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At a crossroads. Educating music teachers through Flanders' evolving educational landscape

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Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

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Thomas Geudens, Bert Appermont & Thomas De Baets

At a Crossroads

Educating Music Teachers through Flanders' Evolving Educational Landscape

Abstract

This chapter considers the evolving landscape of music teacher education in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, tracing key developments since the turn of the millennium. Firstly, we delineate the pathways for generalist and specialist music teachers into primary, secondary, and part-time arts education, distinguishing between integrated and consecutive programmes. We then discuss several central themes emerging in music teacher education discourse, including pedagogical content knowledge, competence-oriented learning, musical creativities, interdisciplinarity, teacher identity, practitioner research, and pedagogical improvisation. Our chapter subsequently provides a case report of the introduction of educational master's programmes in music, introducing their origins, analysing their curricula, and describing ongoing challenges. It concludes by identifying future directions for music teacher education in Flanders.

Keywords: educational master's degree, Flanders, higher music education, music teacher education, practitioner research

This chapter provides an overview of music teacher education in Flanders, focusing on developments since the turn of the millennium that have shaped the situation today. Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region and community in northern Belgium, gained full educational autonomy during the second half of the twentieth century and is therefore considered separately in this chapter. Below, we examine the various types of music teacher education for primary, secondary and music schools, and address the dominant themes in the developments within music teacher education. After discussing the establishment of the educational master's programmes in music, we identify potential future directions for music teacher educators.

Music Teacher Education in Flanders

Generalist and Specialist Teachers

In Flemish preschools, generalist classroom teachers use music as a part of daily routines during early childhood education (ages 2 to 6). In primary schools, music is taught within an integrated subject, combined with other arts disciplines (De Baets et al., 2026). Unfortunately, many primary school teachers feel unprepared to teach music due to the limited time and attention devoted to music during their teacher education (Bamford, 2007; Deckers et al., 2021; Van Stappen, 2025). Although this problem is widely recognised (e. g., Hennessy, 2020; Mills, 1989; Nieuwmeijer et al., 2021), there are few signs of improvement, largely due to the already overcrowded curricula.

Conversely, in secondary schools and music schools, music is always taught by subject specialists. While all music teacher education programmes prepare students for a career in secondary schools, there is a higher demand for qualified music teachers in music schools. These Flemish music schools form part of so-called *part-time arts education*, a network of art academies that follow formal requirements that are very similar to secondary schools.

Although specialist music teacher education is now well established across eight institutions in Flanders, this was not the case in former times. The music pedagogical department at the Lemmens Institute, founded in 1950, was the sole provider of music teacher education in Flanders until the 1990s (Geudens & De Baets, 2025). In parallel, graduate performers and composers could also obtain a generic teaching certificate after their studies. The programmes from the Lemmens Institute and the generic qualification took many shapes and names over the decades. Until recently, music teacher education remained clearly divided into two tracks: an *integrated* bachelor's track, where musical and teaching skills were developed simultaneously, and a *consecutive* track for master's graduates who obtained a teaching certificate afterwards. Most consecutive programmes, however, were in reality followed alongside or partially interwoven with the master's degree. In 2019, the introduction of integrated educational master's programmes aimed to formalise this, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Integrated and Consecutive Programmes

In the integrated music teacher programmes at bachelor's level (180 ECTS), students always combine music with another subject. These programmes are offered by four 'universities of applied sciences' (*hogescholen*), which are not affiliated with the Flemish conservatoires. Introduced in the 1990s, these programmes played a transformative role in music teacher education by incorporating international trends, popular music, and a broader educational framework (Geudens & De Baets, 2025). Because of the combination with a second subject, the amount of time allocated to the development of subject-specific competencies is often considered limited (e. g. Crevits, 2016). For art subjects, specifically, the three-year bachelor programmes are not always considered to provide the time and space needed to develop the artistic skills needed for teaching as a discrete subject specialist.

Teacher education at the bachelor's level is designed for teaching in secondary schools and takes a practice-oriented approach, characterised by a substantial number of internships throughout the three years of study. Internships are typically organised by the students themselves in a school of their choice, with some guidance from a tutor, who assesses the student informed by the feedback from the classroom teachers. They often follow a progressive trajectory, evolving from observation to participation and eventually to teaching entire lessons themselves.

Over a period of the last fifteen years, prospective music teachers have been able to choose cross-disciplinary arts as a second subject (Frenssen, 2013). This development responds to changes in secondary education, where music is no longer taught as a separate subject but is integrated into cross-disciplinary *artistic education*. Schools have the autonomy to decide how many and which artistic disciplines are included (De Baets & Vanvolsem, 2021; Geudens & Overmeer, 2022; Geudens, 2023).

From Audition to Qualification

Like all Flemish study programmes, Flemish music teacher education has a tuition fee of € 1,157 in 2025 (AHOVOKS, n. d.), with reductions for low-income households. In the integrated bachelor's programme, music teachers must prove their proficiency in Dutch through an entrance examination (VLHORA, n. d.), but no musical audition is required. Auditions, however, are mandatory for bachelor's and master's programmes in music at the schools of arts.

Once qualified, Flemish music teachers can secure a permanent position within one to five years (Department of Education, n. d. b). Without a teaching qualification, however, music teachers can only be employed temporarily under less attractive conditions (Department of Education, n. d. a). The ongoing teacher shortage is urging teacher education programmes to explore new solutions (Commissie van Wijzen, 2023; De Witte & Iterbeke, 2022; Department of Education, 2025). Many music teachers begin teaching before entering teacher education. In such cases, they complete their internships 'in-service', with limited

guidance from the teacher education institution. Meanwhile, like all beginning teachers, they receive initial guidance by a designated colleague at their school (Department of Education, n. d. c).

Music Teachers and Music Teacher Education

Flemish music teachers can be qualified at bachelor's or master's level, and primarily develop careers in music schools (master's graduates) or secondary schools (master's and bachelor's graduates). While music schools are mostly populated by teachers who obtained a master's in music, bachelor-level teacher education programmes for primary school generalist teachers and secondary school teachers provide limited coverage of musical and music-specific methodological skills. Against a background of reduced lesson time for arts subjects in secondary schools (Geudens, 2023) and persistent economisations in higher education (Vermeylen, 2023), many music teacher educators at the bachelor's level are worried about the long-term viability of their programmes.

A Current State of Music Teacher Education

While we can draw on our own experiences and impressions of the current state of music teacher education, there is a notable lack of data on student enrolment, graduation rates, and subsequent professional pathways. Therefore, in this section, we will focus on dominant themes that have emerged within the discourse surrounding music teacher education. Several of these were identified from the Dutch-language book series *Muziekpedagogiek in beweging* (Music pedagogy in motion) that was published since 2013. We will primarily refer to research conducted by teacher educators regarding the development of their programmes, or to their research interests that have significantly influenced programme contents: pedagogical content knowledge, competence-oriented learning, musical creativities, interdisciplinarity, teacher identity, practitioner research, and pedagogical improvisation.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

The interplay between music teachers' artistic and pedagogical competence has strongly influenced the debate in Flanders. Rather than viewing this interplay as a source of tension (for an overview, see De Baets, 2012), it is understood as a dynamic phenomenon, in line with Shulman's (1986, 1987) concept of *pedagogical content knowledge* (PCK). Shulman's work was referenced by Ardui et al. (2011, p. 19) in the development of their own model of *vakdidactiek* (subject-specific pedagogy), a central concept in Flemish teacher education. In their model, *vakdidactiek* is defined as the interplay of subject knowledge, general pedagogy, and teaching practice (p. 23). De Baets (2014) also drew on Shulman's work to

conceptualise music teachers' music-pedagogical artistry. The artistic-pedagogical interplay has also been frequently discussed in relation to the educational master's programmes in the arts, which will be addressed in the next section (e.g. De bisschop, 2018; Geudens & De Baets, 2020; Vanmaele & De bisschop, 2024). It reflects the 'integrative ambition' of music teacher education programmes, which aim to offer curricula in which musical and pedagogical development are not treated separately but rather enrich and reinforce each other.

Open and Competence-Oriented Curricula

In both general education and music schools, music curricula have shifted markedly towards open and competence-based frameworks. Music schools in particular have embraced an individually differentiated, competence-oriented approach as part of their educational mission. This direction was first formalised in a position paper authored by Flemish Minister of Education Pascal Smet (2011), and further developed through successive research and development projects (Schrooten & Bosman, 2014; 2016). It led to the development of new, widely adopted music school curricula (e.g. Borms et al., 2025, for the performing arts), the exploration of competence-oriented assessment methods (Schrooten et al., 2023), and a project focused on quality enhancement (Schrooten et al., 2024). In response to these developments, music teacher educators have sought to support prospective teachers in navigating and making decisions within open curricula. Research competencies are frequently cited as essential tools in this process, and innovation and research have been integrated into the Flemish key competencies for teachers (Flemish Government, 2018b).

Musical Creativities

Within a competence-oriented paradigm, musical creativities are increasingly gaining prominence in music education (Burnard, 2012), and this 'creativity turn' is also evident in Flanders (Bremmer & Verneert, 2023). 'Creation and innovation' was adopted as one of six core domains in the student profile of music schools (Department of Education, 2015). Going through a creative process is currently the only active music-making aim in the learning objectives of secondary education (www.onderwijsdoelen.be). The handbook series *Time to Create* (Appermont & Schrooten, 2021; Appermont et al., 2023) provides numerous examples and suggestions for creative assignments in music, both individual and collective. In his doctoral research, Verneert (2024) explored collective free improvisation activities in secondary schools, examining the lived experiences of a large sample of students ($n = 1{,}282$). His research demonstrates the relevance of such activities for classroom music and stimulated music teachers to use similar approaches (see also Verneert & Verbeeck, 2022; Verneert et al., 2026).

Interdisciplinarity

As in many European countries (De Baets & de Vugt, 2016), there is an ongoing debate in Flanders about interdisciplinary subject integration, particularly concerning subject integration within the arts. Various conceptual and curricular developments have compelled teacher education programmes to engage with this issue (Frenssen, 2013; Vanesser, 2014). Hinnekint (2016) used the term 'transdisciplinary learning' to describe a more organic and holistic approach to arts education. Alaerts and colleagues (2012) framed art subjects within a broader educational aim: fostering cultural (self-)awareness across the entire school curriculum (p. 22). In the past twenty years, widespread cross-disciplinary integration across all art subjects has taken place in primary and secondary education (De Baets et al., 2026), along with the implementation of some cross-disciplinary subjects in music schools. Music teacher education today has responded to these changes by integrating compulsory cross-disciplinary projects or *vakdidactiek* (hereafter: teaching methodology) courses in the curriculum. However, specialised music teachers often show resistance to this new reality, reflecting a strong commitment to their own discipline (de Vugt & De Baets, 2022). The debate is further complicated by confusion surrounding the various types of interdisciplinarity and subject integration, as well as the distinction between artistic and broader cultural learning objectives (Geudens & Overmeer, 2023).

Teacher Identity

While attention to learning content and student learning remains, the evolving demands on teachers have increased attention to the profile and 'identity' of music education professionals, as well as their professional development throughout their teaching career. Drawing on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974) and Kelchtermans (2014), Castelein (2015) developed a framework to support self-understanding and self-directed professional development among music teachers. In her doctoral dissertation, she reports on a practitioner research study in which she identified 'constructive frictions' or discrepancies between how she *thinks* and *acts* in practice (Castelein, 2025). Her study underscores the role of the 'personal interpretative framework' (Kelchtermans, 2025) in how music education takes shape. In line with the evolution towards interdisciplinary arts subjects, Frenssen (2013) argued that music teachers' profiles should become more 'interdisciplinary' and oriented towards a 'cross-sectoral reality' that includes both formal and non-formal approaches (p. 71). Vanesser (2014) envisioned a music teacher capable of realising *Music Education 3.0*, characterised by a connective and even activist orientation (p. 47).

Practitioner Research

Since the turn of the century, a stronger research culture has emerged within higher music education institutions throughout Europe. To ensure that prospective music teachers' research remains closely connected to their practice and core expertise as teacher-musicians,

considerable attention has been devoted to the practitioner research paradigm (De Baets et al., 2023). In recent years, this paradigm has gained traction and continues to evolve across continental Europe.

Initial experiences in Flanders led to the publication of the book *Ticket to Ride* (de Vugt et al., 2017), which presented several examples of good practice and early methodological reflections. Continued engagement by students at undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels has enabled further development and refinement of this approach, including the formulation of quality criteria for this type of research (De Baets et al., 2023). Doctoral projects that strongly integrated elements of practitioner research have explored pedagogical improvisation in classroom music (De Baets, 2012), the development of interactive music technology for instrumental learning (Nijs, 2012), challenging and developing the personal interpretative framework (Castelein, 2025; see above), and orchestrating for amateur ensemble musicians (Geudens, 2025). This type of research aligns well with the dominant artistic research paradigm in higher music education (De Baets et al., 2024). Vanmaele and De bisschop (2024) have developed a practice-based and 'nomadic' perspective that resonates with artistic practitioner research, emphasising its conceptual and methodological versatility.

Pedagogical Improvisation

While teacher education often emphasises detailed preparations of lessons and written lesson plans – equipping students with new tools and approaches, and implying that the classroom is a 'controllable' environment – attention has increasingly shifted towards the adventurous and unpredictable nature of teaching (e. g. Capolla, 2024).

In music education specifically, De Baets (2012) examined secondary music teachers' on-the-spot decisions, focusing on their *unprepared, non-routinised musical actions* (De Baets, 2022, p. 371). He also highlighted the 'artistic' nature of these actions. This artistic dimension has since been further explored by a group of teacher-researchers across diverse music education contexts (De Baets et al., 2024), influencing music teacher education by introducing *improvised music instruction* into the curriculum (De Baets, 2014). Students were deliberately 'thrown' into practice with minimal preparation. In doing so, they possibly gained valuable insights into their developing skills and instinctive responses, and became responsive to real-time classroom events. In Moors' ongoing doctoral research (Moors & De Baets, 2023), this *pedagogical improvisation* is further conceptualised and empirically studied within teaching practice, again with a strong connection to artistic and musical competencies.

Challenging Curricula

The addition of interdisciplinary, creative, and research competencies had a transformative impact on music education curricula. It also heightened the 'curricular stress' for music teacher programmes to fit everything in a comprehensive curriculum that is attractive to

both pre-service and a growing number of in-service teachers. Moreover, navigating broad, competence- and creativity-oriented curricula presents a significant challenge for student teachers. For instance, higher music education programmes oriented at classical music performance, in and beyond Flanders, tend to follow a master-apprentice model that does not reflect such curricular approaches, and places little emphasis on creative skills (e. g. Minors et al., 2024). Reconciling students' musical biographies and individual competencies with the diverse demands of modern curricula remains a recurring challenge for teacher educators.

Case Report: Introduction of the Educational Master's in Music (2019)

Context and challenge

In this section, we discuss the introduction of the educational master's programmes in music, which were introduced at the same time at all Flemish universities and schools of arts (Flemish Parliament, 2018). In Flemish music schools, all teachers are expected to have obtained a master's degree in music and a subsequent teaching certificate. This requirement stems from the specific implementation of the Bologna Declaration in Flanders, where the civil effect of art degrees is granted only at the master's level. Prior to 2019, post-master's teacher education had evolved into 60 ECTS packages, which could be followed at the same institutions offering the disciplinary master's degrees. These included subject-specific methodology courses taught by expert educators. However, the same qualification could also be obtained through generic programmes, often involving evening lessons and lacking subject-specific content or teaching staff (Crevits, 2016). This contrast between the disciplinary master's programmes and the generic teaching certificates reinforced a perceived status gap between becoming a subject specialist and becoming a teacher. These issues regarding artistic methodology and societal perception of the profession were particularly tangible in the music domain.

Response

To address these challenges, the generic teaching certificates were abolished and replaced by educational master's programmes for all master's students, both from universities and schools of arts, who wished to become a teacher (Flemish Parliament, 2018). The new, integrated programmes comprised 120 ECTS credits. In the educational master's, students combined discipline-specific and educational coursework.

As such, the educational master's programmes in music were aligned with the seventh, master level of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) (EU, n. d.), elevating the educational learning outcomes to the same level as the music-specific ones (NVAO, 2018). The programmes had to give more attention to societal challenges, including hitherto never formalised concerns such as diversity and the specific complexities or urban

contexts (Flemish Parliament, 2018). They also had to incorporate research competencies, establishing master's-level research with an educational focus within higher music education. Fundamentally, the consecutive learning trajectory would be replaced with an integrated approach, enabling students to develop artistic and educational mastery side-by-side.

Outcomes

What do these educational master's in music look like today? To describe the programmes from Flanders' four conservatories, we performed an analysis of their curricula. Due to the detailed legal framework for educational master's programmes (Flemish Parliament, 2018), they are largely similar. Approximately half of the 120 ECTS credits are allocated to courses with an artistic focus, such as instrument, chamber music, ensemble work, and entrepreneurship. All programmes include an educational research component of 9 to 18 credits, culminating in a master's thesis. In addition to theoretical-educational courses (12 to 18 credits), the remaining 27 to 33 credits are dedicated to teaching methodology and internships. These internships primarily target music education in part-time arts education, while also addressing secondary education and non-formal music participation. The titles of the teaching methodology courses were precisely defined by the Flemish Government (2018a) and, together with a student's instrument or specialisation, form the legal basis for their teaching qualification. All music students follow a general music teaching methodology course, which focuses on teaching music in class group settings (e. g. secondary schools, or solfège in music schools). Additionally, they take ensemble methodology and a specialised methodology course aligned with their profile: performance, composition and creation, or conducting. Furthermore, all art students follow a course in interdisciplinary arts methodology, preparing them to teach cross-disciplinary subjects.

Each teaching methodology course grants a qualification for a cluster of subjects within music and secondary schools, thereby broadening the one-to-one correspondence between methodology courses and subjects that existed in previous programmes. This shift enables a move away from context-specific 'methodolatry' towards a more flexible and reflective methodological approach (Geudens & De Baets, 2020). However, the wide range of musical instruments, the multiple specific teaching methodology courses and the curricular complexity of music schools together have created a complex web. This complexity has resulted in an overly detailed and inconsistent teaching qualification administration, and confronts teacher educators with very diverse demands within a single teaching methodology course (Geudens et al., 2023).

Each teaching methodology course is accompanied by a number of internship hours. In Flemish educational master's programmes, however, the total number of internship hours is typically extremely limited. Despite the broad scope of the resulting music teaching qualification, they contain about 40 internship hours for the total programme.

Reflection

At the time of their introduction, educational master's programmes in music were met with considerable resistance. Classical music performers and composers, in particular, expressed strong concerns about a decline in the musical standards of future music teachers, because master's programmes would sacrifice 60 ECTS of artistic development in favour of educational coursework (Brossé et al., 2017). These critical voices were contradicted by others (De bisschop, 2017). Even today, the integrated educational masters at universities and schools of arts continue to face scepticism from students who fear that their degree will be perceived as second-rate due to the reduced time for discipline-specific development at the master's level (NVAO, 2024). As a result, the majority of students prefer a trajectory in which they first complete a 'regular' master's degree, followed by a shortened educational master's comprising only 60 ECTS pedagogical credits. To accommodate this persistent consecutive route, institutions are required to maintain a 'Berlin wall' between artistic and educational components, which impedes meaningful curricular integration and cross-pollination. Despite the integrative intentions behind the educational master's model, the consecutive trajectory remains the dominant pathway in Flanders today.

Recently, the Dutch-Flemish accreditation body recommended a comprehensive reassessment of all integrated educational master's programmes five years after their implementation (NVAO, 2024). The integrative ambitions of these programmes have, in practice, struggled to overcome two persistent assumptions and perceptions that are well-known in higher (music) education within and beyond Flanders. Firstly, being a music teacher continues to be perceived as having lower status than being a performing musician or composer (see e.g. Regelski, 2007). Moreover, teachers at the master's level root their teaching strongly in their disciplinary expertise, with the assumption that didactic, pedagogical, and professional competencies will naturally follow from artistic mastery given a minimum of practical experience (Bowman, 2007).

A noteworthy counterpoint to these prevailing perceptions and structural limitations is the integrated educational master's in music pedagogy at LUCA School of Arts (www.luca-arts.be). In this programme, students choose music pedagogy as their specialisation from the bachelor's level onwards and follow a broad curriculum in which artistic and educational learning trajectories are interwoven throughout. Nevertheless, the broader ambition to fully integrate artistic and teacher education at the master's level in Flanders is still in the process of being realised.

At a Crossroads: Potential Directions for the Near Future?

Flemish music teacher education currently stands at a crossroads. Ongoing developments and structural changes in music education practice (De Baets et al., 2026), alongside reforms in teacher education, have challenged many established practices and assumptions. In this concluding section, we identify two principal clusters of potential future directions. Firstly, there is a continued and demanding search within music teacher education for approaches that can respond to the rapidly evolving professional landscape. Secondly, and more broadly, there is a need for strengthened collaboration between teacher education and the professional field.

In an optimistic reading, a continuously changing professional landscape underscores the need for reflectiveness and lifelong learning through professional development. Conversely, in a diverse and dynamic professional field, it becomes increasingly difficult to prepare future teachers for specific educational realities. While it is clear that teacher education must become more adaptive, the question remains to what, exactly, it should adapt. In secondary education, for instance, the growing emphasis on interdisciplinarity presents a significant challenge – but is it more than a trend? A recent reform of the primary school curriculum (Flemish Parliament, 2025) suggests that the historical pendulum may be swinging back toward curricula with clearly defined, discipline-specific aims. For teacher education, it is currently not easy to make decisive choices in this regard, as both realities – monodisciplinary and interdisciplinary arts education – now coexist. Meanwhile, the growing inclusion of non-formal learning contexts in music teacher education appears to be more than a passing trend. The wealth of pedagogies outside formal structures is frequently seen as a source of inspiration for formal education (e. g. Verneert & De bisschop, 2025). We also observe that students are increasingly orienting themselves towards the non-formal sector.

The challenges above may also be addressed through a broader evolution towards co-educating future teachers via collaboration between teacher education and the professional field. By viewing teachers' education as a joint effort, several policy texts have proposed a professional development continuum that begins in teacher education, but extends throughout the teaching career. Concrete initiatives include the proposed introduction of an intensive induction year (followed by certification), during which in-service teachers receive paid, on-the-job training based on international models (Commissie van Wijzen, 2023), the extension of internship periods to allow students to gain sufficient practical experience (Flemish Government, 2023), the joint development of training programmes for induction and internship mentors (Flemish Government, 2023), and the formal establishment of learning communities between teacher education institutions and schools (Flemish Government, 2023). Although these are general initiatives, music teacher education programmes will also need to engage with them in the years ahead.

Facing a rapidly evolving professional field, calls for a renewed appreciation for teacher education and the development of a professional development continuum (see e. g. Brinckman & Versluys, 2021) offer hopeful prospects for Flemish music teacher educators, reenvisioning pathways to prepare the music teachers of the future.

Declaration of AI usage

Throughout the writing stage of this chapter, the authors used M365 Copilot to generate suggestions regarding readability and English language use, which were thoroughly reviewed before editing the content. The authors assume full responsibility for the publication's content.

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