

Nordic Network for Research in Music Education 2023: Academic freedom and responsibility in music education practice and research

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School music in the welfare state: Sounding the system, practicing the policy?

In the current political and educational climate, high hopes seem to be invested with school music education not only to foster children's creative engagement with music, but to do so in ways that promote democratic core values such as inclusion and participation, (gender) equality, and respect for cultural diversity. Calling for teachers to address "democracy and citizenship", "gender roles and sexuality" and "cultural understanding", this is indeed also the case within the Norwegian National Curriculum for Music, years 1-10.

In this talk, we draw on qualitative data from a national survey distributed among Norwegian school music teachers (Ellefsen, 2022) to critically address such investments. Juxtaposing sociological (Bourdieu, 1984; Dyndahl et. al, 2014) and musicological theory (Askerøi 2016; Brackett 2016; Zagorski-Thomas 2022) theory, our overall aim is to consider the socio-musical complexity of music education as a 'democratising' practice.

With reference to the long-standing tradition of incorporating popular music in Nordic schools, as well as the positive outlook music education, as a field, seems to have on such practice (see e.g. Green, 2008), we also critically address any assumption about popular music, in its essence, offering an inherently democratic and creative approach to school music education. No music educational practice, we argue, is exclusively inclusive. Similarly, processes of democratisation might work to exclude as well as include (Adams & Owens 2017, Dyndahl et. al, 2017).

We make our case by investigating the musical soundscape of the Norwegian music subject, as outlined by over 2500 cases of music teachers reported to have played, sung, or otherwise practiced together with their pupils (Ellefsen, 2022). Analytically engaging with the full body of musical examples, as well as with a few cases selected for their richness as well as empirical recurrence, we investigate how school music works both to sustain and challenge welfare state ideals, norms, and socio-musical hierarchies.

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