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Economidou Stavrou, Natassa; Chrysostomou, Smaragda; Triantafyllaki, Angeliki; Perakaki, Elissavet

Harmony and disruption revisited. A cross-european synthesis of music teacher education

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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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Table of Contents

Natassa Economidou Stavrou, Smaragda Chrysostomou,
Angeliki Triantafyllaki & Elissavet Perakaki
Harmony and Disruption:
Reflecting on Music Teacher Education in Europe **5**

Helmut Schaumberger, Wilfried Aigner, Bernhard Gritsch, Julia Wieneke,
Andreas Bernhofer, Angelika Bacher & Phillip Feneberg (Austria)
Striving for the Best While Dealing with Reality:
Music Teacher Education in Austria **17**

Thomas Geudens, Bert Appermont & Thomas De Baets (Belgium)
At a Crossroads: Educating Music Teachers
through Flanders' Evolving Educational Landscape **33**

Marek Sedláček, Judita Kučerová & Daniela Taylor
Music Teacher Education in the Czech Republic:
Structures, Challenges, and Emerging Reforms **51**

Anu Sepp & Kristi Kiilu (Estonia)
Mapping the Ground of Music Teacher Education in Estonia **65**

Stefanie Kreuzwieser & Annette Ziegenmeyer (Germany)
Reflecting on and Reimagining Music Teacher Education in Germany **79**

Elissavet Perakaki, Anthoula Koliadi-Tiliakou, Dimitra Koniari,
Vasiliki Psyrra & Iosifina Papalamprou (Greece)
Recent Developments in Music Teacher Education
in Greek Public Schools **97**

Andrea Asztalos (Hungary)
Music Teacher Education in Hungary **117**

Lorraine O'Connell (Ireland)
Bridging Policy and Practice:
Navigating Reform in Music Teacher Education in Ireland **131**

Michele Biasutti & Eleonora Concina (Italy)
Music Teacher Education in Italy:
Pedagogical Foundations, Research Insights, and Innovative Practices **147**

Rūta Girdzijauskienė (Lithuania)
Between Tradition and Change:
Music Teacher Education in Lithuania **167**

Demosthenes Dimitrakoulakos, Luc Nijs & Damien Sagrillo (Luxembourg)
Music Teacher Education in Luxembourg:
Situated between University, Conservatory, and School Contexts
in a Multilingual Setting **179**

Runa Hestad Jenssen, Kirsti Nørstebø & Bendik Fredriksen (Norway)
Music Teacher Education in Norway **195**

Annamaria Savona, Sabine Mommartz, Linda Frigg,
François Joliat & Matteo Luigi Piricò (Switzerland)
Training for School Music in Swiss Universities of Teacher Education:
Balancing Disciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, and Transversality **217**

Rebecca Berkley & Mark Aitchison (United Kingdom)
An Introduction to Music Teacher Education in the United Kingdom **241**

Natassa Economidou Stavrou, Smaragda Chrysostomou,
Angeliki Triantafyllaki & Elissavet Perakaki
Harmony and Disruption Revisited:
A Cross-European Synthesis of Music Teacher Education **255**

The Editors **267**
The Authors **269**

Natassa Economidou Stavrou, Smaragda Chrysostomou,
Angeliki Triantafyllaki & Elissavet Perakaki

Harmony and Disruption Revisited

A Cross-European Synthesis of Music Teacher Education

Introduction

In the introduction to this Volume, we described its ambition as the creation of a 'dialogic space', a site where national perspectives on music teacher education (MTE) could resonate with and challenge one another, where common themes could be identified without missing important differences, and where the diversity of European MTE could be appreciated in its full complexity. We framed this diversity through the concepts of harmony and disruption: the sustaining continuities of national musical and pedagogical traditions on one side, and the forces of transformation, demographic, technological, political, and cultural, that unsettle and reshape those traditions on the other. We insisted, from the outset, that the challenge for MTE is not to resolve this tension prematurely but to hold it productively, recognising that both continuity and change are integral to the field's evolution.

This concluding chapter returns to that framing, now enriched by the evidence of fourteen national contributions and attempts to read them comparatively and synthetically across three interconnected dimensions: the national research landscapes that each chapter maps; the case studies that illuminate specific challenges and innovations; and the forward-looking reflections that articulate shared directions for the field. These three dimensions are not independent: the research traditions of a field shape which challenges become visible; the challenges that become visible shape which innovations are attempted; and the innovations that are attempted, along with the understanding that accumulates around them, shape what futures seem possible. Reading these dimensions together produces a picture of European MTE that is richer and more generative than any single national perspective could offer on its own.

Two framing ideas from the introduction are worth bringing forward explicitly, because they give this synthesis its orientation. The first is Bjørnevoll and Christophersen's (2025) understanding of MTE as a complex system, one characterised by emergence, relationality, and unpredictability rather than by linear pipelines that deliver predetermined outcomes. The second is Economidou Stavrou and O'Connell's (2022) distinction between the curriculum-as-planned and the curriculum-as-lived: the recognition that what is officially prescribed and what is actually experienced are always in productive friction, and that music teachers are not merely deliverers of curricula but curriculum makers at the microlevel. These two ideas run through all three sections that follow.

European MTE Research Across Fourteen Countries

The introduction identified a significant gap in the literature: despite the richness of MTE provision across Europe, there has been no prior large-scale, critically reflexive, Europe-wide attempt to map national research landscapes together within a shared analytical framework. The research landscape sections of the fourteen national chapters begin to fill that gap. What they reveal, read comparatively, is a field that is intellectually active, nationally varied, and, despite working in different languages, within different institutional traditions, and against very different policy backdrops, engaged with a surprisingly consistent set of fundamental questions. Those questions operate across interconnected layers: the professional identity development of individual teachers, the pedagogical design of programmes, and the structural conditions, institutional, policy-driven, and cultural, within which they unfold. The themes identified below move across all three layers, often simultaneously.

Coherence and the Theory–Practice Relationship

The most persistent preoccupation across the reviewed research is the relationship between theoretical preparation and practical classroom experience. Researchers across multiple national contexts describe this relationship as a common gap or divide, a fragmentation of programmes into separate artistic, theoretical, and pedagogical components that student teachers experience as insufficiently connected to the realities of school teaching. This is precisely the concern that De Baets et.al. (2025) identify at the European level: as programmes attempt to integrate an expanding range of competencies, inclusion-oriented practice, digital competence, practitioner research, and interdisciplinarity, there is a genuine risk of what they term 'tick-box' compliance, adding content without achieving the deeper coherence that meaningful professional formation requires.

The teaching practice or school placement emerges across the research as the site where this discord is most acutely felt and, when conditions allow, most productively worked through. Studies consistently document insufficient placement hours, limited

access to qualified mentor teachers, and a lack of systematic structures for reflection during placements. Alongside these formal research findings, case-based accounts across the Volume illuminate the variability of placement experiences, showing how local school conditions, mentor availability, and institutional partnerships shape outcomes in ways that population-level studies do not always capture.

However, the research also documents promising alternatives: co-teaching models, reciprocal university–school partnerships, and extended placements are reported across multiple national contexts as capable of transforming the teaching practice from a one-directional delivery of student teachers into a genuine community of professional learning. These innovations align closely with what Bjørnevoll and Christophersen (2025) describe as the conditions that complex systems need to flourish: spaces for inquiry, relationality, and the productive navigation of uncertainty.

Identity, Beliefs, and the Musician–Educator Axis

A second major thread concerns professional identity, understood here as a core dimension of teacher professional formation that interacts closely with both curricular structures and teaching practice experiences. The introduction drew attention to Westerlund and Karlsen's (2017) critique of 'ocularcentrism of diversity' (p. 81) discourses that render difference visible without questioning whose knowledge is accorded legitimacy. The research documented in the national chapters confirms and extends this critique: institutional norms, often tacit, consistently determine which kinds of teacher-musicians are valued and which professional trajectories are legitimised. The musician-educator dilemma that runs through so many research landscapes is not simply a structural problem to be solved through better curriculum design. It reflects deeper assumptions about what music is, what teaching is, and whether the two can coherently inhabit a single professional identity.

Research on teachers' beliefs is particularly instructive here. Studies across multiple national contexts find that beliefs about musical ability, pedagogical purpose, and the appropriate relationship between artistic and educational aims are deeply held, resistant to change, and significantly influential on how teaching is enacted in classrooms, shaping the curriculum-as-lived in ways that no programme design can fully anticipate or control. What these findings consistently point to is the need for teacher education to attend to the core of professional identity, who teachers understand themselves to be, rather than only the competences they are expected to demonstrate. Several national research landscapes across the 14 chapters document this further, identifying the cultivation of structured reflexive practices such as biographical reflection, critical examination of assumptions, and self-awareness as the means through which teacher education can create genuine conditions for student teachers to ask how their own values shape what happens in the classroom.

Inclusion, Equity, and Whose Knowledge Counts

A third thread concerns inclusion, cultural diversity, and social justice, an area that the introduction identified as carrying particularly important implications for any Europe-wide review of MTE. Research across multiple national contexts documents a gap between the discourse of inclusion in music education and its systematic implementation in teacher education programmes. More critically, studies on gendered repertoire norms, the privileging of Western classical musical forms, and processes of musical 'gentrification' confirm Westerlund and Karlsen's (2017) concern that diversity can be made visible without the underlying question, whose knowledge is deemed canonical?, being meaningfully addressed.

Digitalisation

The comparison of the research output reported within this Volume indicates that the term "digital technology", as it appears across the national landscapes, encompasses a wide and heterogeneous range of practices and tools, such as digital notation and composition software, digital learning environments, and, most recently, AI-powered tools. Furthermore, research on digital pedagogy and technology has gained particular urgency in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing that music teacher education has been slow to respond to the digital transformation of musical life, and that innovations in this area tend to remain isolated rather than being systematically embedded in MTE programmes. Research consistently indicates that the challenge is not merely infrastructural but epistemological, a limited transfer between the technical skills programmes introduced and the pedagogically purposeful, critically informed uses of technology that effective music teaching demands. The risk identified by De Baets et. al. (2025) that the pressure to integrate digital competence alongside other expanding priorities results in overload rather than transformation is clearly expressed here. Research calls for more substantive engagement: developing critical, ethically aware relationships with technology that reflect how digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) are genuinely reshaping musical creation, participation, and learning.

Structural Conditions: Policy, Shortage, and Legitimacy

A fifth and encompassing theme concerns the structural conditions within which MTE operates. Teacher shortage, documented across more than half of the national research landscapes, is not merely a staffing challenge but a symptom of deeper dynamics: the perceived attractiveness of the profession, the marginalisation of music within accountability-driven educational policy, and the working conditions that deter entry and accelerate attrition. Research that examines the purposes and legitimacy of music education in school curricula directly addresses the conditions under which MTE is possible at all, arguing, from historical, philosophical, and empirical perspectives, for a robust and well-articulated rationale for music's place in general education that can withstand policy pressures.

These are not peripheral concerns: as the introduction emphasised, MTE operates 'at the crossroads' of policy prescriptions, institutional constraints, and personal artistic identities (Economidou Stavrou & O'Connell, 2022), and the research reviewed here confirms that the distance between planned and enacted curriculum is, in significant part, a product of those structural conditions.

Taken together, the national research landscapes reveal a field that is critically self-aware, genuinely engaged with the complexity of its task, and asking questions that resonate across national differences. They also reveal gaps that this Volume itself makes visible by bringing national perspectives into dialogue: longitudinal research following graduates into early professional life remains underdeveloped; large-scale empirical studies of actual classroom practice, examining what happens when the curriculum is lived rather than planned, are less common than studies of pre-service preparation; and genuinely comparative cross-national research, as distinct from parallel national description, is called for in a number of the research landscapes reviewed. It is precisely this kind of transnational knowledge production that this Volume, in part, seeks to model.

Challenges in Practice: The Case Studies

Each of the fourteen chapters presented a case study report on one or more current challenges in MTE, specifically in their country or region. Detailed accounts of the context and the circumstances within which the challenge appeared were reported, as well as particular ways in which the challenge was addressed and possible implications to MTE in their particular context. As evidenced within the chapters included in this Volume, MTE in Europe is shaped by national histories, institutional traditions, and cultural values that vary considerably from one country to the next. This section attempts to compare case studies, allowing common themes to emerge while taking care not to diminish differences. Cross-national mapping of this kind has proven productive in the broader field of teacher education. Symeonidis (2020), for instance, used comparative case studies from Austria, Greece, and Hungary to trace how European-level policy influences are translated into national teacher education systems, revealing both convergences and national distinctiveness. A recent comparative mapping of teacher education policies at national and institutional levels across multiple European countries identified patterns of coherence and incoherence across five countries, demonstrating that systematic comparison is essential for revealing broader dynamics of the field of teacher education (including MTE) (Symeonidis et al., 2024).

Notwithstanding the richness of individual case study reports that the interested reader may focus on within the chapters included in this Volume, when examined side-by-side, the case studies surface recurring patterns. This section aims to identify the themes

that comprise the conditions, challenges, and exemplary actions that European countries have recently faced, addressed, and/or developed in the MTE field, as well as the particular ways forward arising from the case study reports.

The Shortage of Qualified Music Teachers

A shared concern, evident across several reports, is a continuing shortage of qualified music teachers. Demographic pressures, including an ageing workforce, retirement waves, and declining enrolment in music teacher education programmes, are reported to threaten both the quality and the continuity of school music provision. In several countries, reported numbers suggest that demand will far outstrip teacher supply within the coming decade. In one case, projections indicate that only one-third of required positions could be filled with qualified graduates by the mid-2030s. At the same time, in another, more than half of the entire teaching workforce is aged 50 or older. However, how this shortage is manifested and the responses it has provoked differ considerably. Some systems have introduced regulated lateral-entry pathways that allow professional musicians to obtain teaching qualifications through structured in-service programmes that combine certification, mentoring, and university coursework. In contrast, others have focused on strengthening recruitment through large-scale empirical research into why potential candidates choose not to enter the profession, leading to reforms in admission procedures and curricular design. Elsewhere, responses have centred on flexible qualification routes, including session-based master's studies and recognition of prior learning, that enable working musicians and partially qualified educators to complete their professional qualifications without interrupting employment. This shortage is at times framed not merely as a staffing problem but as a threat to national cultural heritage, given the central role music teachers play in sustaining choral and ensemble traditions of deep societal significance. In another recent legislative change, specialist music teachers can now teach in the early primary years, a level of education previously reserved for generalists. However, the practical implementation of this reform remains uncertain. Perhaps what distinguishes the cases from one another, then, is not the existence of the shortage itself but the extent to which it is understood as an educational, cultural, or labour-market problem and, consequently, the type of policy response it has elicited.

Specialists / Generalists Teachers

A theme that arises from the case study comparison and is closely related to teacher shortage is the question of who should teach music in schools: specialists or generalists. This tension is most evident in primary education, where, more often than not, generalist primary teachers with minimal musical training are responsible for teaching music. In one case, for example, national statistics reveal that more than half of those teaching music at the primary level lack formal subject qualifications. Strategies for addressing this are evidenced: one

case, for example, describes how a Kodály-informed classroom musicianship curriculum was developed to build embodied subject-specific knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge among generalist student teachers through playful, internship-based training. Another discusses the school internship as an opportunity for co-teaching, in which musically skilled preservice teachers and experienced classroom generalists collaborate as equals, each contributing complementary expertise. The specialist–generalist debate raises fundamental questions about the nature and depth of both musical and music pedagogical competences required for effective classroom teaching.

Artistic and Pedagogical Preparation

A third thread drawn from this case study comparison concerns the enduring friction between artistic and pedagogical preparation. Nearly every case study addresses, in some form, the question of how music teacher education programmes balance the cultivation of high-level musical competence with the development of pedagogical knowledge and classroom readiness. When these dimensions have been largely separated, as in countries where artistic training is housed in conservatoires or specialist departments and pedagogical preparation is treated as supplementary, graduates are often viewed as entering the profession with adequate musical expertise but limited pedagogical preparation for the demands of classroom teaching. Several cases describe reforms that seek to integrate these dimensions more fully, whether through new programme development wherein artistic and educational learning outcomes hold equal value; the elevation of pedagogical coursework through nationally mandated pedagogical competence requirements; or collaborative arrangements between universities and conservatoires within a jointly designed degree programme. Within such negotiations, a comparative reading of the case study reports reveals an important distinction: in some cases, teaching qualifications are indicated as carrying lower status than performance or composition degrees, with students (and staff) preferring a consecutive route that preserves a full artistic master's before adding pedagogical credits, while in others, the musician – educator dilemma has consistently been considered through project-based learning, evolving academic cultures, and a more explicit articulation of professional identity as encompassing both artistic and pedagogical dimensions. However, the move toward integration is not without friction. Several case studies document resistance from within the field: students who fear that integrating pedagogical training into artistic programmes reduces the time and space needed to develop high-level musical competence; practitioners and institutions who worry that broadening the curriculum risks weakening the specialist musical preparation that effective music teaching requires.

Professional Identity in a Diverse and Changing Professional Field

The question of professional identity constitutes a fourth area for further discussion. Several case studies examine how music teachers understand and position themselves as musicians, educators, and cultural practitioners, and how these self-conceptions are formed, negotiated, and sometimes constrained by the structures of MTE. In one case, professional identity serves as the central analytic lens through which all other challenges are interpreted, tracing the historical shift from competing conceptions of the music teacher as either primarily a musician or primarily an educator toward more holistic conceptions. In others, identity concerns are less directly framed, yet seem to manifest as a persistent status gap between artistic and teaching qualifications that continues to shape students' programme choices, or as recognition that postgraduate qualifications, such as integrated master's programmes, must project a strong artistic identity.

The Design and Quality of School-Based Placement Experiences

The design and quality of school-based placement experiences constitute a fifth area for discussion. There is a broad consensus across the case studies that supervised teaching practice as part of initial teacher education is essential for developing professional competence. These range from the introduction of extended placements involving at least two school visits per week over a sustained period and co-teaching models that pair preservice music educators with primary classroom teachers to the strengthening of reflective tools used during the internship, such as video analysis (e.g., stimulated recall techniques), reflective journals, and structured peer feedback, often aligned with a national competence framework. A distinctive innovation in one case reconceives placement not as a one-directional placement of student teachers but as a reciprocal professional learning arrangement in which preservice and in-service teachers collaborate as equals, co-planning, co-teaching, and co-reflecting on lessons. However, at least two case studies report that the shortage of qualified music teachers in schools limits the availability of suitable mentors, who remain the key stakeholders in successful internship experiences (Hennessy, 2017).

Technology and Digital Pedagogy

Technology and digital pedagogy appear somewhat irregularly within this cross-case comparison as an area of both promise and dissonance. The pandemic seemed to serve as a catalyst for experimentation, accelerating the adoption of blended and asynchronous models and prompting a critical reconsideration of which learning objectives can be pursued online and which require embodied, in-person interaction. One case study report refers to the explicit embedding of digital environments within a binding national competence framework for teacher graduates. In others, such initiatives tend to remain isolated rather than being more firmly embedded in MTE curricula. Across the cases that foreground digitalisation as a challenge/innovative theme, a growing recognition seems evident that

technical skill acquisition alone is insufficient without the pedagogical understanding and professional self-efficacy to deploy technology in educationally meaningful ways. Moreover, because of the broad dimensions that the generic discourse of 'digitalisation' encompasses, distinct pedagogical and policy questions can too easily be obscured.

Professional Attractiveness and the Value of Music Teaching

As a final observation, the attractiveness and societal recognition of the music teaching profession underpin many of the challenges described in this section. In some cases, the profession's diminished standing is attributed to working conditions that challenge teacher retention, even where salaries have recently improved. In others, the deterrents relate to: entrance examinations perceived as opaque, curricula that accommodate too narrow a range of musical identities, and a prevailing sense that school teaching is irreconcilable with artistic development.

Forward Directions in Music Teacher Education

The most fundamental shift emerging across the national contributions is a reconceptualisation of music teacher education as a career-long continuum rather than a bounded preparatory stage. Within the fourteen chapters, the forward-looking sections propose something closer to a professional ecosystem: one in which early school-based experience, school placements, induction, mentoring, and in-service development are understood as connected stages rather than separate elements in the MTE field. This reframing has practical consequences that are important for MTE in Europe: earlier and more sustained engagement with schools, stronger mentoring structures, more permeable routes into the profession for musicians entering from diverse artistic backgrounds, to name but a few. However, this reframing may be considered conceptually significant. It encourages MTE not only to prepare teachers for entry into the profession, but also to develop professionals: someone equipped with the judgement, relational capacity, and adaptive disposition to keep learning across the lifespan. Flexible entry pathways are central to this vision, though the contributions within this Volume make it clear that flexibility must be conceptualised within non-negotiable core competences that future music teachers should hold.

Running through these structural ambitions is a shared insistence that inclusion and cultural responsiveness must be embedded throughout the architecture of teacher education, not appended to it. The concern here goes beyond repertoire diversity or the addition of specialist modules. It is a question of whether MTE programmes can themselves model the reflexive, critically informed environments they are preparing teachers to create. For example, whether the interrogation of canonical hierarchies is actually evidenced in curriculum design, in pedagogical practice, in placement structures, and in assessment

frameworks (Kallio et al., 2021), rather than remaining an aspiration confined to elective content. The same critical orientation is demanded of the field's engagement with digital pedagogies and AI. The fourteen chapters consistently resist viewing digitalisation and technologies in MTE as a technical challenge to be resolved through skills acquisition. Instead, they call for teachers who can make informed pedagogical choices about when and how digital tools genuinely serve musical learning and how to engage students with the ethical and cultural dimensions of an AI-mediated musical world whose full consequences are not yet evident (Buchborn & Treß, 2023).

What unites these directions and distinguishes them from previous rounds of reform discourse is the scale at which professional agency is now being claimed. The chapters are not simply calling for better-designed programmes; they are calling for music teacher educators to position themselves as active shapers of the policy and institutional conditions under which their work takes place. This means forging more equitable and sustained partnerships with schools, conservatoires, community organisations, and cultural institutions; generating evidence that challenges broader policy assumptions; and articulating music education's contribution to public and civic life as a collective professional responsibility. To work at this level as curriculum makers not only in the classroom but also in the wider landscape of educational policy and institutional culture (Priestley et al., 2015) is to assert a form of agency that the field has not always exercised consistently. The forward-looking sections of this Volume suggest that European MTE should be increasingly prepared to do so.

Towards a Shared Horizon: Concluding Reflections

The introductory chapter closed with the observation that new insights into music teacher education can begin to emerge within the tension-filled, potential-rich environment of dialogue among diverse voices, experiences, and perspectives. This concluding chapter has sought to create and sustain that dialogic friction across three registers, research, practice, and future orientation, drawing the threads of fourteen national contributions into a comparative synthesis that is more than the sum of its parts.

Three observations emerge from this synthesis that deserve emphasis as closing reflections. The first is the consistency of the underlying strains that MTE faces across European contexts. The limited transfer between preparation and enactment, the musician–educator identity question, the challenge of balancing disciplinary depth with interdisciplinary breadth, the structural pressures of teacher shortage and policy marginalisation: these are not problems awaiting resolution but structural conditions through which music teacher education takes shape across very different national contexts. Precisely because they are structural, they will not be resolved by any single reform or programme innovation. They

call instead for sustained, reflexive, and collectively enacted professional engagement, as the introduction's framing and this Volume's aspiration model call for.

The second observation is that the diversity of responses to these shared dissonances documented across the chapters is itself a major finding and a major resource. MTE in Europe is not converging on a single model, and this Volume makes no case for it. What it does argue, by creating the conditions for systematic comparison, is that much can be gained from systematically exploring this diversity: from recognising that the co-teaching model developed in one context, the flexible qualification ecosystem designed in another, and the competence framework that embeds digital pedagogy in a third are not merely local solutions but potential contributions to a shared European repertoire of MTE knowledge. This is precisely the kind of transnational knowledge production that the dialogic space of this Volume seeks to enact.

The third observation concerns what the introduction described as the risk of 'tick-box' compliance (De Baets et al., 2025), the danger that programmes respond to the expanding demands placed on MTE by adding competence domains rather than achieving the deeper coherence that genuine professional preparation requires. On this reading, the forward-looking sections of the national chapters are arguments for a different kind of relationship between planning and implementation, between what is prescribed and what is enacted. They are arguments for MTE as a complex system that cultivates judgement, reflexivity, and ethical agency rather than delivering predetermined outcomes and for music teacher educators as curriculum makers at every level of the educational enterprise, from the individual classroom to the policy arena (Economidou-Stavrou & O'Connell, 2022).

In a field constantly balancing harmony and disruption, the question the introduction posed, 'What kinds of professionals and educational environments are we aiming to cultivate?' has no firm answer. What this book provides is something more valuable: a richly evidenced, comparatively informed, and critically engaged account of how colleagues across Europe are exploring that question, in all its difficulty and all its importance. What it offers is not convergence on a single model but a space in which difference becomes analytically productive and through which the ongoing work of music teacher education in Europe can continue to find both its grounding and its direction.

Looking ahead, the task for music teacher education in Europe will be to sustain this dialogic space not as a one-time achievement but as an ongoing professional practice. To do so, it will be essential to strengthen connections across national contexts, research traditions, and institutional settings in order to develop more responsive and resilient forms of MTE in an increasingly complex educational landscape.

Declaration of AI usage

Artificial intelligence tools (Claude, ChatGPT, and Grammarly) were utilised in a supportive, non-automated manner for language editing and stylistic improvements, focusing on clarity and structural coherence. All substantive content, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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