

PERSPECTIVES ON MUSIC EDUCATION IN ESTONIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract. *The content of education at schools meeting the demand for culturally, socially and politically relevant knowledge, skills and competencies for a particular society has remained an issue of debate in all times. Estonia started development of a new national curriculum (NC) in 2020/2021 and both – the content of learning as well as its organization from kindergartens up to the end of gymnasia became a serious issue. The main topic for debates were the proportions of compulsory and optional subjects, especially at the final level (grades 10–12). Music and other art subjects must prove their positions during recent pandemia and military conflicts. The aim of the study is to map expectations of different target groups concerning the future of music education creating the basis for development of music culture in society.*

The students (n=203) were asked to write essays, analyzing why learning music at high school level is meaningful or not for their personal development. The people responsible for pan-Estonia cultural organizations were interviewed (n=10) and the data were analyzed qualitatively. The results of the study can be used for development of music syllabi in NC of all levels of general education under the present conditions and for teacher training.

Keywords: *compulsory subjects, music education, national curriculum, optional /elective subjects, syllabus.*

Introduction and background to the study

Including music education in the compulsory school curriculum has been a topic of political debate in many countries for various reasons. The content of universal education is a type of social contract to meet the demand for culturally, socially and

politically relevant knowledge, skills and competencies for members of a particular society. This means that National Curricula (NC) are formulated for a specific context and period of time, and are influenced by various factors ranging from local school traditions to contemporary global issues and regional circumstances. Understandably, the social demand for the aforementioned objectives, often described as competencies, results in their being selected, specified and organized in different ways. There are core curriculum documents, subject-based encyclopedic curricula, or the content can be presented in another form suitable for its intended audience. Curricula for different age groups and students with diverse abilities (from those who are gifted to those who have special educational needs) require different approaches, and are therefore designed and structured accordingly (Befring, 1997; Unt, 2005; Janson, 2020; Läänemets, 2021).

It is difficult for professional educators to decide what type of education is best and most meaningful for the population in rapidly changing times and conditions. Thomas Popkewitz has compared this process to alchemy, and drew attention to the shift in principles for their specification over time. The subject content must also assist those with differing levels of literacy (Popkewitz, 2015; Popkewitz, 2018) and ability to become members of the society (Autio, 2022; Läänemets, 2017). The NC must be based on value-related philosophical foundations, and an ideology/set of ideas understood and accepted as cultural norms and historical roots (Tröhler, 2016) have to be determined in advance. David Tyack and William Tobin created the term “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) to refer to “standardized organizational practices in dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into subjects”. However, following discussions about innovative changes to curricula, the question was asked “why certain features of schooling persist and how they might be understood” (Courtney & Mann, 2020). They also highlight global influences on schooling, such as industrialism, welfarism, neoliberalism and neo-conservatism (*ibid.*), of which neoliberalism in particular has put forward autonomy, choice and freedom as new ideals, especially in post-socialist countries.

International organizations (the OECD and European Commission) have also offered their recommendations (e.g. “shrinking smartly” for optimizing school networks in Estonia), and at meetings of national leaders/ministers of education (e.g. the annual World Education Forum) new aspirations and experience gained so far are presented. The forthcoming World Education Forum, with 118 countries participating, will take place 7–10 May 2023 on the topic of “Education: Building forward together; stronger, bolder, better”. Among other goals, a concluding statement is made: “In all, we hope that we will each have been helped to develop our own picture, for our own contexts, of how we should build a stronger, bolder and

better future. The program will inform us about planning and developing education to support individual and collective resilience, economic progress and the contribution education can or should make.” Accordingly, learning from shared ideas about the improvement of education, decision-making at the national level remains the responsibility of local educational leaders and stakeholders.

The development of NC as well as the meaning and potential of school subjects has been a hotly debated issue for educational policy-making in Estonia since 1991. Freedom of choice has been declared to be of the utmost value, especially concerning the proportion of compulsory and elective courses at the high school level. In addition to 63 compulsory subjects, some high schools offer more than 100 optional/elective courses from which students can choose 33 to comprise the 96 courses required for graduation. Implementing school curricula is also related to economic issues and necessary resources (time, money, professional competencies) and has a price tag. Music education is costly as it requires special learning environments (including instruments), lengthier training for the teachers, and is often declared elitist as not everyone is interested in or able to perform music. However, music education has been compulsory in Estonian schools from the 19th century, and is closely related historically to secular Lutheranism, cultural traditions and ethnic identity building.

Estonia began the development of a new national curriculum (NC) in 2020/2021, and strongly conflicting opinions have been expressed with regard to both the content and its organization from kindergarten to the end of gymnasium/high school. The main topic of debate has been the proportion of compulsory and optional subjects, especially at the final levels (Grades 10–12). Music and art have had to prove their worth during the recent pandemic and military conflicts, when conditions and environments greatly changed and new forms of learning, mainly supported by ICT, were implemented. However, remote learning of any type and school subject, and even hybrid models, have less to offer than contact lessons with an experienced professional music teacher. The most efficient and supportive learning environments contain different elements: functional classrooms, study aids, ICT, and human communication, as post-pandemic feedback has shown.

This study is part of a research program that began in 2015, and which is dedicated to different aspects of mapping and analyzing music education in Estonian schools. The issue of offering free access to music education for all children and young people from kindergarten to the end of high school has to be decided at the national level. Our research has also gained support from the results of recent brain research, which have identified the special potential of music education with respect to many aspects of human development (Tervaniemi, 2017; Huotilainen, 2021), including the mental wellbeing of young people in digitalized daily environments.

Purpose of the study. Considering the longitudinal program, started in 2015 the main research question in this study is to specify how different target groups envisage the future of learning music in high schools. This study is mapping how learning music can create a basis for the development of music culture in society as well as for students' individual development.

Research methods

The study is based on qualitative approach. The data were collected from November 2021 to February 2022. Students (n=203) were asked to write essays, in which they explained why they do or do not consider learning music at the high school level meaningful for their personal development. The essays were collected from 2 high schools (one located in the capital Tallinn and the other in a rural district). The students at high school level grades (10–12, aged 16–19) were asked to express their ideas by writing essays and discussing the topic “My opinion about the music education as a compulsory subject at school”. The content of the collected essays was analyzed according to three basic criteria: opinions/arguments explaining why compulsory music education at Estonian schools could be considered necessary; why it is not necessary as part of an obligatory curriculum and ideas/recommendations how music education could be organized so that it would meet students' expectations, intellectual and social needs in the best possible way. Supportive arguments explaining the needs for music education for everybody were analyzed in depth by the following subcategories considering: widening of student's cultural awareness and world outlook, its potential for socialization, development of emotional literacy and national/ethnic identity.

Interviews with a new target group – representatives of pan-Estonian cultural organizations (n=10), which are responsible for specific activities at the national level, were used as another instrument for data collection. The aim was to describe how official/national organizations perceive the role of school music education in sustaining and developing a music culture in Estonia. The following organizations were consulted: the Estonian Society for Music Education (R1), whose members are general comprehensive school teachers; the Association of Estonian Professional Musicians (R7); the Music Estonia Centre (R4), which is occupied with developing music management; the Estonian Song Celebration Centre (R3, R10), which plans and organizes these festivals; the Estonian Choral Society (R2), which is comprised of professional and semi-professional choirs, and the Estonian Concert organization (R5). The Estonian representative and research coordinator for the European Music Exporters Exchange (R6), and consultants with the Parliamentary Commission for Education and Culture (R8, R9) were also interviewed.

The data collected by interviews were analyzed by means of the web-based software QCAMap, and the following two main categories and subcategories were specified: 1) music education, with subcategories for music education in general comprehensive schools (concerning the role and necessity of school music education), and at informal hobby schools (with respect to the inclusion of choral singing in the curricula, and challenges related to organizing choirs), and 2) music in society, (with a subcategory for Song Celebrations, which distinguished between the significance of traditional Youth Song Celebrations and the challenges the tradition is encountering). The students' essays were analyzed using qualitative content analysis with following categories 1) cultural and historical horizons (shared knowledge, values); 2) socialization, identity, wellbeing (social skills, shared repertoire, national identity, creating cohesive society); 3) individual musical literacy (basic musical skills, creativity development).

Results and discussion

According to the design of the study the target groups were chosen and linked considering how the results of music education at schools can be used for developing music culture in society at large, using its full potential. It also means contribution for enhancement of cohesive society and students' musical literacy and identity building.

Target group 1: students. The majority of students recognized the role and high potential of music education for widening their mental horizons by offering knowledge in different fields of life. Music education at schools enables students to understand and value different styles of music as well as music of other countries through which they can increase their cultural awareness. Comprehension of one's own music culture as well as that of different countries helps to understand the role of music in development of their ethnic characteristics, common values, their statehoods and contemporary values. Students have perceived and recognized the great contribution music education has provided them with for development of their own ethnic roots, traditions and cultural identity.

The task of music education is to transfer traditions. It is most important from the point of our ethnical belonging, because without culture we would cease to exist as a nation/ethnic group. In addition to widening our cultural awareness and outlook, we also learn in music lessons some history and develop our creativity/creative skills (S15; S= student, 15- participant's number)

The ideas expressed by students also showed that when learning some history of our state in music lessons, it also helps them to understand older generations and all society as well as to discover and identify oneself. Shared values, shared

repertoire (mostly for singing) and knowledge about our culture can unite different generations, diminish controversies and avoid social conflicts.

Song Celebrations have united our people and preserved cohesion in society throughout times. In music lessons we have learned the repertoire of those celebrations, their history, and discussed the values shared by this particular tradition. (S122) Music has a significant role in preserving our history and culture. Music, especially folksongs are those, which describe our life and beliefs in those days when there was no literary language or fixed texts. These songs have been transferred as an oral tradition from parents and grandparents to offspring up to the present days and we have to teach them to coming generations. We learn about these traditions and there are some, which we will observe presently and definitely carry on. (S26)

Music education has a great potential for development of students' social skills and becoming a member of society. Joint singing, often in choirs and ensembles, means teamwork, discussions of different topics, individual explanations and expressing oneself musically – all this makes students more self-confident and aware of their own social roles and potential. *Music can overcome language barriers. It is something that brings people together despite their belonging or background. Music teaches equality and the importance of belonging together. (S118)*

There is also a great potential of music education for development of creativity and fantasy in activities. Joint singing in music lessons makes students perceive their class as a united team/group in which they learn to understand and use contributions of their peers for the sake of common achievement. In addition, when listening and analyzing different styles, timbers and pieces of music, students develop their musical taste and acquire skills to understand and value music, belonging to the educated concert audience and informed and aware consumer of culture.

Although I do not feel the great need to identify myself every day as Estonian, I feel something very special, when I happen to come across songs, performed at Song Celebrations; it is a kind of feeling pride of being Estonian by birth, which one cannot describe. (S26) We all have our favorite songs, which we know by heart and there are specific songs which we bear in mind for a long time, and we often remember them related to a particular event or situation (S32)

The students, participating in this study have also considered important to offer some generalizations, according to which they expect to acquire at school wider and stronger foundations for informed decision making concerning their future professions and opportunities at the labor market. So they also expect to have a chance to learn about the activities of professional musicians and find out about their own potential interests in music and music related professional activities. There are some interesting views characterizing students' thinking and planning.

I have sometimes heard from my peers that they do not consider music education at school necessary at all, or if, then only for children in primary grades, when small kids can just enjoy singing. I think that the knowledge and skills acquired in music lessons do not offer much for future jobs. However, young people do not know at such an early age, what life could offer them as options or new fields of interests. I think it is important to find out and try different things, even if it tends to be boring or meaningless. (S12)

Is it really necessary to learn subjects, which the majority of students can never use in their future jobs and/or everyday lives? This statement could be questioned with a new question, and namely – how can a person know what he/she will need in future or not? (S21)

Still, there is a small number of students (18 out of 203), who consider music education not much related to their future lives. They are of the opinion that music as a school subject could be among the electives at high school level and explain that by that age they have already found out the specific fields they are really interested in and probably could use as supportive for their future activities.

My experience so far has shown that if you know math formulae and physics, then you can live all anything else or new. My dad, for instance, who works in IT field, always likes to say that he is more willing to solve ten math tasks than write one essay. It makes me think that life is probably not only math and we might need other skills as well, in addition to those. May be when looking for a job. (S15)

The majority of respondents have also mentioned that music lessons offer them a sense of feeling well, which helps them better focus on learning during schooldays, often filled with stress and anxiety. It is also perceived as a nice alternative and therapeutic activity, which helps to switch over from problems to some pleasant self-expression by means of music; it can reduce anxiety and increase self-awareness. *Let's imagine the situation: you have just received back your test in some other school subject with a poor mark or negative feedback. But if your next lesson is music, where you sing with your class something nice, you can get rid of your worries. (S121)*

Listening to music supports learning languages; it helps to acquire phonetics and also vocabulary. It is also possible to develop your language skills by singing (and think about lyrics). Learning to play instruments and notes trains our memory. Better memory, in turn helps to remember important facts and concepts in any school subject. Without listening to music and remembering lyrics my foreign language skills would be considerably worse. Music education helps and develops our thinking in other school subjects as well, often we do not even notice it. (S15)

It can be concluded that nobody of high school students has questioned the importance of music education at lower levels of general education, everybody has

considered it meaningful and relevant for kids in kindergartens and compulsory schools (9 grade schools in Estonia). The majority of respondents have perceived music education as something positive and supportive for development of an intelligent, ethical, emotionally stable, emphatic, tolerant and cooperative personality, able to manage one's life. So they expect music education to be preserved as a necessary and needed component of high school education. However, there was a small group of respondents, who proposed to offer music education as an elective at high school level. The reasons for that can be various and need specifications by a specific research of changing values. One can speculate perhaps considering technology and money-oriented new social values, willingness to change one's approaches and attitudes as new opportunities arise and aspirations towards focusing on individual wellbeing.

Target group 2: representatives of cultural organizations. The views expressed in interviews indicated that *wide and many-sided music education* (R6; R= respondent, 6=interviewee's number) should function in *ideal symbiosis*, (R1) including compulsory music education as well as the types of activities offered in informal hobby schools – music groups of various kinds: school choirs, vocal and instrumental ensembles, folk groups, school bands, etc. None of the respondents questioned the need for music education, or its positive impact on young people's development, but questions and doubts arose with regard to implementation and decision-making about the required financial resources.

We are facing real challenges when we have to create conditions, mainly environments. Music activities require extra expenses (money), rooms/places and technical equipment..., also instruments to play... (R6)

School music lessons can lead to specialized music instruction. Teachers are usually aware of students' talents and interests and can recommend in-depth studies for them. *Studies at hobby schools and ordinary schools should support each other, they cannot replace each other. Ideal would be, if music teachers can detect talents in first music lessons already and recommend them additional music activities at music schools, in professional choirs and use them as much as possible at their own school events. (R1)*

Cooperation and integrated music learning at schools with extracurricular activities create special environments for functioning cultural communities. Sound arguments were made in support of music education as an important school subject. The majority of respondents highlighted the value of introducing music culture to students to promote its further transmission.

Music culture is a part of Estonian culture, it must be preserved and valued. (R5)

There are many aspects of music culture and musical literacy. Respondents considered the development of educated concert audiences to be meaningful, and therefore felt that high quality music experiences (often classical music concerts) must be made available/accessible. The frequency with which students attend concerts greatly depends on teachers and their values, as concert attendance requires extra time and money for tickets. Several organizations that arrange concerts also contribute to this kind of education by offering lectures with concerts and even concert cycles that are especially designed for young people.

Respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with school education in general. They were of the opinion that *it does not support development of young people's multisided abilities for orientation in contemporary/modern cultural spaces.* (R8) This might refer to prevailing values and young people's fields of interest, as well as their orientation toward finding and processing information mainly through social networks and websites, which have diminished the role of traditional information channels (school textbooks, radio, television, newspapers), and direct human communication. These respondents see a role for music education to play in the development of critical thinking and fostering an awareness of different areas of human activity.

Music education can also support development of skills and abilities of those students who are more interested in sciences and hope to acquire some technical qualifications at vocational schools or become an engineer. The real task of engineering education is to train creative engineers, able to design technical and technological solutions. (R9)

Hobby schools support music education by working toward common goals. It is important to include choral singing in the NC, but this is currently left for schools and local communities to decide, which creates problems with designing school timetables and paying choir conductors.

Choir singing must be a part of NC. Music is a school subject for being and becoming a human – it gives skills, which cannot be obtained elsewhere – empathy, feelings/emotions etc. (R3) All respondents expressed a need to preserve music education from kindergarten through high school. In addition to developing creativity and sustaining music culture, they also saw the potential of music activities to develop students' social skills.

Music education develops creativity, but it also contributes to development of highly needed social approaches and skills, which are important for future specialists in all fields and jobs where they have to communicate with other people. (R9)

There are challenges associated with music education. Teachers often have to explain why music education is a meaningful school subject and that their job should be more highly valued and respected.

...we [music teachers] must fight and prove that music is a school subject as any other ... music is ... a real thing. ... We have constantly explain to colleagues and general public the role of music education. It is not a piece of small entertainment between other more important school subjects. (R1) Music education has to be culturally wide and students should have the right to decide about it themselves. The way, how we think about music education could be changed as well. 'Classical' music education means 'learning notes, singing in choirs.' At music school [learning again notes again and then we play instruments. But there are also other opportunities... All people, also those who cannot learn notes, should have some access/way to music and make it in different ways. There are technologies, etc. (R6)

The respondents were also concerned about the diminishing role of classical music. Some teachers no longer consider it important and do not try to motivate students to appreciate it, as young people's focusing skills have decreased considerably.

We have to take great pains to translate [music] when introducing this material [classical music] to them. (R5). The ability to concentrate is the first prerequisite for listening to music, especially classical music. The history of music is also closely related to the development of listening skills, and when teaching music, ways must be found to present classical and modern music as a meaningful whole and rather than treating them as opposites.

Several respondents highlighted the need to develop musical literacy, which is necessary for participation in ensembles and semi-professional choirs as adults. Musical activities such as singing in choirs or playing in orchestras provide opportunities to have a more meaningful and interesting life by forming friendships and discovering new identities, which are associated with belonging to a group.

Access to musical activities should be offered to all children ... as it is rewarding for everybody in our society. If music education at schools could address and help those young people who would like to make music in different ways. Nobody, interested in music should not be left without help ... if possible, support and encourage them, offer them some knowledge as well, so that they would not be busy with new apps only today. (R6)

There are also issues concerning web-based and other study aids. *Development of good materials is a complicated task, it is not a short-time hobby of some teachers. (R6).* The development of study aids, both traditional and web-based, requires special professional competency and money.

Another challenge is music teacher training, as today's student candidates often have inferior musical skills to those possessed by previous generations, and decisions with regard to education policy and the implementation of inclusive education have complicated teachers' work immensely. One of the forthcoming tasks must be the revision of music teacher training curricula to include increasing professional skills in different fields of music.

The tradition of Baltic Song Celebrations has been accorded UNESCO world heritage status. It is not simply a choral, or joint singing tradition, but one which is both polyphonic (multiple voices) and *a cappella* (without accompaniment). Various types of choirs perform at Song Celebrations, and they promote the development of musical skills among different age groups and also encourage individual musical activities.

If there were no music education at schools and choirs of different kind from primary grade students' choirs [children's choirs] until the end of high schools [mixed choirs], this tradition would not exist. ...music education is of utmost importance for Estonian choral singing culture. Of utmost importance. (R3)

Song Celebrations for young people are considered even more important than those for adults as the former pave the way for participation in the latter. School choirs create the foundations of the tradition and guarantee the sustainability of the celebrations. Still, there is a lack of young conductors and teachers, and they often do not continue working in schools.

For Song Celebrations (social) movement existence of school choirs is crucial. In ideal cases children would move on and continue step-by step to a following type of choir until they become members of adult choirs. (R1)

In the context of Song Celebrations it is important for children to get the emotion of singing in a huge choir of thousands that would 'carry them on' for long. Such an experience cannot be gained at school events. Participation in Song Celebration makes all singers 'stretch mentally out' in a different way. (R3)

However, it requires hard and smartly planned work from music teachers and choir conductors as well as from students to learn the repertoire, which is quite demanding. Sometimes they find the effort unmanageable, and quit. Also, there are not enough teachers and conductors, and many of them are old. (R3, R1, R10). Considering the gained results in this study they largely indicate to similar tendencies expressed in earlier researches (Huotilainen 2021, Popkewitz 2018).

Conclusions

This study has shown that music education has a special role in NC in many respects. The target groups expectations and ideas expressed allow to make more

informed decisions concerning development of music syllabi in NC of all levels of general education under the present conditions and for teacher training at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. However, there are certain limitations related to qualitative analyzes. Both, interviews and essays always remain subjective and all respondents could have been somewhat influenced by forthcoming Song Celebrations in 2023. Still, only music education at schools creates the basis for preserving the traditions and development of music culture in society. The proportions of compulsory and optional/elective school subjects require wider further studies and the future of learning music at schools as well as that of other school subjects. The *complicated conversation* about school curricula and the content of learning must go on.

Hilda Taba has said: “If education is to be a countervailing power in a technological culture, it needs to cultivate a conscious commitment to democratic values and a sense of personal and collective goals that lends new meaning to individual effort and achievement. Education must help people think collectively about social ends, since we no longer can count on collective goals, emerging from an “accidental coincidences of individual goals” (Taba, 1962).

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