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Why should children compose? From an ego-logical to relational eco-logical rationality

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Heidi Westerlund

Why Should Children Compose?

From an Ego-Logical to Relational Eco-Logical Rationality

Introduction

Despite a decades-long call for increasing children's opportunities to compose as part of school music education, composing is not always required in school curricula (Devaney et al., 2023) and even when it is, it may rarely be practised (Laitinen et al., 2011). This may be due to teachers' and policy makers' understandings, their mental models (Meadows, 2009) that steer thinking and action regarding not only why composing matters but also what is meant by composing. Indeed, mental models play an important role in framing the (ir) rationality of composing in general education. For instance, Margaret Barrett (2006) has described a commonly held mental model according to which a composer is "a lone seeker of creative inspiration" (p. 195). Another common understanding among teachers is that composing is "a sophisticated skill or ability that requires many years of formal academic training" (Burnard et al., 2017, p. 39). When locating composing within a high level of practice and star culture, it is not surprising that teachers may not find much sense in having students compose in school contexts.

My own interest in composing in the classroom first arose in the 1980s after having been introduced, as a music teacher education student in Finland, to the composer, music educator, and environmentalist Raymond Murray Schafer's ideas of soundscapes and graphic notation. Although the curriculum framework for music in general education at that time already included composing, or musical invention, and teachers were expected to include composing in music lessons in schools in some form or another, Marja-Leena Juntunen's 2011 study (Laitinen et al., 2011) revealed that only half of Finnish students had experienced composing and musical invention during their schooling. Since Juntunen's study, several studies and doctoral dissertations have been conducted in the country to

inspire new composing practices (Partti, 2012) and students' collaborative and technology-aided composing and songcrafting (e.g. Muhonen, 2016; Ojala, 2017); an edited volume was produced for music teachers to learn about different approaches to composing (Ojala & Väkevä, 2013); and studies have been conducted on young people's journeys towards creative musical authorship (Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2017, 2023). In addition, educational projects have included the Sibelius Academy's annual *Listen, I compose!* inspired by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra's *Very Young Composers* (VYC) project, in which adolescents compose for orchestral instruments, receive mentorship from professional composers and experience their final piece being performed by professional musicians. These diverse efforts by teacher-researchers and the Sibelius Academy, the music university of Finland, to increase opportunities for children to experience composing illustrate the multitude of possibilities also in school contexts.

In this chapter, I propose the possibility of a relational and ecological professional rationality¹ (Barrett & Westerlund, 2024; Westerlund, 2023) as distinct from a technical rationality (Schön, 1983/2016), when reconstructing mental models concerning children's composing. When teachers are acting based on technical rationality, they see composing as learning to follow the rules and principles of musical genres, repertoires, and various stylistic details in a progressive path towards the highest possible musical quality, whereas a relational and ecological rationality could widen the horizon to more indeterminate zones of experience beyond individual competences. Based on relational, ecological rationality composing could be seen as a space for children and adolescents to find their voices as musical, artistic, and cultural authors and agents in relation to other people and their environment. The child's 'voice' refers here not simply to children's possibilities to express "ideas, opinions and wants" in the world, but to their opportunity "to transform it" responsibly (Harris & Manatakis, 2013, pp. 4–5). I use the term composing to refer to *any* creative, inventive approach (see also Ojala & Väkevä, 2013), in this way encouraging music education to widen its understanding of music composing beyond the cult of genius and overly strict normative boundaries of musical genres. Following the theme of the European Association for Music in Schools' (EAS) 2023 conference in Lyon, France – *Liberté* (freedom), *Égalité* (equality), and *Creativité* (creativity) – I embrace composing as a pluralist

¹ In the context of this chapter, the term rationality refers to the normative and pragmatic side of a teacher's understanding of the whys, whats and hows of music teaching – the reasoning regarding why certain things are worth attaining and the pragmatic decision-making it involves from the teacher. While rationality involves motivations, aims, and values, it should not be understood here simply as an individualistic psychological concept, but rather as socially constructed, contextually, and situationally developed and sustained. In this sense rationality is based on social epistemology (Goldman & Whitcomb, 2011). As such, rationality has been the focus of philosophical investigations for over 2000 years and today constitutes a conceptual field about human cognitive faculties concerning "acquiring concepts, forming beliefs, gaining knowledge, inferring and reasoning, thinking, judging, decision making, planning, deliberating, calculating, and satisfying wishes, needs, and desires" (Knauff & Spohn, 2021, p. 3).

field of artistic freedom and creativity for all people, yet, I also suggest considering the whole tripartite French motto – *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (fraternity) – to point toward the hope for a responsible, democratic life in and through composing beyond merely individualistic interests. While we may leave behind the various contested historical meanings of *Fraternité*, it reminds us how music education can resonate with responsible relations in the social and natural environment and solidarities within one's immediate and more distant social configurations.

In what follows, I first explore how composing in education has become only a means for learning, then critically examine some of the most prominent research frameworks in music education to show how they frame teachers' mental models when including composing as part of education, while at the same time limiting possibilities for considering what composing in education could be and why it may matter in a repertoire-centred music education. I then conclude by suggesting an expanded and situational, more unscripted and open, relational and ecological rationality for composing in school.

The Child Composer and the PISA Language of Learning

Music teachers' mental models concerning children's composing do not develop in a vacuum but are actively adapted to the language of policies, such as the OECD's (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) PISA assessments (OECD, 2023). PISA assessments are now widely seen to shape public understanding of success in education towards effective learning in a world where competition and market-based values and ideals dominate. According to educational philosopher Gert Biesta (2022), such neoliberal economically driven societal values emphasise pre-determined learning outcomes and control, thus providing a narrow definition of learners as 'good citizens'. This development is also evident in Finland where, according to the educational researcher Tero Autio (2017), individual students are now reduced to "a collective and non-personal aggregate of various skills and competences" and knowing is becoming "an atomistic performance of predefined knowledge and skills" (p. 48).

The PISA rationality is not simply about rhetoric. In time, it affects both teachers' and researchers' mental models regarding the purpose of music education, and thereby, how music teaching is thought to be organised. In the PISA rationality, children's music learning has become a means for learning other, more important subjects (such as mathematics or languages) that guarantee that the individual child will become a successful, well-earning citizen. This rationality takes us far from the idea of composing as empowering children to become musical and cultural authors (see Ojala & Väkevä, 2013; Kuoppamäki & Vilmilä, 2023) whose art could aim to make the world a better place. Indeed, already over 15 years ago, in her analysis of research on children's composition, Barrett (2006) concluded that

composing had become “a means to learning” (p. 197) and that researchers rarely talk about learning music composition itself.

Gert Biesta (2022), therefore, calls on teachers to critically examine the instrumentalising effects of the individualistic language of learning, which he calls ‘learnification’. In particular, learnification manifests in music education advocacy in which the professional field conforms to society’s market-based value logic (Laes et al., 2024). Music is advocated as an effective means to succeed in an economically-driven world – Music makes you smarter!²) – as if music existed in human life to support that particular purpose. This kind of advocacy pushes music education in a strange direction, as music and musical meanings seem to disappear – not only from society’s, but also the teacher’s radar. Paradoxically, through such advocacy, music educators themselves participate in the instrumentalisation of their subject and, in this way, the lowering of music education’s status within societal hierarchies of importance. In educational theorist Sharon Todd’s (2022) words, this kind of strong instrumentalism “positions education within a mechanistic framework and operates politically through a marrying of national educational policies with economic interests” (p. 335).

Progressive Development towards Mastery in and through Composing

In music education, past theorising on composing in schooling has, perhaps unsurprisingly, emphasised the development of cognitive capacities in and through composing by focusing on the individual learner. While this emphasis does not necessarily lead to strong instrumentalism but rather responds to the lack of instruction on how to compose, theories of music education often conceptualise composing in school as a matter of the individual learner’s mind and the abstract world of music rather than as a matter of collective meaning-making in the social realities – the social ecosystem – of music education. One of these theories is Keith Swanwick and June Tillman’s Piagetian developmental model (Swanwick, 1988) which aims to demonstrate how children’s cyclical and cumulative processes of engaging with musical sounds swings between imitation and mastery moving “towards socially shared vernacular conventions” (p. 66). From this perspective, the answer to the question ‘Why should children compose in school?’ is because we are all guided by the “universal processes of a desire for mastery, and an urge towards imitation, imaginative play and meta-cognition” (Swanwick, 1994, p. 83). Composing is, in this way, one way to nurture the child’s inner need for progressive cognitive development.

² For a review of this trend in music education and how it is based on neuromyths see Odendaal et al., 2019.

The Piagetian model of children's learning has been criticised in sociocultural theories and childhood studies not only because it presents the child's capacities as relatively fixed to uniform stages of development but also because it underestimates both the positive and negative power of social configurations in educational situations. Researchers have pointed out that education should also allow "children and their actions to emerge from reductive nouns ('learners') to become social agents" (Dyson, 2013) – and to see learning as relational and socially mediated (Rogoff, 2003). In this critique, the question may not even be whether the individualistic developmental view is right or wrong, but rather, what it leaves out and how it limits teachers' mental models of the ways meaningful learning takes place in educational situations. For instance, Anne Haas Dyson (2013) writes:

simplistic developmental progressions may provide comfort and confidence to researchers, policy makers, and educators, but they do harm in the world [... as] children are categorised mainly as individual learners of adult practices [... and] their developmental path is regularly stretched out in linear fashion [... In reality], children can be found, not simply progressing vertically, but manoeuvring horizontally among the evolving practices of official and unofficial worlds (n. p.).

For decades, such horizontal manoeuvring was seen as irrelevant if not harmful in music teaching. Bennett Reimer (2009), for instance, urged music educators to concentrate on the intrinsic values of great art, rather than the values created through "the horizontal relationships between person and person" (p. 12) and "all of the societal issues that will always surround music education" (p. 131). Although it could be agreed that horizontal relationships are not 'taught' per se, they do constitute educational reality for both teachers and students and also unavoidably, condition composing.

Accounting for the classroom's social matrix is also important since a classroom is not naturally and automatically a context of *Égalité*. In the Finnish context, for example, Sari Muhonen (2016) interviewed primary school pupils, years after being their teacher and found that the collaborative songcrafting practice she had developed with the students was not experienced equally positively by all students. Muhonen concludes that taking "the seemingly democratic stance whereby students are allowed to choose their level of participation" (p. 7) is not enough. Rather, teachers need to balance power relations *between* children and be aware of how students' agency in composing develops relationally. When composing in school is seen as embedded within the social matrix of the classroom, responsibility to others and one's immediate social ecologies becomes an important aspect of the composing experience. The rationality concerning what matters in composing in collective social environments thus needs to include both the individual processes of vertical progress and the horizontal relationships.

Disciplined Composing

The mental model according to which a composing child has an inner need for progressive cognitive development also underpins the US-based praxialism of David Elliott (1995) in his *Music Matters*. Similar to Swanwick, in the 1990s Elliott also emphasised how the learning of music is always embedded in existing musical traditions and practices with established principles and values, stressing that musical creation is not random in nature, but “occurs in the context of well-known histories of effort and achievement” (p. 230). Elliott writes:

whether someone deserves to be called creative or just a mediocre songwriter depends on the relationship between the song he composes and the relevant criteria and traditions of songwriting by which we judge the originality and significance of his song [...] When a teacher declares that everything his or her students do is automatically creative, then there is nothing more to do and the teacher is instantly free to teach nothing at all (p. 222).

Like Swanwick’s progressive developmental model, Elliott’s (1995) “Head-and-Shoulders View” to creativity (p. 218) emphasises the student’s vertical progress towards musical mastery, however, in this case, specifically in relation to musical genres – if composing jazz, one needs to know the jazz tradition in question and its stylistic rules. This kind of traditional cognitive approach highlights “the role of mental models or schemata in learning” (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005, p. 537), and as the Finnish learning scientists Sami Paavola and Kai Hakkarainen argue, “often without recognizing the importance of environment or context at all” (p. 537). The individualistic cognitive view erases the immediate social, material and place-related, local ecological aspects as irrelevant for musical meanings. Instead, the gaze is on musical rules and their context of origin which set the criteria for quality in music education; it is also against the musical rules through which the child finds the pleasure in one’s own skill; where he “loves to do what he does well and, having done it well, he loves to do it better” (Bronowski cited in Elliott, 1995, p. 114).

Although technical rule-following may be accepted as one important principle in music education, it could still be asked whether tightly disciplined composing leaves enough space for the playfulness of children’s imagination in their local context; whether preexisting principles and values of past achievements can guide children in creating resonances and meaningful relations with their here and now daily life; and even more, whether technical rule-following as such can inspire children to become cultural authors who wish to transform responsibly their environment in and through composing, since rule-following does not recognise that students could develop transformative, political and cultural agency in and through composing. Instead of simply demonstrating their musical competences (learning outcomes) children’s composing could be seen to create relationships in and with their local ecosystem, and to show what they value and wish for from the future. Such an approach could see children as artists, right from the beginning, instead of learners of scripted content.

This mental model of learner pertains also to the professional education of composers. Recent research with ten successful composers in Finland (Westerlund & López-Iñiguez, 2022) indicated that professional education in composing could also better recognise students as artists who create music in relation to their changing environment. This study showed how young composers wished their education could have reached beyond the traditional technical aspects of certain kinds of composing, as this approach did not correspond to the pluralist realities of the composing profession. The interviewees described how they did not necessarily adhere to particular musical styles or practices in their composing work and how their practice could vary from writing symphonies or mixed-style operas to sound installations and multimedia performances tied to specific places, social spaces, and people. They wished to express their life values through their art and some of them deliberately wanted to distance themselves from the traditional elitist composer position. Their playful artistic passion was combined not only with *Égalité* but also *Fraternité* as some wanted to compose with children and vulnerable people, which sometimes meant giving up their personal artistic authorship and individual copyrights. According to their critique, their professional education in composing had reduced artistic work to technical competences, which were not sufficient for a successful career as a composer in contemporary society.

If composing in school is not simply about developing certain historically predefined competences but also seen as a way for children to gain cultural authorship and meaning in their local ecosystems, then it could be argued that children in school could also compose beyond musical genres by combining various cultural materials from their life worlds into a bricolage or remixing of different musical and other materials. Composing could be, at least sometimes not serious, but “about play, plunging, even spoofing”, as the teacher educator Sakari Antila (2013, p. 99) wrote in Ojala and Väkevä’s (2013) book – in other words, about having fun with sounds, as some of the professional composers described their work in the Finnish study (Westerlund & López-Iñiguez, 2022). Indeed, in his paper, Antila (2013) reflected on how a teacher’s mental models could “be shattered in one moment, when the student does things exactly the other way round and yet the final outcome sounds good” (p. 99). Following the rules and principles of previous generations can provide security but, alone, can limit the imaginative artistic playground to the boundaries of technical rationality.

Besides limiting *Creativité*, Elliott’s “Head-and-Shoulders View” involves an even deeper educational problem. In a context such as school, which aims to open educational possibilities for all students, it could be asked whether the question of who deserves to be called a creative or mediocre songwriter is the wrong question entirely. Accepting the comparison of students’ musical achievements simply against existing high-level practices as natural and desired in education, music education can end up supporting society’s meritocratic system and ‘hidden elitism’ (Väkevä et. al., 2022), in this way preventing true

equality of opportunities in music education. Even when *Égalité* may be the starting point of music education, in a meritocratic system the credit will, in the end, go to the most ‘advanced.’ As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991) writes, there is no real equality, if we share “the belief in genius” (p. 96). He argues that the progressives “want to liberate minds and promote the abilities of the masses. But what they propose is to perfect stultification by perfecting explications” (p. 121). Rancière reminds us that education rarely gives opportunities for children to use their imagination in a radical way, to surprise adults, as Antila (2013) pointed out, or to express what worries or matters to them. Although there is no doubt that children want to learn about the rules and principles of composing, and gain personal enjoyment from their achievements, as Elliott (1995) highlights, this does not mean that their composing is simply reduced to advancement up the cognitive ladders of existing musical genres and practices, as if children could only engage with other people’s artistic values and not be given the possibility to use their own imagination to create new artistic connections in their here-and-now environment.

Towards a Relational Ecological Rationality of Responsible Composing

I have aimed to show how music teachers’ mental models that stem from technical rationality may present children’s composing merely as a means of learning already defined musical content of existing practices – technique; how these mental models can also involve a fixed understanding of learner; and how these mental models easily support competitive economic values and meritocratic elitism rather than freedom (*Liberté*), creativity (*Creativité*), equality (*Égalité*) and responsibility (seen here as *Fraternité*). In general, technical rationality has been argued to be insufficient for guiding professionals in the complex contemporary world (Cribb & Gewirtz 2015), but perhaps in the arts, in particular, it is possible to recognise how rigid rule-following can limit creative imagination, not just in relation to musical sounds but in relation to places and spaces and the entire ecosystem. Technical rationality can thus limit new possibilities, not just in professional education but already in schools.

To move away from a mechanistic and atomistic learnification of the arts, a teacher could, as Biesta (2017) has suggested, focus on meanings and existential horizons by asking “*what education means*” rather than “*what education produces*” (p. 54, orig. italics). And rather than asking what education makes, we should be asking what education *makes possible*” (p. 54, orig. italics). Following Biesta then, children ought not to be reduced to future servants of economics and the labour market, and as Todd (2022) also argues, education should not focus on the development of knowledge “captured within narrow views of skills, competencies, and information” (p. 334). The question of utmost importance seems to be how to shift the mechanistic language of learning – which Todd (2022) refers to as “strong instrumentalization” – into “a language of experience, sensibility, or relationship”

(p. 334). I have suggested the widening of rationality and fundamentally transforming mental models in music teaching towards recognising the child as a composer and cultural author from the very beginning instead of as an object lacking skills and competences. Teachers could consider what composing could make possible at both individual and collective levels in educational contexts and how children could engage with new realities and aim at transforming their own ecosystems in and through composing.

To answer the question within the limited space of this chapter, I have suggested a turn towards a relational ecological rationality in music education in which children's composing can be seen to be embedded in the dynamic social matrix of educational situations and in which children can seek their place and 'voice' in their ecosystems as responsible human beings while participating in meaningful musical/artistic activities that are meant to be transformative (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). Such composing has purpose in and of itself, without the need to serve a predefined end of a musical practice or society. Instead of strengthening an ego-centric, individualistic mental model of a composer, music teachers could recognise the multiple possibilities of composing and the children's here-and-now experience while taking a more critical position towards society's economically driven demands. Particularly when composing is included in education, we may need to resist the forces that Rancière (1991) called "the madness of superior beings" and "the belief in genius" (p. 96) that produce inequality and can belittle the meaning of composing and creative invention in general education. A teacher may also need to fight for places and public spaces for children's composing to resist forces in which cultural authorship is only for, and defined by, adults, and in which children's political agency – their 'voice' – is reduced to the efficient learning of once scripted content. Music teachers may not even need normative descriptions of 'best practices' in composing in education but, rather, can learn from each other's diverse approaches to become contextually more reflexive, and situationally and locally flexible.

Returning to the initial question of this chapter 'Why should children compose?', there are, thus, multiple horizons to consider and consequently endless practical solutions available. In the Finnish context, a rising critical discourse to the PISA rationality is currently shifting the focus of curriculum thinking from global competition to "global responsibility" (Värri, 2018, p. 133). Just like contemporary composers, it is therefore possible for music educators to seek resonances, where possible, with responsibility and welcome larger contemporary moral-political questions, which Greek philosophers tried to capture in the concept of praxis (Westerlund & Partti, 2018), and that John Dewey (1998) in his *Creative Democracy* referred to when encouraging educators to have faith in "a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute" (p. 343). Just as Dewey's notion of creative democracy did not imply uniformity, with the tripartite French motto, *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, I have not proposed a normative, fixed description of society, rather, they both frame the hope for a more free, equal, and responsible society. Thus,

this suggestion for a relational ecological rationality is not meant to provide a practical description of what composing ought to be in school but, rather, to show how teaching and learning composing depend on the way teachers frame the phenomenon.

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