

# Problems with school music in Finland

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*Almost every Finnish child and adolescent takes an interest in music in some form. However, many young people feel dissatisfaction with what music education institutions provide and fail to find them motivating. According to the results of a series of empirical studies, school music education can have a negative effect on many pupils and undermine their musical self-esteem. At the music education institutions where this research was undertaken, music was narrowly defined and there was an absence of contemporary music cultures. Forms of music making were limited and active music listening absent from lessons. Assessment too was a problem with many pupils feeling that the evaluation of their work lacked legitimacy and fairness.*

## Introduction

Music, in one form or another, is central to the life of every Western child. It may be an important hobby, way of life, entertainment or a consumer product. Everyone takes an interest in (or at least consumes) music in some form, because it is heard almost everywhere (Sloboda *et al.*, 2001; North *et al.*, 2004). Almost every school pupil listens to music; primarily to popular styles of music (Lamont *et al.*, 2003). Music is particularly important to middle and high school adolescents; it's a necessary component of their life. The meanings of music to adolescents may be divided into five principal themes: (a) identity formation in and through music, (b) emotional benefits, (c) music's benefits to life, including character-building and life skills, (d) social benefits and (e) positive and negative impressions of school music programmes and teachers (North *et al.*, 2000; Campbell *et al.*, 2007).

In England there is a perceived problem with school music, particularly at secondary level. This perception is shared by pupils, teachers, inspectors and policy makers. The problem is that although music is an increasingly important part of adolescents' lives and central to the identities of many pupils, a good deal of lower secondary school music seems to be unsuccessful, unimaginatively taught, and out of touch with the pupils' interests (Harland *et al.*, 2000, p. 568; Hargreaves *et al.* 2003; Lamont *et al.* 2003). Many English young people, who are skilful popular musicians, report that school music education is unhelpful or even detrimental (Green, 2002, pp. 127–176). Many adolescents drop out of formal music education, not because they are either uninterested or unmusical, but rather because they cannot respond to the kind of education it offers (Green, 2008, p. 3). Hargreaves and North (2001) point out that this issue with music education can be found in many countries, although it has wide national variations, and it may be less acute or

different in scope. In this article, I explore the situation in Finland in the light of a series of three research projects into music education at the upper level of the comprehensive school (pupils aged 14–17) and the upper secondary school (pupils aged 17–19), general class teacher education and the education of music subject teachers. I attempt to answer the question: is Finnish music education appropriate and functional or are there problems similar to those in England?

### **Organisation of Finnish school music education**

Pupils attend Finnish comprehensive schools (aged 7–16, classes I–IX) as part of their compulsory education. This may be followed by vocational or upper secondary school education (usually aged 16–19). Music is studied throughout the Finnish comprehensive school and the general upper secondary school. Music is a compulsory subject during the first seven years of the comprehensive school, but in the eighth and ninth years it is optional: pupils may choose to study either music or art. This article focuses on eighth year pupils (aged 14–15) of the comprehensive school and second year pupils (aged 17–18) of the upper secondary school. In the eighth year, pupils who choose music have one compulsory music lesson per week and, in addition, they may choose additional optional courses. Thus, pupils in the eighth class of the comprehensive school may have no music lessons at all, one lesson per week or – because of optional studies – more than one. In the upper secondary school the situation is still more complicated, but usually pupils have one music lesson per week in the first class and after that only optional courses. At the lower level of the comprehensive school (pupils aged 7–13), music is taught by class teachers, but at the upper level of comprehensive and secondary schools, by music subject teachers.

A potential weakness of music education in Finnish schools is the limited number of lessons. Pupils at the upper level of the comprehensive school (aged 13–16) usually have only one lesson per week, and music is a compulsory subject during only the first year. The situation in secondary schools is similar; it's difficult to carry out all the intentions of the national core curriculum within so few lessons. Because of large learner groups and few lessons, it's difficult to systematically develop playing skills, and music teaching is mostly concentrated on singing together and listening to music (Jaakkola, 1998).

While the amount of time spent on music lessons has decreased, school teaching in general has become more challenging (Kiviniemi, 2000). The amount of disruptive behavior has increased. The classes are more heterogeneous, and it makes the teaching of large groups difficult: teachers feel they lack sufficient knowledge and opportunities to address some of the issues they are confronted with (Virta & Kurikka, 2001, p. 59).

### **Goals and content of school music education**

The tasks, content and other aspects of Finnish music teaching are defined in *Municipal Curricula* which are based on the *National Core Curriculum* stipulated by the National Board of Education (POP, 2004, p. 8). The core curriculum states that the goals of teachers' work are both the teaching of subjects and the general education of pupils. The principal goal of the comprehensive school and the upper secondary school is to make pupils active members of society and develop in them a strong cultural identity. Schools try to support learners to develop knowledge and skills for life through promoting self-esteem and helping

them to develop the skill and willingness to think critically – this lays the foundation for lifelong learning. To make this possible, the values of the school system include paying attention to the needs of different learners (LOP, 2003, p. 3; POP, 2004, p. 12).

According to the National Board of Education, the aims of school music education include, among other things, helping pupils to identify their musical interests; encouraging them to become involved in musical activity, providing them with the means of expressing themselves through music, and supporting their holistic development. An important part of music education is to help young people understand that music is connected to time and place; it is different in different eras, cultures and societies, and it has different meanings for different people (LOP, 2003, p. 170; POP, 2004, p. 230). Music education is required to support the formation of the pupil's own musical identity (POP, 2004, p. 230). Music education is not just about 'content' but is also about getting the pupils to see music as being important, to learn to express themselves, and to develop as a human being.

In the *National Core Curriculum*, which stipulates what is to be taught in Finnish schools, the content of music teaching is defined broadly and even perhaps vaguely. It consists mainly of singing, playing instruments and listening to music of various styles and genres. According to the core curriculum, it is important to get pupils to try out their own musical ideas by improvising, arranging and composing e.g. for voice, singing, musical instruments, dancing and technology (POP, 2004, pp. 230–231). Teachers should take into account pupils' different musical orientations and skills so that the tasks are felt to be meaningful (LOP, 2003, p. 170).

The focus of music teaching's goals and content is clearly on the development of pupils' active music making – on the development of musicianship. In this respect, the view of the Board of Education on music education is more praxial than aesthetic (see Elliott, 1995; Regelski, 1998). In praxial music education, music is not seen to be a set of aesthetic objects, the value of which is absolute, transcendental, and independent of the listener. Rather, it is seen as something that people do – as goal-directed human activity (Elliott, 1995, 39). The central aspect of music is its utility in the lives of individuals and groups in serving varying needs and purposes. Good music is music which under certain circumstances makes the quality of living better (Regelski, 1998, p. 20). According to the praxial music education philosophy, the task of general music education is to enhance active music-making at every personally gratifying level. It's unreasonable to strive for professional musicianship at school or something equal to that; general education should support every pupil's individual musical development according to his/her own starting point. From this perspective, each pupil is allowed to decide for him/herself what kind of music can best suit his/her personal needs (Regelski, 1998, pp. 25–29.).

The core curriculum is founded on constructivist conceptions of knowledge and learning. This should produce a learner-oriented conception of teaching (see Anttila, 2004, pp. 28–31), which means that the main task of the teacher is not in teaching music but in teaching the pupil. The main importance is not to cover certain content but to get the pupil to develop his/her own schemata of knowledge, as well as skills and understanding connected with music. If teachers follow the core curriculum, it is anticipated that every learner can be motivated and feel that music is a significant factor in his/her life. Pupils do not lose confidence in their own abilities and the possibilities of participating in musical activity, but each learns individual ways of making music, listening to music and in many ways taking pleasure in it.

### **Assessment of learning in school music**

Assessment criteria are also set out in the core curriculum of the National Board of Education. The purpose of assessment is to motivate and guide the learners by describing the extent to which they have achieved the planned goals focusing on their learning and progress (LOP, 2003, p. 186; POP, 2004, pp. 260–264). Teachers are required to collect information about their pupils in a variety of ways and forms. The criteria and practices of assessment should be made known both to pupils and their parents. The core curriculum also says that the final assessment must treat pupils equally and be based on the same criteria in every school throughout the country (POP, 2004, p. 264).

### **Studying music and music education in class teacher education**

Most Finnish student teachers have not studied music since their school days several years earlier. Many of them cannot play any instrument and lack confidence in singing. The teacher training entrance examination does not assess musical skills in any way. In general class teacher education, the amount and quality of music studies vary across Finnish universities. The University of Joensuu is a typical teacher training institution. In Joensuu's Class teacher education, future teachers' compulsory music and music education studies take place during the second academic year and include only 5 study points (80 lessons of 45 minutes), plus some optional studies. Compulsory studies include eight piano lessons of 45 minutes.

These limited times might be regarded as insufficient, if we consider that in order to carry out the *National Core Curriculum* all students should fluently play the piano and other school instruments, sing in tune, have a proper knowledge of music theory, history and different cultures, and to have a diverse singing, playing and listening repertoire.

### **Education of subject music teachers**

Music teachers at the upper level of the comprehensive school and upper secondary school are educated at Sibelius Academy and the universities of Jyväskylä and Oulu. The purpose of these degree programmes in Music Education is to acquaint the students with music in general, give them the competence to teach subjects related to music education and to provide them with pedagogical skills. Upon completion of the degree programme, students are qualified to work as teachers of music, as well as to serve in various positions that require expertise in music education. Students are also prepared to conduct scholarly research and follow current research in the field.

### **Aim of this article**

Three empirical research projects on music learning motivation were undertaken in Finland during the years 2002–2008 (Juvonen & Anttila, 2003; Anttila, 2006a, 2008). The target group consisted of over 800 school pupils as well as students in class teacher and music teacher education. In this paper I present a summary of the main results and draw conclusions from the findings.

Table 1 *Background empirical research for this paper*

Research project	Target group	Data collection method	Publications
<b>Research 1</b> Viewpoints on Music teacher education in Finland and Estonia	130 students at the Sibelius Academy and the universities of Jyväskylä and Oulu	Questionnaire	Anttila (2005); Juvonen and Anttila (2003)
<b>Research 2</b> Music learning motivation in the comprehensive and upper secondary school in Finland	426 pupils at 36 upper level of comprehensive and upper secondary schools all over Finland	Web-questionnaire	Anttila (2006a, 2006b)
<b>Research 3</b> Music learning motivation of future class teachers in Finland	256 students at the universities of Joensuu, Helsinki and Turku	Web-questionnaire	Anttila (2007, 2008)

### Methods of research

The data in this article – including both qualitative and quantitative parts – are composed of three empirical research projects as shown in Table 1.

The questionnaires included multiple-choice and open-ended questions, Likert-scale items and semantic differentials. The tool for quantitative analysis was SPSS. The methods of the research projects are described in detail in the former publications (see the Table 1). In this article, I use frequencies and cross tabulations of wide quantitative data as well as pupils' and students' answers to open-ended questions.

### Results

#### *Pupils' perceptions of school music education*

According to the results of research on music learning motivation at the upper level of the comprehensive school and upper secondary school (Research 2), many Finnish adolescents (76%) liked music lessons and tried their best (87%). Female pupils were significantly ( $p = 0.000$ ) more often highly motivated (81%) than male pupils (52%).

Music lessons were considered enjoyable when pupils sang, played and listened to interesting music together; both the degree of interest in the music in question and the social

aspects of music making and studying were important to learning motivation. Demotivated pupils however regarded music lessons as boring, dull or oppressive. The reasons for disliking music lessons could be divided into four themes:

- (1) content of the curriculum and methods of teaching
- (2) organization of the teaching
- (3) assessment of study and learning
- (4) teacher and social interaction.

The quantitative data showed that almost every third pupil (29%) regarded him/herself as being unmusical at school. According to cross tabulations, this opinion was held more by boys than girls ( $p = 0.000$ ). Perceptions of being unmusical were in many ways connected with pupils' learning motivation. Pupils who more frequently regarded themselves as unmusical ( $p = 0.000$ ):

- disliked school music lessons
- saw music lessons as a waste of time
- felt lessons decreased their self-esteem
- were demotivated to study
- didn't try their best
- experienced failure at music lessons
- considered the teacher to be a poor pedagogue.

According to the quantitative data, experiences of feeling unmusical were closely connected ( $p = 0.000$ ) to low value appraisals, low expectancy of success, negative appraisals of the teacher and teacher–pupil interactions in lessons. In their answers to open-ended questions, pupils' experiences and impressions of factors which alienated them from music studying or made them feel unmusical, were the same as the reasons given for disliking music lessons: the teaching was teacher-centred, i.e. content and methods of teaching were foreign to the pupils' world; the teacher and the interaction in lessons was felt to be negative and assessment of learning was inappropriate. These core areas of music education practices are discussed in the following, in the light of the pupils' responses to open-ended questions.

#### *Curriculum content and teaching methods*

Many adolescents in the target group wanted more practical musical activities such as singing, playing an instrument and dancing. They felt there was too much music theory and history. The pupils especially wished to learn such forms of music making that are relevant in the modern world outside the school. They wanted to be able to play 'interesting music' – close to their own taste and cultures – particularly in bands with their friends.

More band courses and such . . .

I wish I could play in my own band, and everyone else could do so, too.

Many adolescents thought that the most important task of school music education was to develop the pupil's own relationship to music within their own cultures – not the transmission of the old cultural heritage.

#### *Organization of teaching*

Due to oversized groups and few lessons, it is difficult to give a high-standard music education in the present Finnish school environment (Virta & Kurikka, 2001, p. 59). According to pupils, a good solution to this might be the increase of optional studies and differentiation of teaching.

Studying groups according to musical preference.

Totally optional, not a single compulsory course.

Some pupils thought that the easiest way for learner-centred differentiation would be streaming by ability groups. This would profit not only the weakest pupils but also pupils who, outside the school, are interested in different kinds of music. Everyone could have the opportunity of studying meaningful content in their own ways and with their own schedules. Some pupils even wrote that music should be optional, not a compulsory subject at all – or music education should be left to other institutions.

#### *Assessment of learning*

According to Research 2, there were four main problems with assessment practices: (1) the pupils didn't know the criteria used in assessment; (2) assessment was not comparable – the same – in every school; (3) assessment of qualitative music learning with one quantitative grade was senseless; and (4) the methods of assessment were biased.

In this study, many pupils didn't know what criteria were used for assessing music grades. Even in the same class they had a variety of opinions about the criteria. The grade awarded was seen to be based, among other things, on the pupil's activity and behaviour, skills learned, natural talents, musical hobbies, exams, class culture, the chemistry between the pupil and the teacher, on the teacher's knowledge of the pupils and even just luck. Some, but not all of these criteria are stipulated in the national core curriculum. Evidently the criteria varied with the school or even the classroom: there were different criteria for different pupils. One pupil wrote:

I am not the teacher; I can't know [the criteria].

#### *The teacher and social interaction*

Most pupils liked the teacher, but there were many such adolescents who had an extremely negative opinion of him/her. They thought that school music education could be improved – made more motivating and useful – only by changing the teacher.

I would change that f%^\*ing teacher or make her dumb!!!!!!

It is important for the pupil to feel that the teacher is sincerely interested in him/her, and that the teacher really wants to help the pupil to develop according to his/her own individual potential and goals. For this reason the most shocking answers in the empirical data of this study were those in which pupils described the teacher's attitude towards them as aggressive or unfair. The teacher was felt to dislike the pupils and frequently humiliated them.

Embarrasses people . . .

Quite a strange attitude. Sometimes even makes fun of pupils.

An interesting detail was the fact, that according to the quantitative data, 70% of the target group liked the music teacher, but only 6% felt that the teacher liked the pupil. Pupils liking for the teacher was often unrequited. Perhaps classrooms are still the deserts of emotions as Flanders (1960) described them decades ago. Maybe the teachers do have positive feelings for the pupils but they just don't show them.

#### *Class teacher and music teacher education*

According to research on the music learning motivation of future class teachers in Finland (Research 3), lessons in music education made many students feel uncomfortable or insecure. More than every fourth student (27%) felt unmusical in the music lessons.

Many students liked music education in general class teacher training, because they regarded it as being interesting and useful, and because the teacher was pleasant. However, every fifth student (19%) didn't like their music studies, feeling them to be not relevant or meaningful. Forty-one per cent of the students had already decided not to teach music in his/her future work.

I can't teach music, pupils would suffer from it.

I believe that I shall never be able to teach music.

Many students participating in music teacher (subject teacher) education in Finland, were also afraid of teaching music at school. Almost all of the students (97%) regarded themselves as musical; fear was caused by the lack of teaching skills not by the lack of musical skills. Only 67% of future music teachers felt they could be successful in teaching music at school.

I feel very insecure as a teacher. The problem is not in the subject but in my own teacher identity.

Teaching unwilling pupils is not meaningful.

## **Discussion**

#### *Content and methods used in school music education*

One could say that at the upper level of the comprehensive school and the upper secondary school, Finnish music education was mostly regarded positively, because 76% of the pupils

liked the lessons and tried their best. However, it could also be interpreted that only three-quarters of the pupils liked the music lessons and that music education failed to meet the needs of every fourth pupil. These pupils disliked music lessons and were demotivated mostly because school music focused on music styles which they found uninteresting and lessons were presented using non-motivating methods. This situation was worsened by large groups of pupils with no differentiation of teaching, inappropriate assessment and negative social interaction between the teacher and pupils.

These problems alienated many adolescents from music education and decreased their self-confidence in music in general. Almost every third pupil learned that (s)he was not 'musical' and did not have the talent to succeed in musical activities. Thus, music education had a negative effect on their musical self-esteem and actually educated them to think of themselves as unmusical. Teachers do not recognise perhaps, that musicality is always connected to the environment; a person may be musical in one environment but not in another. For example, a skilful rap-singer may appear unmusical when trying to sing Schubert, or the violinist of a symphony orchestra unmusical in a blues band which improvises without notation. Small (1998) clarifies the process in which schools prevent the development of musicality in pupils. The following syllogism is very damaging:

1. Our music is the only real music.
2. You don't like our music, you don't have the skills needed for it, or you are not interested in our music.
3. Therefore, you are not musical (p. 212).

Because school music education was harmful to many Finnish music-loving adolescents (see also Anttila, 2006b), their relationship with music would possibly improve if they were exempted from music lessons.

According to the Finnish core curriculum, the tasks of school music education include, among other things, helping pupils to identify their musical interests, encouraging them to become involved in musical activity, providing them with the means of musical expression, and supporting their holistic development (LOP, 2003, p. 170; POP, 2004, p. 230). Unfortunately this is far from the reality of music lessons. The biggest challenge for music educators is, perhaps, to support pupils in developing the knowledge, skills and resources which allow them to engage with present-day music cultures – their own music (see also Hargreaves, 2005). It's not easy, because in the modern fragmented musical world there are numerous different music cultures represented even within the same classroom.

Since cultures and pupils are different, why should everyone learn the same things in the same way? Adolescents at the upper levels of the comprehensive and secondary school differ from each other e.g. in their musical needs, skills, values, backgrounds and musical self. The minimal resources of school music education today are wasted if the teacher doesn't explore the needs of all pupils and shape the content and teaching methods in accordance with them.

### *Assessment*

It is perhaps always problematic to make a comprehensive, adequate assessment of pupils' music learning, because as a whole, music learning is variable and qualitative in nature.

There is some quantitative content in Finnish school music teaching, but learning consists mostly of procedural knowledge, attitudes and values. Knowledge and skills may be assessed through tests and exams, but the many qualitative dimensions of music studying and learning – such as the love of music, music as a hobby, creativity, metacognitions and other learning skills are much more difficult to identify and investigate (see Colwell, 1990; Elliott, 1995, p. 282). However, all these aspects belong to music teaching and learning and therefore should also be included in the assessment of learning. The quantitative grade (in Finland from 4 to 10) is arguably a much too one-dimensional means of assessing a pupil's learning.

A better means of assessing qualitative learning is the use of process- and self-evaluation. However in Research 2, not a single pupil mentioned anything of process- or self-evaluation. They were not in use in Finnish schools, although the core curriculum stipulates their importance in supporting, among other things, the learners' self-knowledge, learning skills and motivation. Self-evaluation is also a good way of supporting pupils' individual musical learning. Each member of the group learns different things in the music lesson. In order to 'catch' the individual characteristics of learning, assessment should be qualitative, taking into consideration various aspects of musical learning.

The criteria used when assessing learning were varied and unclear. Marking varied with the schools and classrooms and even in the same classroom. Unified criteria were lacking. Most of the pupils didn't know what criteria were in use. Assessment was not comparable – the same – in schools all over the country. Comparability is especially difficult in a subject such as music; teachers, pupils and groups are different and musical knowing is procedural in nature, and connected to the environment – to the surrounding culture. Musical skills, studying and learning – as well as the conceptions of a skilful performance – vary in different music cultures, for example from classical music to punk. Teachers, pupils, their parents and also the National Board of Education should be conscious of the fact that a music grade only tells how well the pupil has been able to show his/her knowing and skills

- in a certain group
- with a certain teacher
- about certain content (e.g. certain music genre)
- with certain working methods, and
- according to certain assessment methods.

If any of these factors change – and they really vary – the grade may change. That's why it is impossible to carry out the assessment of school music learning in a nationally comparable way. This should be acknowledged, and the core curriculum revised accordingly.

#### *Social interaction*

It's natural that a pupil who experiences negative interaction with the teacher will not regard music lessons positively and be motivated to study. Some pupils said that it was not possible to study in a negative atmosphere. They felt that the teacher had to be able to create a good, close human relationship with every pupil in the classroom; only then could the pupil be motivated. It was only possible for the teaching methods and content to

be relevant in a positive atmosphere. In a negative emotional atmosphere, both studying and learning suffered and the results remained insignificant.

#### *Music teachers and teacher education*

The music education described above presents challenges not only to pupils at school but also to music teachers themselves and students in teacher education. The problems manifest themselves in two ways. Firstly, many pupils are a source of stress to their music teachers as they are not motivated by the subject in the way in which it is presented in school, and therefore do not seriously engage with it (Drummond, 1999). Secondly, teachers have gone through school music education, and the results show that many of them experience and suffer from the same symptoms of feeling unmusical as do their pupils. In addition, because of the high competence requirements of music teachers, most of them have been trained within the Western classical tradition, in which music-making is dominated by the 'professional' career model. This model is inappropriate for the demands of the modern-day school classroom, and teachers with a classical background are usually relatively lacking in their knowledge of the latest genres (see also York, 2001). Class and subject teachers' musical self-concepts, values, attitudes and teaching traditions are difficult to change. Several studies have already pointed out the drawbacks of music education and made suggestions for resolving the problems. The teachers themselves are in the key position, and at least here, in the Finnish school institution, they also have the power to make the necessary changes.

#### **Conclusions**

It is clear that the school music problem in Finland is similar to that in England. To many young people, Finnish music education is uninteresting and to every third pupil even detrimental, alienating him/her from active participation in musical life. Most music cultures of today and ways of enjoying music are left outside the curriculum, in particular, many active music listening forms are absent from lessons. Grading is also problematic. Pupils often consider grades to be unfair, feeling that teachers give them haphazardly and arbitrarily.

Music belongs to everyone, and enjoying it in one's own ways should be a self-evident human right. Music education institutions should support young people in forming this relationship with music rather than educating them away from music. Finnish music education is based on too narrow a conception of music and musicality, and it needs thorough reform. The core curriculum is more up-to-date in respecting the pupils' rights to musical self-confidence in their own music, but this is not being enacted in the classroom.

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