artistic processes on their own terms. It refers to the diverse musical/artistic capabilities, goals, and/or ways of experiencing the arts/music of each individual, drawing from the thoughts of scholars such as Wright (2018) or Carson & Westvall (2024) who argue that people connect and relate to arts/music in different and plural ways and warn of the dangers of hegemonic understandings of the arts that may alienate and exclude people by failing "to speak to their individual musicality" (Wright 2018, p. 221).

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Abstract

This article shares the process and findings of a participatory action research collaboration with participants from two music initiatives aiming to expand inclusion and participation (Canto Abierto, n.d.; Repercusion San Cristobal, n.d.), exploring how to develop music education experiences where participants may increasingly belong. The article begins by introducing the collaborators in the project, and describing our implementation of Participatory Action Research (PAR). It continues by presenting the findings of reflecting over and analyzing the lived experiences of the participants, and exploring their implications for music education in line with the themes of: 1) interpersonal care and belonging, and 2) feeling belonging as artists and developing practices to belong. ■

Keywords: music education, participatory action research, belonging, care

Abstrakti

Tässä artikkelissa kuvataan osallistavan toimintatutkimuksen prosessi ja keskeiset löydökset, jotka syntyivät yhteistyössä kahden inkluusiota ja osallisuutta edistävän musiikkihankkeen osallistujien kanssa (Canto Abierto, n.d.; Repercusión San Cristóbal, n.d.). Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, miten musiikkikasvatuksen käytäntöjä voidaan kehittää siten, että osallistujat voivat kokea yhä vahvemmin kuuluvansa mukaan. Artikkelissa esitellään mukana olleet yhteistyötahot ja kuvataan osallistavan toimintatutkimuksen (Participatory Action Research, PAR) toteutusta. Tämän jälkeen esitetään tutkimuksen tulokset, jotka pohjautuvat osallistujien elettyjen kokemusten reflektointiin ja analyysiin. Tuloksia tarkastellaan musiikkikasvatuksen näkökulmasta kahden teeman kautta: 1) vuorovaikutuksellinen välittäminen ja kuuluminen, sekä 2) taiteilijana kuulumisen tunne ja kuulumista tukevien käytäntöjen kehittäminen. ■

Avainsanat: musiikkikasvatus, osallistava toimintatutkimus, kuuluminen, välittäminen

Article 5: Co-crafting Artistic Belonging with Communities through Arts-Based Participatory Action Research

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Co-crafting Artistic Belonging with Communities through Arts-Based Participatory Action Research

Abstract

This article shares the process and findings of a co-authored arts-based participatory action research (AB-PAR) collaboration exploring how participatory and pedagogical practices could increasingly enable artistic spaces where participants feel that they belong. The research was conducted by a group of international arts professionals from diverse artistic backgrounds, brought together by Landsby Akademiet—a project dedicated to amplifying access to artistic creation for citizens in rural Denmark. The article begins by introducing the project's collaborators, and describing our use of Arts-Based Participatory Action Research (AB-PAR) as a framework to challenge, and bring new perspectives, to arts education scholarship. It then describes our research process, and key pedagogical findings, according to the themes of: (a) Challenging conformity in artistic participation and meaning, (b) developing shared pedagogical practices, (c) recognizing ambiguous power dynamics, (d) responding to power through engaging in shared critical dialogue, and (e) responding to power through engaging in shared artistic practices.

1- Introduction

This article advances artistic and pedagogical practices grounded in arts-based participatory action research (AB-PAR) as means to challenge conformity within arts education in two interrelated ways. First, it brings forward the under-represented

voices of arts practitioners—individuals with years of embodied experience yet limited academic representation—by engaging them as co-researchers rather than subjects. Second, through the engagement of these practitioners with participants in an artistic and social initiative called Landsby Akademiet, it investigates how to expand participatory and pedagogical processes to foster artistic practices where people may increasingly belong.

Belonging may be defined as “the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences” (Allen et al., 2021). Allen et al. (2021) propose understanding people’s experiences of belonging through four interconnected aspects: (1) having the *competencies to belong*, (2) having the *opportunities to belong*, (3) having the *motivations to belong*, and (4) having the *perceptions of belonging*. We propose that these dimensions may offer a valuable framework for exploring our artistic practices through a holistic lens. They helped us move beyond thinking about inclusion or access as sole triggers for expansion in participation, toward a broader view that also centers recognition, value, and the ability to shape artistic and educational processes on one’s own terms.

Scholarship within arts education identifies feelings of belonging as a defining factor in enabling empowering or disruptive experiences during a person’s artistic upbringing—experiences that may open pathways to lifelong engagement in the arts or, conversely, lead to detachment and alienation from the field (Liu et al., 2024). Participatory and co-creative practices play a key role in shaping such experiences, potentially fostering a sense of belonging that can become an important impetus for

continued engagement with the arts (Carson & Westvall, 2024). However, fostering belonging through such processes often requires a “re-learning” of how individuals participate and practice—sometimes moving beyond familiar roles or comfort zones (Carson & Westvall, 2016).

This re-learning is not only necessary for participants, but also for practitioners and scholars. Expanding who belongs in the arts requires a parallel shift in how we practice, educate, think about, and produce knowledge in the field. As Camlin (2023, p. 26) reminds us, transformation “demands not only changing musicians’ (or artists') practices and habits, but the whole way we think about music (or art) itself, what it is for, and what we do with it.”[1]

Through our critical engagement and a collaborative research process, we sought to surface new possibilities for participants, communities, and ourselves—possibilities that may challenge conformity both in content, and in method.

2- Participants and Project

The co-authors of this article are a group of international arts professionals[2] from diverse artistic backgrounds brought together by Landsby Akademiet:

[1] Brackets not in the original.

[2] In this article we often refer to terms such as participants, facilitators, or professional artists. Participants refers to members of the community. References to facilitators or professional artists in this refers to either us, or other individuals whose occupation involves working in the arts as performers, composers, arts educators, etc. However, we acknowledge that this distinction itself is both problematic, artificial and complex, and want to highlight that this does not intend to create a hierarchical or qualitative distinction between the different forms of artistic practice, but rather to clarify who we are referring to for the sake of clarity in this article.

Sergio Garcia-Cuesta (A1): Musician, PhD fellow, and lecturer at one of Denmark's conservatoires, with degrees in rhythmic and classical music, and a Master's degree in Music Education from Spain, Ireland, and Denmark, respectively. Their artistic practice and research interests include accessibility, meaningfulness, care, and fostering feelings of belonging within musical practices.

Gracia Rios Calderon (A2): Actor, singer, and musician trained in Spain, Germany, the UK, and Denmark, and co-project leader of Landsby Akademiet. Their artistic practice combines these disciplines on stage as a storytelling tool, with a particular focus on LGBTQ+ activism.

Pablo Lara Garcia (A3): Actress, musician, and theater maker, and co-project leader of Landsby Akademiet. With degrees in classical music and musical theater from Spain and London, her aim is to use theater and artistic practices as educational tools for social change, exploring themes such as domestic or sexual abuse from a feminist perspective.

Signild Thygesen (A4): Trained circus artist from Denmark specializing in aerial acrobatics, experienced in physical theater and interdisciplinary practices. She applies her circus skills and background in both performative and pedagogical settings, always seeking projects that bring the performing arts out of traditional venues and into nature, public spaces, and beyond.

Filippa Westerberg (A5): Swedish cellist, vocalist, performer, teacher, and composer, with degrees in classical music and a postgraduate qualification

from the Contemporary Creative Artist program in Denmark. Her artistic practice is diverse, creative, and frequently involves collaborations with artists from various fields.

Tiago Candal (A6): Multi-instrumentalist musician, composer, and sound technician, from Porto with a particular passion for spreading traditional music in plural and diverse contexts. A lifelong learner with a passion for teaching.

Mauricio Diaz Reyes (A7): Mexican Master of Music based in the Netherlands. Actor, singer, musical director, educator, social worker, and multi-instrumentalist. He works with vulnerable populations across Mexico and Europe, particularly with children and senior citizens.

Landsby Akademiet*:* Organized by Nordisk TeaterLaboratorium (NTL)—a cultural institution based in the north of Denmark—Landsby Akademiet is a project aimed at amplifying access to artistic creation and education for citizens in rural areas of Denmark, exploring the potentials of art to strengthen these communities, while expanding professional artists' opportunities to work in diverse contexts. This project invited international artists experienced in participatory practices to freely put their embodied knowledge into practice and holistically address these goals through two weeks of artistic interventions in each town.

A1 joined the project as a research collaborator during the inception of Landsby Akademiet (Summer 2022) being invited to both research the practices of the participating artists, and the impact of the project for the community. A2 and 3 joined

soon after, taking on roles as project leaders. A4, 5, 6, and 7 joined the initiative as artists and co-researchers.[3] During the fieldwork (Spring 2024 and Autumn 2024) and the subsequent online meetings (until Winter 2025), all authors contributed to reflection, analysis, and dissemination processes.

3- Arts-Based Participatory Action Research

3.1- Method

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative research methodology that empowers individuals with embodied knowledge on a subject to explore it from within (Kemmis et al., 2014; Lenette, 2022). It unsettles conventional boundaries between researcher and researched by embracing inquiry as a non-linear, holistic, and ongoing process that includes: 1) “a shared process of co-participation between researchers and participants to co-construct of knowledge”; 2) “the promotion of self- and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change”; and, 3) “the building of alliances between researchers and participants[4] in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1).

Arts-Based PAR (AB-PAR) incorporates art as a catalyst in PAR processes (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019). This can involve creating imaginative research environments or using artistic processes as a means of co-reflection and communication among co-researchers. By enabling those who are simultaneously artists, educators, and reflective individuals to leverage their multidisciplinary

[3] A small town in Norddjurs Kommune in Region Midtjylland with under 270 habitants.

[4] A1 as the invited researcher and A2-7 as the participants that became co-researchers.

identities and expertises through research (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019), AB-PAR may amplify the under-represented voices of practitioners in the field, and embrace an embodied and organic path to engage in reflection—not only understanding research as a dialogical or intellectual activity, but as an embodied and integral part of artistic practices.

3.2- Our Implementation of AB-PAR

There is no rigid formula for implementing PAR (McIntyre, 2008). However, the research presented in this article followed a non-linear iterative cycle of AB-PAR (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019) consisting of:

1. Planning and observing the initiatives we facilitated.
2. Reflecting on their potentials, challenges, and possibilities for change.
3. Implementing changes.
4. Starting this process all over again.

Inspired by other AB-PAR publications (e.g. Asakura et al., 2019; Patel, 2022) and embracing the purposefully flexible structure of this method, our research unfolded through the following practices:

1. **Arts-Based Reflection Sessions:** We started each day by engaging in shared artistic practices. In line with the values of AB-PAR (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019), this artistic engagement generated new data and functioned as a space for shared reflection through the arts. Triggered by our research interests, our observations of previous interventions, and our shared dialogic reflections, we would experiment, co-create, or facilitate for one

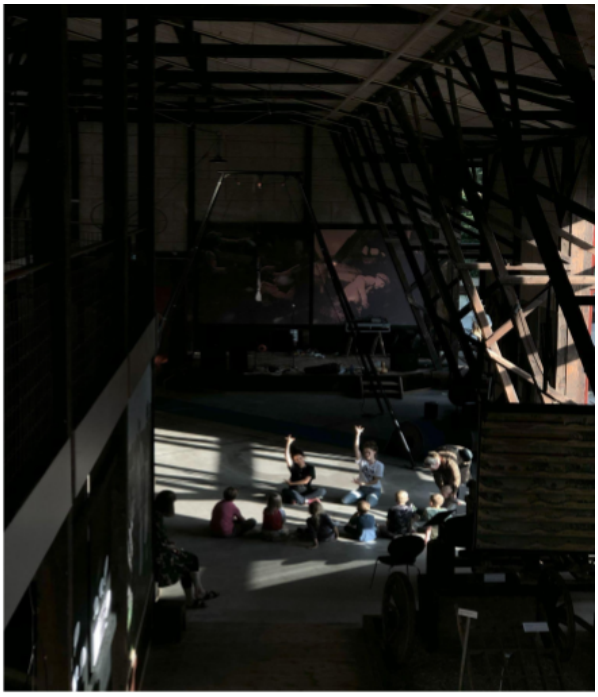
another. This allowed co-researchers to experience each other's practices in an embodied way, test and explore the practical challenges and suggestions that arose in our dialogic reflections, and let the shared artistic practices "take us to places where discussions would not have gotten us alone" (A1). As we will discuss later in the article, over the course of the research process we decided to open these arts-based reflection sessions to local participants, through which they became meaningful sites of exchange and impact between the co-authors and the community. These morning sessions were documented through video, audio recordings, and co-authors' field notes.

Arts-based sessions were held in Stenvad's museum—a space offered by the community for the invited artists to practice. This image shows A4 introducing A2 to her acrobatic practice and exploring together challenges of fear, self-perceived limitations, and diverse capabilities for participation and belonging.

2. **PAR-Reflection Sessions:** Following the arts-based reflection sessions, we engaged in dialogic reflection sessions among the co-authors. These were shaped by a “living dialectical process” grounded in “shared criticality” and “collective reflection” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 24), through which we revisited our research questions, shared observations, and envisioned new possibilities for change. Data generation, analysis, and proposals for action unfolded as an intertwined process (Lenette, 2022), bringing into critical dialogue the material generated during the arts-based reflections and participatory events, scholarly literature from each co-author’s field of practice, and our embodied knowledge as active practitioners. In this way, PAR-sessions served both to generate new data and to analyze our experiences through critical dialogue—collaboratively searching “for trends, for themes, and for insights triggered in others” (Bray et al., 2000, p. 93) that we could explore together. These sessions lasted from one to two hours and were documented through video, audio recordings, and co-authors’ field notes.

Drawing from the shared morning session and the inputs voiced by participants, in this PAR reflection session co-authors were discussing possible participation challenges—and alternatives—in the jam-session format.

3. **Participatory events with the community:** Building on insights from the arts-based reflection sessions and the PAR-reflections, we organized larger artistic and participatory events with the community to put our research into action. These included activities such as jam sessions, circus workshops, or community-led performances and concerts. These afternoon events were often followed by informal conversations with participants from the community discussing their experiences and suggestions, which we documented through field notes in our journals.

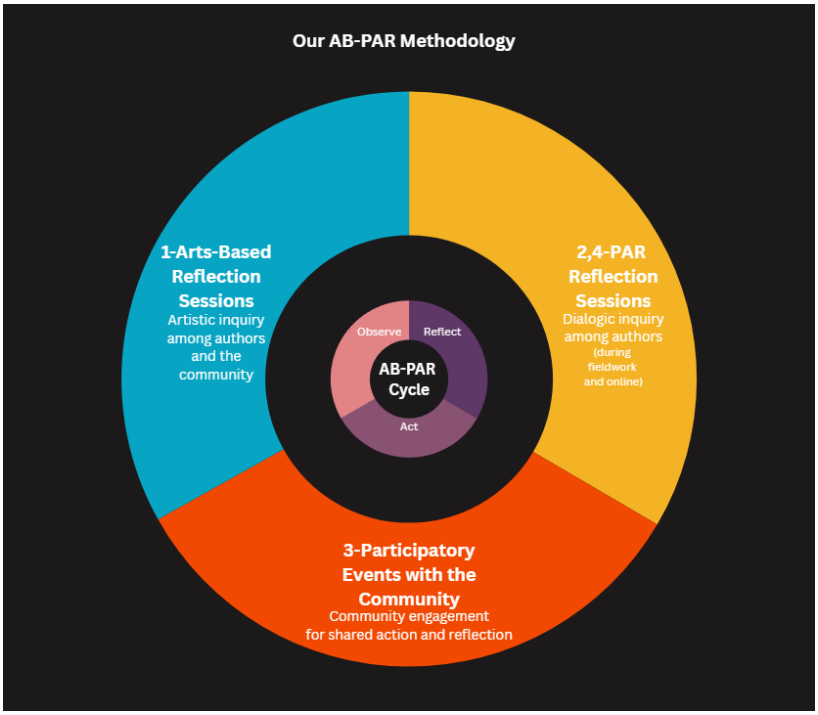


Authors 2 and 4 facilitating a circus workshop for the children of the town.

From the left: authors 5, 7 and 6 playing with members of the community. They decided to move away from the stage and play near the audience. Some participants decided to take the stage while others joined the co-authors in sitting amongst the audience..

4. **Online PAR-Reflection sessions:** During the four months following the fieldwork, each of us revised videos, transcriptions, and field-notes emphasizing the selection of excerpts that we recognized specifically relevant to answer our research question. During this period we conveyed via online meetings to collaboratively discuss and analyze the data. Through shared reflection and inductive thematic analysis we arrived at the themes outlined in the subheadings of this article (Bray et al., 2000). In line with the values of PAR, “legitimacy and validity” were achieved “through communicative action”

(Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 31), where the authors' collectively and reflectively engaged in critical dialogue to question, challenge, and expand each other's thoughts, findings, and experiences. Even though our AB-PAR was designed around the knowledge of practitioners, field notes from discussions with participants and reflexive engagement with scholarship in the field offered additional sources to contrast and triangulate our findings. Insights from participants are presented in this article as P1, P2, etc.



4- Sharing our process and findings

Mirroring our shared research process, this section invites the reader into a layered narrative that intertwines experience, analysis, and findings. As Lenette (2022) highlights, such “messiness” is intrinsic to participatory research that resists tokenism and values relationality, and should be embraced and represented. Aiming to stay close to our collaborative and evolving process while also engaging with, and contributing to the wider field, we will structure the section in two parts:

First, we describe how our thinking and practice shifted—from leading performative interventions to co-creating reciprocal pedagogical spaces. To illustrate this shift and ground our findings, we introduce two *shared-moments*. These convey specific situations from our fieldwork that we consider particularly significant in informing the discussion that follows and may serve as windows into our process—offering our embodied engagements as situated traces of meaning for the reader.

We then reflect on the insights that emerged through our research, drawing on our field experiences, and the new reflections that arose through writing, putting them into dialogue with existing scholarship in the field.

5- A Reciprocal Transformative Process: Seeking for Belonging by Challenging Conformity in Meaning and Participation

A2: … but it won't matter what practices or pedagogies we can imagine, to make a difference the first thing we need is for people to be there. How can we change something for those who do not resonate with the arts if we don't meet them? If they do not come to our concerts, workshops, or performances in the first place?

A1: But why would they come? As long as they think of arts and artists as something foreign to who they are, why would they want to be there in the first place? Maybe changing how people think about the arts should come first.

Extract from first PAR-reflection session

Discussing the challenges we could encounter in developing more accessible and diverse practices where participants could belong, and drawing on the co-authors' embodied experiences in previous projects, this extract from our first reflection session highlighted the difficulties that often arise when artists attempt to challenge normativity through their practices. It resulted in shared reflections on how thinking and doing otherwise might fall short when faced with the weighty and historically ingrained resistance of normative, and often excluding, socially constructed understandings of the arts (see Assefa, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021). It prompted us to attempt expanding beyond traditional arts-performance and arts-education contexts—expanding opportunities to belong for sections of the population who would otherwise not have met our practices—and deconstructing their expectations of what the arts are—challenging their perceptions of unbelonging (Allen et al., 2021).

Being initially inspired by practices in participatory fields such as community music and community theater (e.g. Higgins, 2024; Haedicke & Nellhaus)—and adapting our practices through our ongoing exploratory PAR process—we put into action different approaches to tackle both of these goals. We aimed to "bring arts to people…not just ask them to come to us" (A1) by presenting our work in non-traditional spaces such as community gathering spots, schools, and churches. We combined our performances with communal meals, talks, and other social events, aiming to create more opportunities for connection and dialogue. We sought to include as many people from the community in our planned performances/workshops as possible, talking with residents and crafting events that could align with the town and its inhabitants. This meant, for example, including

existing artistic initiatives in the town in our performances—such as local artists, choirs, theater groups, etc.—, including local artists who did not see themselves as professionals and did not often perform publicly—people who played instruments as a hobby, who enjoyed singing, who liked to paint, etc.—planning our interventions around the history and stories of the town—researching local traditions, folklore, etc., and introducing them into our activities—, and inviting people who did not see themselves as artists at all to participate in alternative ways, i.e. by helping to set the stage, contributing to wardrobe or scenography, collaborating in organizing, etc.

We observed how these efforts led to “participants’ artistic self-confidence and wishes for participation gradually developing” (A3). Describing being initially drawn by the “fun” or “empowering” atmosphere of the workshops and performances, participants began joining as audience members. However, this often developed into more active forms of participation—singing, acting, and increasingly engaging with the artists in dialogue and co-creation. The impact of these efforts was further underscored by the growing number of people attending and actively taking part in the activities as the project progressed—from five people at the first intervention to over sixty just five days later.

However, and despite these hopeful developments, claims such as “I can’t play together with you…yes I play guitar…but just a little bit…I am not an artist” (P5), “I am not good enough (during a dancing workshop)” (P6), and “I have never had this talent…arts are not for me” (P7) were still common amongst the community. These statements not only highlighted the limitations of our efforts in bringing transformative change to participants´ feelings of belonging, but also got us to question our role in

reinforcing the same normative limitations we sought to challenge: “Did people belong just because they were a part of our performances and workshops?” (A4).

Trying to further explore this and related questions—and working to enable more complete experiences of belonging—got us to propose opening up the morning arts-based reflection sessions to the community. We speculated that inviting the community into our personal and vulnerable shared artistic processes of reflection, introspection and connection, could (1) contribute to reframing the arts as a diverse, imperfect, and evolving process valuable in itself, and (2) allow us to more thoroughly engage with the community, bringing more diverse perspectives to learn from, that could illuminate new possibilities for expanding participants’ feelings of belonging.

Members of the community started joining each day during the arts-based reflection sessions. They would share in these unscripted and informal settings, where the arts were not meant to entertain or be displayed, but where we embodied artistic practices as a vulnerable and evolving process that enabled introspection and connection with others. Participants voiced how “being taken seriously” by co-authors in a “professional but playful space”, where their “unique voices” were “heard and valued” (P4), resulted in a new sense of artistic self-confidence and belonging. We observed how arts-based reflection sessions became a reciprocal and pedagogical space where members of the community and co-authors could share and learn from each other’s thoughts, stories and histories through the arts. This shared form of collaborative learning, resulted in participants coming to voice beyond what we had experienced in any of our workshops or performances,

empowering them not only to engage in the activities we were facilitating, but also to freely co-create with us, proposing and even leading collaborative artistic practices, and openly challenging our ‘professional’ thoughts and practices.

A2, A4, and A5 during morning session co-creating with a member of the community.

Shared-Moment-1: P9 co-creating a dance/circus/song performance together with A2, A4 and A5 based on an original song P9 had written. P9 described how co-authors invited him to guide the collaboration. Together—but following P9’s vision—they crafted a shared performance in which dance and acrobatics responded to the tone, rhythm, and feeling of his

song. Despite "having limited artistic experience" and recognizing "the mastery and skill" of the co-authors, P9 discusses "feeling completely equal" to them. He highlights how A4, and A2 openly asked him for guidance and suggestions for their dance, explicitly articulating how his thoughts were inspiring and opening new creative possibilities. He describes how co-authors not only supported him with encouragement, but also by not shying away from giving their opinion, or challenging his thoughts when they saw other potentials or disagreed. Being treated as an artistic voice that can offer unique contributions, and that can also be contested in the same way co-authors contested each other—while co-authors "humbly" positioned their opinion and thoughts as contingent—resulted in a "horizontal" experience of belonging according to this participant.

Arts-based shared sessions brought new inspirations not only to the community but also to us, allowing us to see our pedagogical and artistic practices in a new light, questioning aspects we had taken for granted, and co-crafting new pedagogical approaches together with and for participants where they would have the competencies and motivation to belong. Seeing the new interest and engagement that resulted from these experimentations prompted us to further question our role in previously obscuring or partially silencing participants' voices.

These experiences led us to recognize that "bringing arts to people…not just asking them to come to us" (A1) should mean more than increasing the reach of our practices, but rather "allowing people to take us out of our structure" (A2)—learning through and with the diverse artistic voices of others how to co-craft spaces where they can also comfortably belong. These thoughts pervaded all of our interventions, inspiring us to move from performative approaches to participation, to increasingly

co-developed pedagogical and shared spaces of co-learning, where we could also be invited into the artistry of others.

A5 teaching a Swedish song to members of the community before participants seized control of the intervention.

Shared-Moment-2: On the second-to-last day with the community, A5 had planned to lead a community singing workshop. Some of the co-authors joined the choir as participants, while others observed and documented from the outside. The goal was to create an open and welcoming singing space where, drawing on her choir experience, A5 would guide the group through various singing exercises and warmups—focusing on offering a diversity of exercises that different participants could resonate with—and introduce a selection of songs—some familiar, some likely new to the participants. The session began as planned. We observed how, drawing on her experience, skills, and adopting a caring, and a warm presence, A5 worked to establish a confident and structured environment. However, partway through the

workshop, an unexpected moment shifted the dynamic. After the group had finished one of the songs led by A5, a participant (P10) stepped forward and confidently proposed, "I have an idea for something we could sing together." Looking around at the whole group—not specifically at A5—P10 introduced a movement and singing canon exercise, which the group joyfully embraced. This spontaneous contribution further enlivened the already playful yet confident atmosphere. Soon, other participants began suggesting new exercises and songs, gradually taking full ownership of the session. A5, along with the co-authors who had been participating, let go of control and merged seamlessly with the group. What had started as a facilitated workshop had now become a fully community-led activity—animated, shared, and self-directed by participants who seemed to have forgotten that we were there.[5]

6- Sharing Our Learnings: Challenging Belonging Through Shared Pedagogical Practices

Engaging with participants in co-crafting pedagogical spaces for belonging became a transformative effort for the project and our practices. Acknowledging that our research can result is only a small, and partial step toward informing art-pedagogical spaces where participants voices can belong, we now turn to sharing the insights that emerged through reflecting on this transformative process—offered not as radically new thoughts on the field, nor as transferable solutions, but as situated insights that may both resonate and build on the work of others navigating similar aims.

[5] Due to participants' moving around into different positions once they seized control of the activity, we could not find a picture where we had permission from all members of the community to be portrayed. Instead we share a previous moment where we can more easily control who appears in the image.

6.1- Recognizing Ambiguous Power Dynamics

Participants' statements—for example when describing feeling “not good enough” or “not an artist”—illustrate how excellence-driven understandings of the arts (see Assefa, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández 2008; Westerlund & Gaunt 2021) may contribute to unbelonging, exclusions, and reduced participation. At the same time, participants describing moments of belonging as artists that emerged through being recognized by the co-authors—such as “being heard and valued” (P2) or “being taken seriously” (P3)—highlight how our positions as established artists, shaped by the same excellence-driven norms that had previously excluded some participants, could also enable belonging. In this sense, the recognition we offered carried weight because it was rooted in hierarchical understandings of artistic value—revealing how those very norms could both limit and facilitate participation and belonging.

In line with Ansdell et al. (2020), such examples illustrate how the power facilitators hold is not in itself “good or bad,” but always present and deeply impactful. As Higgins (2024, p. 105) emphasizes, this power must be acknowledged and engaged with responsibly. But recognizing power is only a first step—what we do with that recognition matters just as much.

Scholars and practitioners have long sought to take responsibility for these imbalances by asking how facilitators might support participants appropriately: What kinds of support are useful? How much guidance should be offered? When should we intervene or step back? (Ansdell et al., 2020; Higgins, 2024; Patel, 2022). These questions aim to care for participants by responding to uneven dynamics. However, when we—facilitators—are the ones crafting the questions and shaping the

responses, we may unintentionally reaffirm our central role—risking a return to hierarchies that define belonging on the facilitator's terms. As Ansdell et al. (2020, p. 135) ask, are we "showing the way, or getting in the way"?

As we will introduce in the next subheadings, we saw value in not only engaging with and reacting to these important questions, but also complementing them with practices that address the paradox of power: it will always be there, but it is still worth challenging. If left unexamined, even careful and caring facilitation may reinforce the same frameworks and standards that shaped our authority in the first place—limiting how participants engage, what they learn, and whose voices are centered. Taking responsibility, then, also means working to question and unsettle these dynamics, even when they cannot be fully dismantled. Through this, we might move toward spaces where belonging is not granted, but co-created.

6.2- Responding Through Shared Critical Dialogue

Taking responsibility for our power, and supporting participants' sense of belonging meant rethinking whose ideas and values defined our artistic practices.

Opening these challenges and hopes to participants, got us to integrate reflective sessions into our shared artistic practices—not as separate add-ons, but as central, dialogic moments of shared meaning-making. During arts-based sessions and interventions we explicitly allocated time to dialogically, and collaboratively explore terms like 'art,' 'artist,' and 'creativity' with participants—opening these concepts up for collective reimagining. This process aimed not only to expand participants' perception of belonging as artists—by opening up more diverse

understandings of the arts in which they could see themselves belonging—but also to affirm their role as co-guides in shaping artistic practices that resonated with their own possibilities, motivations, and competencies to belong on their own terms (Allen et al., 2021).

These pedagogical choices were informed by calls in the field to interrogate dominant artistic frameworks as a means of expanding how people experience and practice the arts (Camlin, 2023; Liu et al., 2024). By bringing critical reflections into our community context, we aimed to move beyond abstract critique—often directed at practitioners or scholars—towards critical dialogue as a situated, shared practice that not only shaped how participants engaged in artistic processes but also affirmed their voices, feelings, and ideas.

The impact of this shift became visible in both participants' artistic experiences and interpersonal dynamics. Aligning with research highlighting the transformative potential of shared reflection and collaborative knowledge creation to amplify participants' voices, validate their lived experiences, and foster agency (Asakura, 2019; Patel, 2022); we observed how participants began to "take more risks" artistically (A3) and expressed their artistic opinions more confidently during collaborations (A2). More significantly, participants described how the reflective process gave them the confidence to challenge our artistic decisions and suggest alternatives for how our shared practice could evolve.

Reflecting on these experiences, we identify how belonging began to shift from something granted by facilitators early in the research—or something one must conform to—toward something co-constructed through mutual questioning and

shared authority that culminated in participants´ take over in Shared-Moment-2. We suggest that these changes reflect more than just increased access or participation—they point to an evolving shift in participants´ relationship to artistic and pedagogical hierarchies, in which participants acted not only within the practice, but also upon it to propose artistic spaces where they could belong on their own terms.

6.3- Responding Through Practice

Aiming to enable diverse spaces for belonging and to unsettle the unequal power we held as facilitators, we also responded through our artistic practices. We invited participants to lead and guide us in co-creative processes centered on their artistic visions and approaches. Recognizing participants as “the only potential experts in their own art” (A1), we focused on being pedagogically present and curious—demonstrating in action how we were learning from participants’ unique perspectives, transparently incorporating what we learned into our own practice, and allowing them to experience how they enriched our process. We suggest that these efforts may have contributed to participants feeling “taken seriously” in a “professional but playful space” (P4), by fostering increasingly reciprocal collaborations in which both facilitators and participants acted as *artists among artist*s.

Shared-Moment-1 reflects these dynamics. In this collaboration, P9’s artistic vision shaped the structure, pacing, and affective tone of a piece co-created with co-authors. He guided the process with specific suggestions about the artistic atmosphere and direction he envisioned. Co-authors responded by actively learning

from the artistic cues he offered—embracing unfamiliar ways of working, stepping into uncomfortable spaces where they were not the experts in order to meet P9 in the space where he comfortably belonged. They explicitly voiced to P9 how this process expanded their own artistic practices. They treated P9 as an artistic peer, not only by listening attentively and respecting his lead, but also by responding to his ideas with creative challenges of their own—aiming not to take control, but to "harmonize" with his artistic voice without displacing it. This required a careful balance: they consciously decentered their own preferences—describing them as contingent and personal—while remaining aware of their power as facilitators and still choosing to engage fully as artists.

This experience was grounded in Matarasso's (2019) view that each person holds a unique capacity to create and express meaning through their own art. Our goal was then to step beyond our own comfort zones into spaces where participants' unique voices could belong (Carson & Westvall, 2016). In Abrahams' (2007) terms, we hoped to support participants in "knowing that they know," and from that place, perceive, and perform belonging.

Still, engaging participants as equal artists while holding positional power presents a complex challenge—requiring ongoing negotiation of when to share space and when to make space (Ansdell, 2020; Higgins, 2024). Our response to this challenge resonates with Waghid's (2019) concept of rhythmic care: a form of pedagogical engagement shaped by elastic movement between centering oneself and centering others, between supporting and challenging. It emphasizes the role of mutual learning and responsiveness in co-creating pedagogical direction

(Garcia-Cuesta, 2025). Rather than withdrawing or taking charge, rhythmic care urged us to stay attuned to others, fluidly negotiating when to contribute, when to withdraw, and when to create space for participants to shape the process (Garcia-Cuesta, 2025; Waghid 2019).[6]

Through our practice we enacted rhythmic care. We moved fluidly between artistic positions—from immersing ourselves in others' artistries to openly offering our own, from momentarily withholding our input to challenging participants' ideas, from teaching what we knew to learning what they knew, and from leading pedagogical spaces to following or merging with the group.

The impact of these dynamics can be observed in both Shared-Moment-1 and Shared-Moment-2. In Shared-Moment-1, P9 described "feeling completely equal" to co-authors despite recognizing their artistic mastery—highlighting how their elastic movement between openness to his guidance, willingness to be inspired by his ideas, and readiness to contest them respectfully resulted in what he experienced as a "horizontal experience of belonging". In Shared-Moment-2, this fluid exchange—shifting between leading, making space, and letting go—culminated in a participant stepping forward to lead their own activity while the facilitator blended into the group. Taken together, these moments suggest how rhythmic movements from leading, to following, to challenging, to letting go can support participants in embodying belonging as leaders of their own artistic processes.

[6] The concept is too complex to describe in depth in this article, or thoroughly discuss how it differs from other approaches to facilitations that are power-aware and argue for flexibility (Ansdell, 2020; Higgins, 2024). However, recognizing the importance that it had in our understanding of the complexities of our roles, and believing it might inspire practitioners navigating similar challenges we decided to keep it in the text. Thus, and even though we can barely introduce it here, we invite readers to refer to (Waghid, 2019) or (Garcia-Cuesta, 2025) for further exploration..

We can't do it alone: A reciprocal invitation

There are many ways of experiencing, participating in, and learning through artistic processes (Carson & Westvall, 2016). Even when facilitators act with care and the intention to challenge norms, we may not fully recognize the limitations of our own approaches or know how to meaningfully engage with the unique artistry of each participant. When such limitations go unacknowledged, well-meaning efforts to expand belonging risk becoming "one-way processes of normalization, where the marginalized are included... into the center which remains more or less stagnated" (Laes & Westerlund, 2017, p. 42).

Echoing calls within community arts traditions to unsettle facilitators' expectations of community arts, and to move toward co-constructed artistic practices where participants and facilitators could "be in common" differently (Schaefer, 2022), a turning point in our project came when we stopped trying to build counter-practices that make space for others and instead asked what it would mean to build practices *with* others—"allowing people to take us out of our structure" (A2). Engaging with the diverse artistic voices around us as co-learners not only deepened the project's impact in the community, but reshaped our own practices—through engaging with the diverse voices of the community we grew as artists and facilitators, allowing us to uncover new ways to further engage and impact the community, in a synergistic cycle of growth.

These experiences show that goals of expanding belonging, and goals for social, artistic, and personal growth are not separate, but might be deeply

interconnected. As Carson and Westvall (2024, p. 15) put it, as more people access “collaborative artistic experiences”, practitioners are enriched by “new modes of expression”, simultaneously strengthening practitioners’ artistic practice, and the social impact of the arts.

In this process, we identify how participatory projects offer unique possibilities to challenge and expand the field by creating points of engagement with the artistic diversity of participants. Our experience aligns with Kenny’s reflections on relational and collaborative community partnerships as “pivot points” for transforming how we think and work in the arts. We close by echoing her call: “We cannot do it alone” (Kenny, 2021, p. 31)—and perhaps we never should.

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Appendix B-Consent Template

AALBORG UNIVERSITET

Declaration of consent

Aalborg University (AAU) is the data controller in connection with our research.

We ask for your consent to process your personal data. The purpose of the processing is in relation to the PhD. research project “Collaboratively Expanding Practices, Understandings, and Belongings: An Integrative Approach to Music Education”. This project is based on the understanding of the individual as an aesthetic being with inherent, creative competencies, and utilizes this premise to develop new knowledge on how to co-create artistic activities that can have an impact on people´s self-understanding, identity and quality of life.

By signing this declaration, you consent to let us:

- Process these personal data: General personal data and, when considered relevant to the purpose of this study, possibly sensitive personal data will be collected for research purposes. The data collected will be related to the aforementioned theme of the project, and be drawn from the group and individual interviews and reflections, addressing issues such as participation, motivation, empowerment, background, or life experiences of the individual related to the arts, music, education or well-being. This will be done in the form of audio recordings of interviews, field notes of observations, formal and Informal interviews with participants, and video observations/photographs. Additionally, for further contact with the participants involved and organization of the data, e-mail, phone number, and age will be collected.

- Publish our results and the following personal data: The data will be used for research dissemination as well as teaching and lectures under conditions of pseudo anonymity. This may include reproductions of audio and/or visual material, and the use of transcripts, impressions and excerpts in academic articles, for teaching purposes, conference presentations or other dissemination activities. If still images and selected clips are used, all names will be removed, however face-obscuring etc. will not be applied. For textual reproductions, such as e.g. academic articles, references to name will be anonymized, unless a different agreement with the specific person involved has been made.

- Reuse the data in our research in a period of 4 year(s) after your consent.

- Disclose your data to our partners in the research. The research partners share the same purpose and are subject to the same rules of confidentiality, as any AAU employee. If we disclose your data, you will receive a notice.

The data will be stored securely, and we will use the data solely for the above purpose.

You always have the right to revoke your consent. If you wish to revoke your consent later on, you can send an email to: kultur-laering@hum.aau.dk

Under the General Data Protection Regulation, you are entitled to receive a series of information that you can find below.

Best regards,

Sergio Garcia Cuesta
PhD. student
sergiogc@ikl.aau.dk
Aalborg University, DK-9220 Aalborg, CVR no. 2910238

AALBORG UNIVERSITET

YOUR SIGNATURE

☐ (Tick)

I hereby consent to AAU processing my data in accordance with the above purpose and information.

Date:
Name:

_____
Signature

AALBORG UNIVERSITET

INFORMATION APPENDICES

HOW WE PROCESS YOUR DATA

WE ARE THE DATA CONTROLLER

Aalborg University
Fredrik Bajers Vej 7K
DK-9220 Aalborg
CVR no. 2910238

THE PURPOSE OF PROCESSING YOUR DATA

The purpose of the processing is in relation to the PhD. research project “Collaboratively Expanding Practices, Understandings, and Belongings: An Integrative Approach to Music Education”. This project is based on the understanding of the individual as an aesthetic being with inherent, creative competencies, and utilizes this premise to develop new knowledge on how to co-create artistic activities that can have an impact on people´s self-understanding, identity and quality of life.

No material with identifiable persons will be released for use in the public media unless it has been agreed with the people involved. The data might be used for research dissemination under conditions of pseudo anonymity such as in conferences, publication of academic articles, or teaching situations.

WE PROCESS THE FOLLOWING PERSONAL DATA:

General personal data (see Article 6(1) (a))
(E.g. name, address, email, age, self-published data etc.)

Sensitive personal data (see Article 9(2) (a))
(E.g. health data, racial origin, political opinions etc.)

The data collected will be related to the aforementioned theme of the project, and be drawn from the group and individual interviews and reflections, addressing issues such as participation, motivation, empowerment, background, or life experiences of the individual related to the arts, music or well-being. This will be done in the form of audio recordings of interviews, field notes of observations, formal and Informal interviews with participants, and possibly video observations/photographs. Additionally for further contact with the participants involved and organization of the data, e-mail, phone number, and age will be collected

HOW WE STORE YOUR DATA

We will store your personal data for as long as necessary for the data processing purpose for which we are obtaining your consent and in accordance with the applicable legislation. We will then erase your personal data.

YOUR RIGHTS

When we process your personal data, you have several rights under the General Data Protection Regulation. For example, you have a right to erasure and a right to data portability.

In certain cases, you have a right of access, a right to rectification, a right to restriction of processing and a right to object to our processing of the personal data in question.

Be aware that you cannot withdraw your consent with retroactive effect.

You can read more about your rights in our privacy policy, which you will find here: https://www.aau.dk/om-cookies/.

AALBORG UNIVERSITET

AAU's Data Protection Officer

If you have general questions about your rights, you can contact our Data Protection Officer Niels Vase at dpo@aau.dk

Do you want to complain?

We must and will always comply with the rules. If you believe that we do not meet our responsibility or that we do not process your data according to the rules, you may lodge a complaint with the Danish Data Protection Agency at dt@datatilsynet.dk.

However, we encourage you also to contact us, as we want to do our utmost to accommodate your complaint.