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Pandemic Profits: The Hidden Privatization of US and Canadian Music Education

Antía González Ben
University of Toronto (Canada)

Jess Mullen
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA)

Abstract

Employing Stephen Ball's notion of network governance, this study examines the relationships between private companies, non-profit organizations, and public institutions involved with music education in the United States (US) and Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. To identify which public and private actors had a hand in shaping music education policy, we traced the digital music resources three major professional organizations recommended at the height of the pandemic. Also, we examined these organizations' equity discourses surrounding the adoption of digital music-making services in public schools. Informed by the work of critical theorists Ball, Deborah Youdell, Naomi Klein, and Mark Fisher, our analysis suggests that the uptake of digital technologies during the pandemic may have deepened the hidden privatization of public schooling in the US and Canada. We conclude by advocating for a techno-skeptical approach to music technology and a re-investment in schooling as a public good.

Keywords

Music technology, COVID-19, neoliberalism, capitalism, network governance

Public music education in the United States (US) and Canada has long been entwined with private interests through both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. In the US, the first national band competition held in Chicago, Illinois, in 1923, was conceptualized and organized by a mix of instrument dealers and music educators (Keene 1982). Similarly, the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) continues to sponsor music education conferences for practitioners, education administrators, and scholars. For example, registration to the Music Program Leaders Forum that the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) held in January 2024 included "a complimentary one-year individual NAMM membership, providing an all-access pass to thousands of innovative brands, sessions, and performances" (https://nafme.org/event/2024-nafme-music-program-leaders-forum/). The event, meant to "provide relevant professional development for music program leaders and district arts coordinators working in the K–12 school setting," featured "a tour of the NAMM Show floor" (National Association for Music Education 2023). Additionally, one very popular alternative to the large music ensemble model in public school music comes from Music Will, a non-profit with close connections to school districts, state governments, universities, and music industry organizations like the aforementioned NAMM (Smith, Powell, and Knapp 2023). Music Will (formerly known as Little Kids Rock) constitutes "the largest nonprofit music program in the US public school system" (https://musicwill.org/about/).

In Canada, the non-profit MusicFest Canada runs the most established national music festival for large school ensembles, and the non-profit Coalition for Music Education, which has close ties with private music industry stakeholders, is Canada's main music education and management advocacy organization. Furthermore, the non-profit MusiCounts runs the Band Aid Program, a well-known public-school grant initiative (https://musicounts.ca/en/programs/grants/musicounts-school-music-funding-programs/musicounts-band-aid-program/). Only Band Aid Program recipients are eligible for the prestigious MusiCounts Teacher of the Year Award, given each year at the JUNO Awards ceremony (https://musicounts.ca/en/programs/awards/musicounts-teacher-of-the-year/).

Public school music education's ongoing relationship with private industries is perhaps most notable in the resources music teachers use in their classrooms. Apple (2014) documented the powerful effect that private textbook manufacturers can have on curricular content in schools. Likewise, private businesses and music

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publishers produce and sell most of the instruments and curricular materials used in public school music classrooms (Keene 1982; Green and Vogan 1991). An emerging and related area is the proliferation of digital technologies. In recent years, this process has ostensibly deepened public schools' dependence on privately produced instructional resources (Benedict and O'Leary 2019; Gidney 2019; Williamson et al. 2020). These resources often require paid subscriptions or upgrades or to gain full, unlimited access to their services, changing the nature of the relationship between schools and private companies from one-time purchases to ongoing subscriptions.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies became critical to public schools' delivery of remote music education. Prior to the pandemic, schools in the US and Canada had some technological infrastructure. However, their use was often on the periphery of music instruction, circumscribed to music technology courses or specific learning units, often taking place in person (Brown 2024). For example, frameworks for courses and unit projects involving music production already relied heavily on digital resources (Kuhn and Hein 2021). Starting in March 2020, public schools in both countries shifted all their teaching from in-person to online in response to the rise and spread of COVID-19 (Jungwirth 2021; Kaschub 2020). With little preparation time, public schools relied primarily upon existing digital resources to teach music classes remotely.[1] For instance, resources such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and Soundtrap became critical tools for teaching music during remote learning (Martinec 2020; Nichols 2020; O'Leary and Bannerman 2024). Most of these digital technologies are proprietary, making public schools increasingly dependent on private businesses to deliver music education.

Our study examines the digital technologies that leading professional organizations in the US and Canada recommended during remote teaching to shed light on how ongoing public-private policy networks in public music education functioned during that period. The concept of a policy network (Ball 2012) relies on a broad conception of policy, encompassing not just formal governing decisions but also the context and actors that shape those decisions, directly and indirectly. This study focuses specifically on mapping the policy community, including non-profit, private, and governmental organizations, that may have influenced the digital technologies public music teachers used during the pandemic. We also consider how those actors leveraged equity discourses (see the Methodology section for more on policy network mapping as a method). We address the following research

questions: (a) What public and private actors had a hand in shaping music education policy in the US and Canada since the COVID-19 pandemic? (b) What equity discourses surround the adoption of digital music-making services in public schools since the COVID-19 pandemic?

We leverage Ball's (2012) notion of network governance, Ball and Youdell's (2007) hidden privatization, Klein's (2007) disaster capitalism, and Fisher's (2012) capitalist realism to understand how public schools' uncritical uptake of proprietary digital technologies may deepen the neoliberal aims of further extracting resources from public school music for private wealth accumulation. We argue that public schools' reliance on privately owned digital technologies during remote learning intensified the funneling of public dollars to private corporations with little accountability from districts, governments, and the broader community. Furthermore, these digital resources have the potential to shape teachers' pedagogical choices in ways that may align more with the companies' business models than the schools' educational goals. Our analysis raises ethical questions regarding what it means to deliver a public good, such as music education, through increasingly private means. Ultimately, the pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on possible alternative relationships between technology, public education, and for-profit companies.

Literature Review

Music education scholarship often frames digital technology's potential to broaden pedagogical offerings positively, as a digital utopia (e.g., Bauer 2020; Cayari 2015, 2018; Dorfman 2022; Ward 2023). Some scholars provide pedagogical frameworks for incorporating digital technologies into music classrooms (Bauer 2020; Dorfman 2022). For example, Bauer (2020) developed a model to describe the technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK) educators need to implement technology in music classrooms effectively. Other scholars examine digital online music making as a participatory culture, including virtual ensembles (Cayari 2018), digital video creation (Cayari 2015), and virtual traditional Irish music sessions during the pandemic (Ward 2023). Music education scholars also recognize technology as a tool, among others, that can contribute to more expansive musical and pedagogical practices. For instance, bell's (2018) multiple case study of do-it-yourself (DIY) songwriters and producers places digital technology

at the center of the participants' compositional processes, conceptualizing DIY studios and their associated digital technologies *as* instruments.

Beyond expanding pedagogical possibilities, scholars contend that digital technology continues to be increasingly intertwined with contemporary life, and music educators must leverage technology in their teaching practice considering this reality (e.g., Bauer 2020; Kuhn and Hein 2021). This argument assumes that by including digital technology in the classroom, music educators can more closely align their classroom practices with their students' lives outside the classroom. Specifically, digital audio workstations (DAWs) enable composition activities in popular music styles that are central to youth culture (Kuhn and Hein 2021; Stark 2020). For instance, Kuhn and Hein (2021) suggest that creativity, as facilitated by DAWs, is key to solving the perceived irrelevancy of music education in the US. Addressing issues of access, other scholars underscore the equity potential of digital and online resources through increased access to music instruction (e.g., Cho 2020). While in-person music teaching happens in the school building during school hours, digital resources allow teachers to deliver music instruction independently of time and location. For example, students can access learning resources on- and off-site, at any time of the day, and at their own pace (King et al. 2019).

Although the music education literature generally views technology as a positive asset for music teaching and learning, some scholars offer critical perspectives. Specifically, they note that the increased use of technology in the music classroom furthers capitalist hegemony and limits student agency (e.g., Abramo 2020; Bates and Shevock 2020; Benedict and O'Leary 2019; Louth 2015; O'Leary 2022; Thorgersen 2020). Specifically, Louth (2015) recognizes digital technology's potential to reinscribe capitalist subjectivities, noting schools' reliance on commercial software, planned obsolescence, and the de-skilling of the teaching profession. Ultimately, he argues for contextual understandings of the musical materials with which students engage to resist the commodification of sounds. For his part, Abramo (2020) considers the paradox of social media as a democratic practice and the object of market forces, which constrain users' agency in subtle and often invisible ways. Similarly, O'Leary (2022) considers the tensions between YouTube creators' agency and the limitations of platformization, noting opaque copyright policies, the disciplinary function of algorithms, and monetization incentives as obstacles. Bates and Shevock (2020) address digital technology's potential for creating online communities and cooperatively shared knowledge through

crowdsourced platforms such as Wikipedia. However, they warn about social media's role in encouraging consumerism and cycles of planned obsolescence that contribute to environmental degradation. Thorgersen (2020) critiques the assumed egalitarian nature of social media in music education, pointing to governmental control of internet access, questions of free speech, and Orwellian surveillance. Finally, Benedict and O'Leary (2019) challenge the assumed student-centered nature of technology. They underscore how the pre-set parameters that characterize commercially developed digital technologies limit their pedagogical adaptability. In sum, critical scholarship problematizes the inherent good of digital and online resources for music education, revealing its limitations as a democratic space and connections to commercial profit. These critiques notwithstanding, scholars generally agree that digital technologies provide music educators with opportunities to expand their pedagogies beyond traditional hierarchical ensemble instruction.

Overall, the scholarly discourse regarding technology's place in music education focuses primarily on the classroom itself, considering what technology can do for students, teachers, and pedagogy (Bauer 2020; Dorfman 2022; Cayari 2018; Kuhn and Hein 2021). Less studied are the structural relationships that technology establishes between private companies, professional organizations, and public schooling. Rather than focusing on student agency and subjectivities, we critically analyze those public-private policy relationships.

Conceptual Framework

We situate our exploration of the digital resources that prominent professional organizations recommended during the COVID-19 pandemic within the intellectual tradition of critical education policy studies (Diem et al. 2014; Horsford et al. 2019). This tradition adheres to a broad conception of policy that, as noted previously, includes not only the formal decisions governing bodies make but also the larger sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts that make those decisions possible and the policy actors within and outside of formal governing institutions who interpret and act within those contexts (Levinson et al 2009; Schmidt and Colwell 2017). This understanding of how policy works departs from techno-rational conceptualizations that draw a straight line from centralized governing agencies to policy implementation and outcomes (Simons et al. 2009; Young and

Diem 2018). In this study, we conceptualize music education's policy landscape as the network of stakeholders involved in providing public music education. The transition from in-person schooling to remote learning in the U.S. and Canada in response to the COVID-19 pandemic provides a particularly rich context to examine the relationships between policy actors in public music education.

Network Governance: Private Corporations and Professional Organizations as Policy Actors

In line with this broad conception of education policy, we deploy Ball's (2012) notion of network governance to examine how public and private organizations work through partnerships to govern and enact policy within public music education. Borrowing from Rhodes (1997), network governance can be thought of as "self-organizing, inter-organization networks characterized by interdependence, resource exchange, rule of the game, and significant autonomy from the state" (as cited in Ball 2012, 7). Network governance helps us explain how, under certain conditions, public policy issues are increasingly addressed by networks of private for-profit, non-profit, and state actors and agencies rather than a centralized governing body or institution.

The notion of network governance is thus closely tied to the effects of neoliberalism and, in the case of education, to an ongoing embrace of market-based educational reforms in the US and Canada (Apple 2006; Ball 2012; Horsley 2009). Neoliberalism can be thought of as a complex, often contradictory, set of practices that shape the economic and social world around the principles of the free market. As Ball (2012) explains, "such a view of neo-liberalism recognizes both the material and the social relations involved [in the] … 'economization' of social life and the 'creation' of new opportunities for profit" (3). Music education scholars have recognized neoliberalism's reframing of what schooling does and how it operates, providing human capital for the knowledge economy and following the business logic of efficiency through measurable outcomes (Horsley 2009; Mullen 2019; Powell 2023; Woodford 2015). In this article, the marketization of public education under neoliberalism helps us interrogate the largely unquestioned practice of allocating public funds to purchase proprietary digital resources to deliver compulsory music education, a public good.

An Ongoing Process of Hidden Privatization of Public Music Education

Ball and Youdell (2007) coined the term hidden privatization of public schooling to describe seemingly commonsensical yet inherently contradictory practices such as purchasing proprietary digital resources with public funds to teach music education in public school settings. Ball and Youdell (2007) explain that, under neoliberalism, two forms of hidden privatization often take place: endogenous and exogenous privatization. *Endogenous privatization* describes how neoliberalism encourages schools to operate as businesses, employing notions of efficiency, and mandating measurable outcomes through accountability regimes. Notably, states and governing bodies do not provide concrete practices or prescribed methods for achieving those outcomes. The pressure placed on teachers to perform at increasingly higher levels with fewer resources creates the conditions for the secondary effects of neoliberal reforms wherein educators' roles are expanded and intensified (Valli and Buese 2007). By asking teachers to do more with less, neoliberal policy creates opportunities for private interests to intervene in public education. Private businesses capitalize on the ever-expanding demands placed on teachers by providing ready-made curricular and organizational solutions. Neoliberalism's efficiency and accountability demands prime public education for *exogenous privatization*, wherein schools become centers for potential profit. For instance, schools and districts contract out services, engage in public-private partnerships, and rely on proprietary technology to support curricular and administrative tasks.

Disaster Capitalism: COVID-19 as an Opportunity for Profit

Moreover, we leverage Klein's (2007) construct of disaster capitalism to theorize why the above neoliberal processes may have intensified under COVID-19. Klein (2007) describes disaster capitalism as the process in which policymakers and private interests exploit natural or manufactured crises to further privatization efforts that would otherwise be unthinkable. The shock of the crisis disorients the public, allowing for the suspension of democratic institutions. This temporary suspension of normative democratic processes creates a pathway for a radical remaking of the public sphere. It opens the door for new capitalist ventures that deepen an extractive logic, bypassing the incrementalism that typically characterizes democratically enacted reforms. In our case, we postulate that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a

crisis in the normal functioning of public schools, providing an opportunity to enact radical policy reforms that would have previously been unimaginable, such as near-total dependence on proprietary digital resources to provide public school music education.

Capitalist Realism: Market Dependence as the Only Possible Horizon

Finally, we draw on Fisher's (2009) notion of capitalist realism to interpret why, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school music could not imagine a robust response to remote learning outside of established capitalist market relations. Fisher (2009) defines capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2). We deploy this construct to theorize why a discussion of the economic, political, and ethical ramifications of relying almost exclusively on privately produced digital resources to teach music in public schools during the pandemic seems largely absent.

Building on the writings of Ball (2012), Ball and Youdell (2007), Klein (2007), and Fisher (2009), we examine how the private digital infrastructure that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic became critical for delivering public music education as schools moved to remote learning. COVID-19 exacerbated teachers' role expansion and intensification in Canada and the US by requiring educators to rapidly convert their practices to remote teaching and learning in response to public safety mandates.

Method

Informed by Ball's (2012) network governance framework, we analyzed the policy networks in music education in the US and Canada during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Network analysis is descriptive in nature, mapping the relationships between policy actors with an emphasis on the flow of ideas, capital, and policy. Ball (2012) described this method as an ethnographic approach to capturing "governance in action" (5). Epistemologically, this understanding of governance turns away from sociological notions of structure and toward the spatialization of social relationships and other forms of transnational movement brought on

through the process of globalization. Network analysis maps the social relationships between stakeholders within particular policy communities, illustrating how, in practice, the role of centralized, state-level governments is de-emphasized.

While network analysis provides a useful model for conceptualizing the social nature of how educational policy is done under neoliberalism, it is not without limitations. The nature of network governance makes empirically documenting the flow and exercise of power among stakeholders challenging. Ball (2012) explains that "network relations are opaque, consisting in good part of informal social exchanges, negotiations and compromises which go on behind the scenes" (8). Although not well suited to quantify the flows of power and influence among policy actors, network analysis is an effective descriptive tool to depict the social relationships among non-profit, private, and governmental stakeholders within a given policy community.

We focused our analysis on the US and Canada because, overall, the two countries have similar approaches to providing music education in public schools. For example, U.S. and Canadian schools routinely offer general music courses where students become familiar with instruments like recorder, keyboard, and ukulele, and large music ensembles–traditionally choir, band, and orchestra (Cox and Stevens 2017). However, the two countries have slightly different approaches to the role of private corporations in public schooling. Generally speaking, Canada is more cautious and skeptical about those relationships, while in the US, such relationships are more normalized (Woodford 2009).

We mapped the digital and online resources that three prominent music education professional organizations from the US and Canada recommended to music teachers: the US-based National Association for Music Education (NAfME), the Canadian Music Educators' Association (CMEA), and the Ontario Music Educators' Association (OMEA). We focused on NAfME and CMEA, because they are reference points for music teachers in each country. For Canada, we also covered OMEA, the largest regional music education professional organization (Brault and Luko 2006/2013), to ensure our sample was big enough to yield some trends.

Our analysis focused specifically on practitioner journal articles and blog posts because they were likely to offer educators practical advice, and their relatively short submission-to-publication time made them well-suited to addressing the quickly changing policy landscape. We examined NAfME's *Music Educators Journal* and its weblog, CMEA's *Canadian Music Educator*, OMEA's *The Recorder*,

and OMEA's weblog, although we found no relevant weblogs on CMEA's website. In each source, we selected publications that addressed music educators' challenges and opportunities during remote and hybrid teaching and learning related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within those, we focused on publications that mentioned specific digital resources. We analyzed publications released between March 2020 and June 2021 to account for the time period when most schools in both countries implemented remote and hybrid teaching.[2] Our final data set included eighteen NAfME blog posts, five *Music Educators Journal* articles, three *Canadian Music Educator* articles, one OMEA blog post, and six *The Recorder* articles (see the Appendix for a list of all the sources we included in our analysis). We closely read each publication focusing on the online and digital resources they mentioned. Combined, the articles and blog posts mentioned 108 different digital resources.

For each resource, we documented the resource type; for example, whether it was a DAW, a notation software, or a videoconferencing platform. We also noted the activities the resources suggested for those resources; for instance, if they focused on how to transfer traditional performance-based large ensemble practices to a virtual format or if they advocated for other types of musical activities like songwriting or music production. Furthermore, we documented the resources' ownership and licensing models—proprietary or open-source—and their pricing scheme: whether the resources were free or for pay and, in the latter case, if they offered free trials or basic free versions. Finally, we closely read our sources for references to extended free trials and discounts that some companies offered schools during remote teaching. We paid particular attention to how the journal articles and blog posts discussed those offers: whether they framed the offers as entirely positive (i.e., the offers contribute to equalizing public schools' access to the resources) or if they took a more nuanced approach that acknowledged both affordances and potential concerns associated with such offers. To visualize the different facets of our network analysis, we used the free, open-source visualization software package Gephi. To create a more readable version of our maps, we ported our Gephi visualizations onto the proprietary data visualization software Tableau Desktop (see Figures 1–3). Finally, we published an interactive version of our network maps on the free proprietary site Tableau Public: https://public.tableau.com/views/PandemicProfits/PandemicProfits_1.

Drawing from critical digital humanities methods (Dobson 2019), we created a policy network map (Ball 2012) that plots the relationships between the music education professional organizations and the digital resources referenced in their journal articles and blog posts. Because our goal is to offer a general sense of the professional organizations' recommendations, our network map included digital resources mentioned at least twice among US and Canadian publications. Of the one hundred and eight resources we identified initially, thirty-six qualified to be included in the network map with our given criteria. We color-coded these resources according to their software types, ownership and licensing models, and pricing schemes.

Readers should keep in mind two limitations when interpreting our results. First, we examined articles and blog posts published by three music teacher professional organizations as a proxy for what public music teachers may have used in their classrooms during remote teaching, but we did not collect data from the teachers themselves. Thus, we cannot confirm which resources mentioned in the professional organizations' publications music teachers used or how they used them. However, music teachers reported an overall lack of support and direction from their school districts (e.g., Menard 2023; Shaw and Mayo 2022) and engaged in self-directed professional development using social media and professional networks (O'Leary and Bannerman 2024). It is thus plausible that public teachers drew on suggestions from their main professional organizations to inform their practice. Second, the articles and blog posts we analyzed do not represent the official voice of the three professional organizations; rather, their members and sponsors wrote those texts. However, the organizations have processes in place to curate the content they publish. Therefore, there is a tacit endorsement of the articles and blog posts they publish and, by extension, the digital resources those texts mention. Furthermore, this dispersed approach to dealing with challenges caused by the pandemic and remote learning illustrates how network governance functions. These limitations point to opportunities for future research on the digital music resources teachers report having used during remote teaching.

Results

Our policy network map connects NAfME, CMEA, and OMEA with the digital resources that each of the organizations mentions in their COVID-19-focused practitioner journal articles and blog posts (see Figure 1). As noted previously, only resources mentioned at least twice across the three organizations appear on the map. The size of the resources' nodes represents the frequency with which the three organizations mention them. Of the thirty-six digital resources, the three professional organizations referenced YouTube, Zoom, and Google Classroom most frequently with fourteen, twelve, and ten mentions, respectively. These frequencies are perhaps not surprising given the applications' popularity across school subjects and, in the first two cases, also outside the field of education. The music-specific resources that the three organizations mentioned most frequently were DAWs: Soundtrap with six mentions and BandLab and Pro Tools with five mentions each.

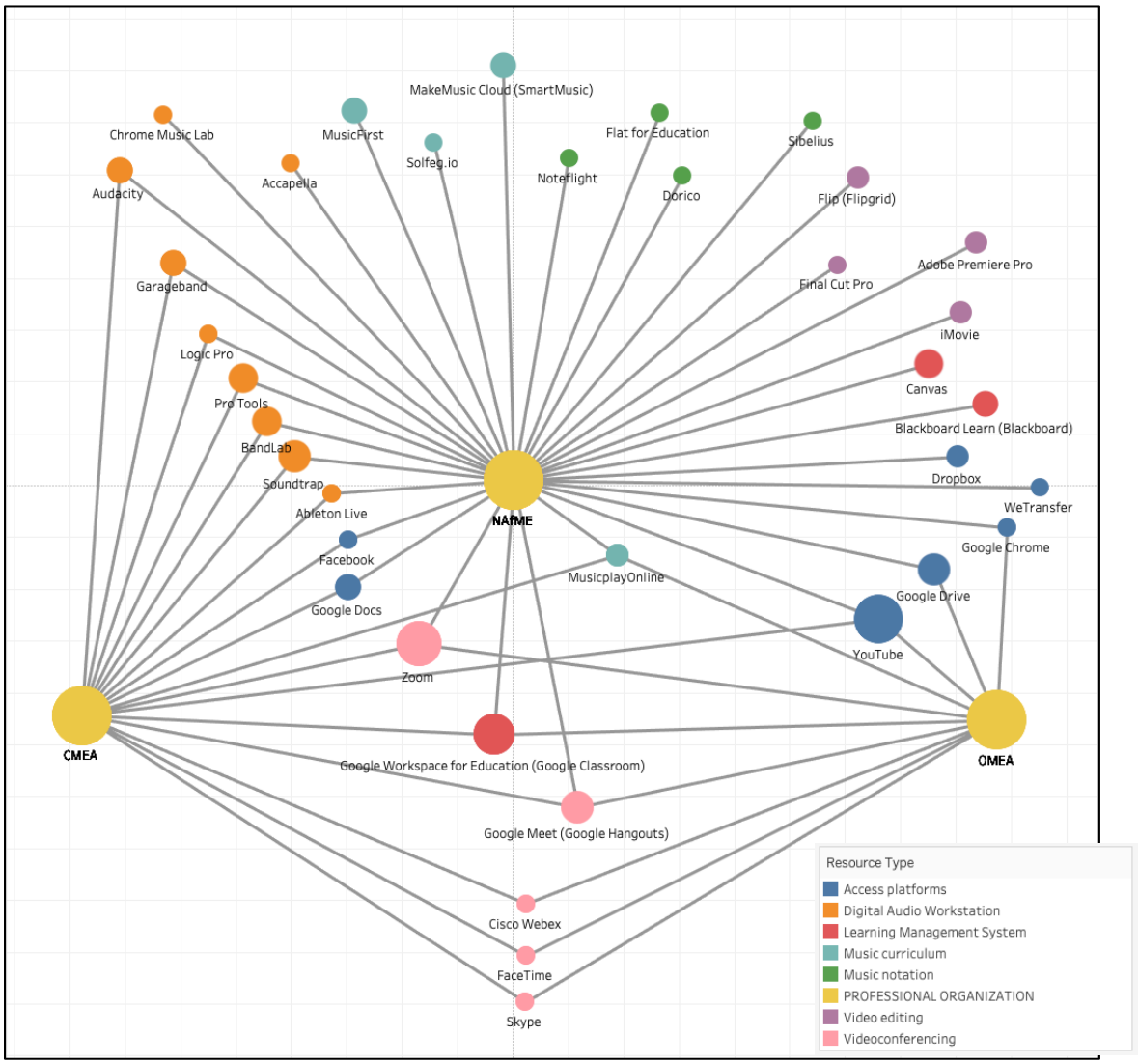

Figure 1. Network map of the three professional organizations and the digital resources they reference, color-coded by resource type.

Resource Types and Uses

To understand the nature of the digital resources the three organizations suggested, we color-coded them into seven categories: DAWs, access platforms, videoconferencing platforms, music curricula, music notation software, video editing platforms, and learning management systems or LMSs (see Figure 1). Digital audio workstations constituted the largest category with nine resources. These resources ranged from professional software like Ableton Live and Logic Pro to entry-level

options like Chrome Music Lab. Next, we created a catch-all category, access platforms, with seven matches. This category included software whose primary function was to facilitate access to files and information, including file hosting services like Dropbox and Google Drive, the online video-sharing platform YouTube, and the social media platform Facebook, where some music educators shared ideas and offered workshops via private groups and live webinars (e.g., Caldwell 2020). The next category included videoconferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Meet (formerly Google Hangouts), with five matches. Music curriculum providers, music notation software, and video editing platforms followed with four matches each. Our smallest resource category was LMSs, with three matches.

Sources from the US and Canada appeared in all the categories except music notation software and video editing platforms, which appeared in US sources only. This uneven distribution suggested that Canadian music educators might have been less interested in staff notation-based approaches to music theory and composition, and do-it-yourself virtual ensemble performances (as opposed to virtual ensemble performances produced by an external service) than their US counterparts.

Most sources offered recommendations on how to carry out ensemble performance-based learning remotely. They advocated for virtual ensemble rehearsals and concerts, asynchronous traditional music theory lessons, and listening to and watching high-quality performances of Western art music. The ensemble performance emphasis was particularly noticeable in the US context, where sources of this type outnumbered sources focused on activities like DAW-based music-making and composition in a 3:1 ratio (twelve to four; the rest of the sources did not align clearly with either). In Canada, the focus on ensemble performance-centered and non-performance-centered approaches was roughly equal. Authors in both countries mentioned DAWs rather frequently, although sometimes simply as a medium to facilitate ensemble-based learning. For example, Ammerman and Kohut (2021) suggested in a NAfME blog post that students could use DAWs such as Soundtrap, Accapella, and Audacity, to record themselves playing multiple parts and combine them to create their own individual ensemble. In contrast, Stark (2020) noted in a *Canadian Music Educator* article that "[a] pedagogy for a pandemic requires us to … fiercely embrace new ways of teaching that allow our students to experience the connecting power of music, foreground the opportunity to create music, and strengthen the connection between music in and out of school"

(15). Among other suggestions, Stark (2020) included electronic dance music and DJing projects, and songwriting workshops, for which DAWs were the primary musical tool.

These results suggest that, overall, the digital resources the professional organizations suggested to public music teachers perpetuated existing epistemologies and pedagogies. Some public music teachers may have approached remote teaching as an opportunity to try new pedagogical approaches. However, following the professional organization's advice, most may have seen the pandemic as an obstacle to their ongoing teaching practice. If so, they likely focused on adapting their pre-pandemic practice to an online environment with as little disruption as possible. In both cases, teachers reached for new digital resources and, in so doing, they opened the virtual doors of their public music classrooms to private corporations. In the next section, we delineate the contours of this process by examining the ownership and licensing models of the resources the leading professional organizations in the US and Canada referenced.

Ownership and Licensing Models

To visualize the interplay between public and private interests among the professional organizations and the digital resources in our network map, we color-coded the resources into new categories that reflect the resources' ownership (see Figure 2). Private, for-profit companies own all the digital resources included in our analysis, and some companies own more than one resource. Heading this list is Alphabet Inc., Google's parent company, which owns seven resources: Chrome Music Lab, Google Chrome, Google Classroom, Google Docs, Google Drive, Google Meet (formerly Google Hangouts), and YouTube. Next is Apple Inc. with five resources: FaceTime, Final Cut Pro, Garageband, iMovie, and Logic Pro. Finally, Microsoft Corporation and Avid Technology, Inc. owned two resources each: Flip (formerly Flipgrid) and Skype, and Pro Tools and Sibelius, respectively. The remaining companies owned one resource each.

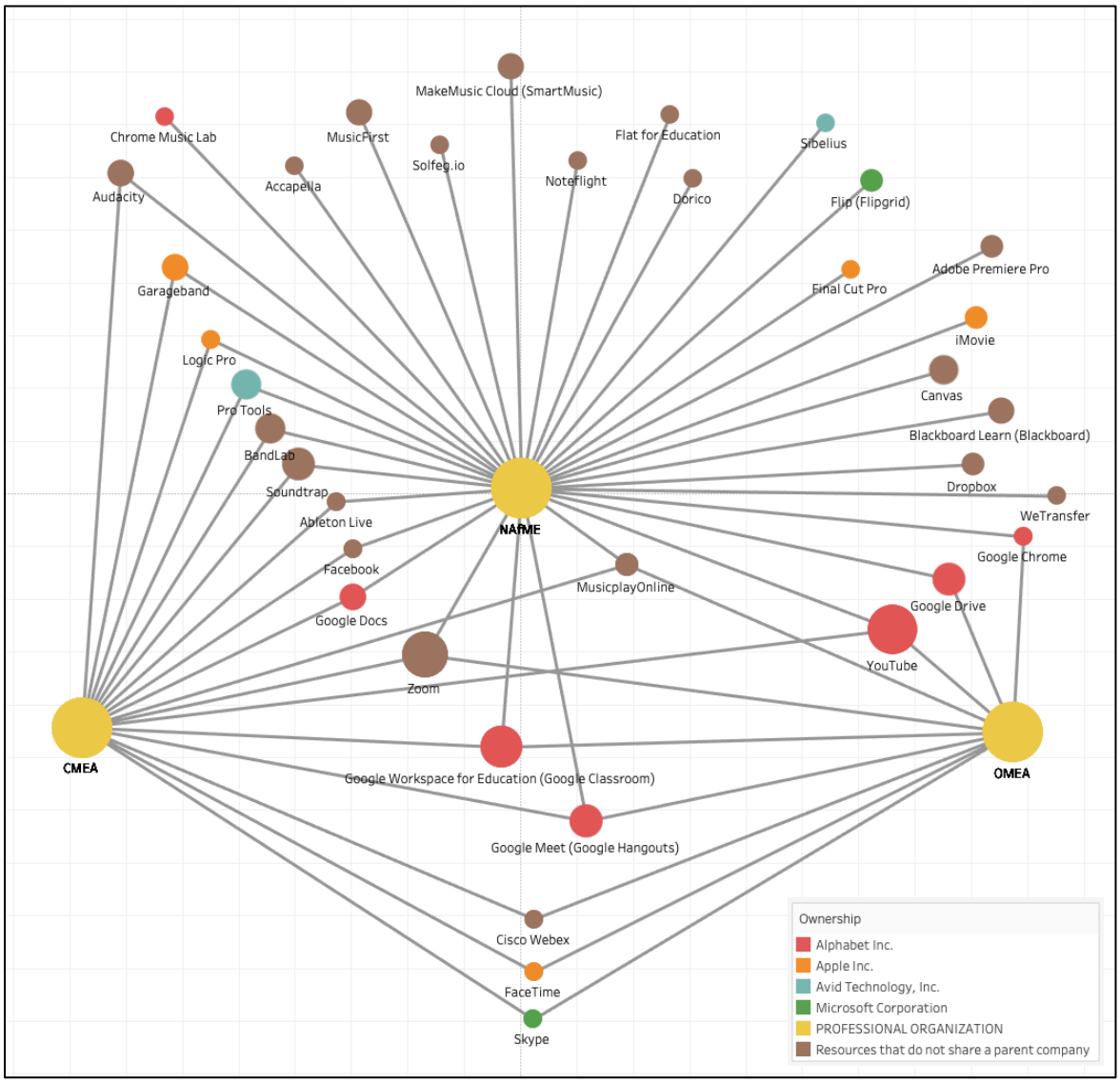

Figure 2. Network map of the three professional organizations and the digital resources they reference, color-coded by the resources' parent companies.

In terms of geographical distribution, most of these companies are US-based. A few are based in Europe, including Solfeg.io, owner of the eponymous software (Latvia), Steinberg Media Technologies GmbH, owner of Dorico (Germany), Tutteo, owner of Flat for Education (United Kingdom), and Wise Music Group, owner of MusicFirst (Cyprus). BandLab Technologies, a Singaporean company, owns BandLab, and a Canadian company, Themes & Variations, Inc., owns MusicplayOnline.

All the digital resources except for the DAW Audacity and the LMS Canvas are proprietary; that is, the software is copyrighted, and access to its source code is restricted. Proprietary resources stand in contrast to open-source software, like Audacity and Canvas. The latter make their source code publicly available to anyone interested in examining it and changing it to improve the general design of the software or serve their specific needs. While Audacity and Canvas are free and open source, the for-profit companies Muse Group and Instructure, Inc. own the software, respectively. In practice, public schools can use Audacity and Canvas at no cost and modify the source code as needed, but these conditions could change at any time if Muse Group or Instructure, Inc. decides to make their software proprietary or charge for it.

Further blurring the line between non-profit professional organizations and for-profit companies, some of the articles and posts we analyzed were sponsored by the companies that owned the resources on which those publications focused. NAfME, CMEA, and OMEA are all non-profit organizations: NAfME is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization under Title 26 of the US Code, and CMEA and OMEA are registered non-profit organizations under the Canada Non-Profit Corporations Act and registered Canadian charities with the Canada Revenue Agency.[3] As non-profits, we surmise that these associations' primary goal is not to generate revenue but to serve their constituents. However, they all count private, for-profit companies along with public music teachers among their constituents. Our analysis suggests that professional organizations welcome the companies that support them economically to market themselves on their physical and digital platforms, like their practitioner journals and weblogs. Importantly, they do so not only through advertisements but also sponsored articles and blog posts. The sponsored publications we analyzed straddle two traditionally distinct genres: the informational article and the advertisement. As such, we may refer to them more accurately as infomercials. NAfME's weblog featured the most sponsored pieces, with six out of the eighteen posts we analyzed (see Figure 2: LaCour 2020, Cho 2020, Soundtrap 2021, Laverger 2021, Martin 2021, Kazaka 2021), and OMEA's *The Recorder* followed suit with one out of the six articles we examined (Breezin' Thru Inc. 2020). Finally, NAfME's *Music Educators Journal* included one sponsored article by the Library of Congress, which is a federally owned institution and not a private company (Moats 2020). Most sponsored articles shared two common features: (a)

they focused exclusively on the company's resources; and (b) they led their arguments with the resources as opposed to the learning those resources facilitate. In contrast, most non-sponsored articles and posts introduce an activity and then mention a few digital resources that may facilitate it.[4] These half-informative, half-marketing posts are a prime example of the intertwining of public and private interests in the provision of music education in public schools during emergency remote learning.

While our analysis focused on the resources professional organizations recommended as a proxy for the resources music teachers used, we could infer from some of the evidence that the rate at which teachers took up their suggestions was likely high. For instance, in an article for *The Recorder*, Geddis (2021) presented an assignment his students completed during the height of the pandemic: Students interviewed local musicians and edited those interviews into documentary films. The assignment instructions included the following statement: "The HPCDSB [Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board] has provided you with a membership to WeVideo which integrates directly with your google drive (sic)" (25).[5] This reference and others like it (e.g., Giddings 2020) confirm that school districts purchased digital resources from private companies to help their teachers provide remote teaching.

Based on this information, we surmise that relatively few private, for-profit companies had an outsized influence on the way music was taught and learned in public schools during emergency remote learning, and likely beyond. Further, because most resources have proprietary licensing models, schools and districts had virtually no access to their software's source code. Although users can interact with technology in ways that challenge and expand their intended uses (Weheliye 2005), having no access to a software's source code limits schools' and districts' ability to adapt that software to their specific needs. Additionally, as private businesses, the parent companies of proprietary resources do not need to tailor their software to public schools' specific needs. As a result, private companies engage in a one-sided relationship with public schools in which the former profit from public funds, yet they are not accountable to the public schools that use their products. These circumstances combined raise ethical issues for public education to be addressed in the discussion and implications section.

Pricing Schemes and Equity of Access Discourses

To illustrate the (hidden) costs that public schools may have incurred through the adoption of digital resources during remote learning, we color-coded the resources one last time into four categories: (a) free; (b) for-pay with a free version; and (c) for pay with a free limited-time trial (see Figure 3). Most of the resources were for pay, with only one-quarter of the thirty-six digital resources (nine in total) being free to use. Among the free resources, Audacity and Canvas are also open source, as noted previously. GarageBand, FaceTime, and iMovie are free to use but native to Apple devices, requiring the prior purchase of proprietary Apple hardware. Chrome Music Lab, Google Chrome, and Google Docs all have the same parent company, Alphabet Inc., and Flip is a Microsoft Corporation product. Alphabet Inc. and Microsoft Corporation are big multinational companies with highly profitable advertisement contracts and for-pay products. These arrangements allow these companies to include free-to-use software in their portfolio, likely as a strategy to help them widen their customer base.

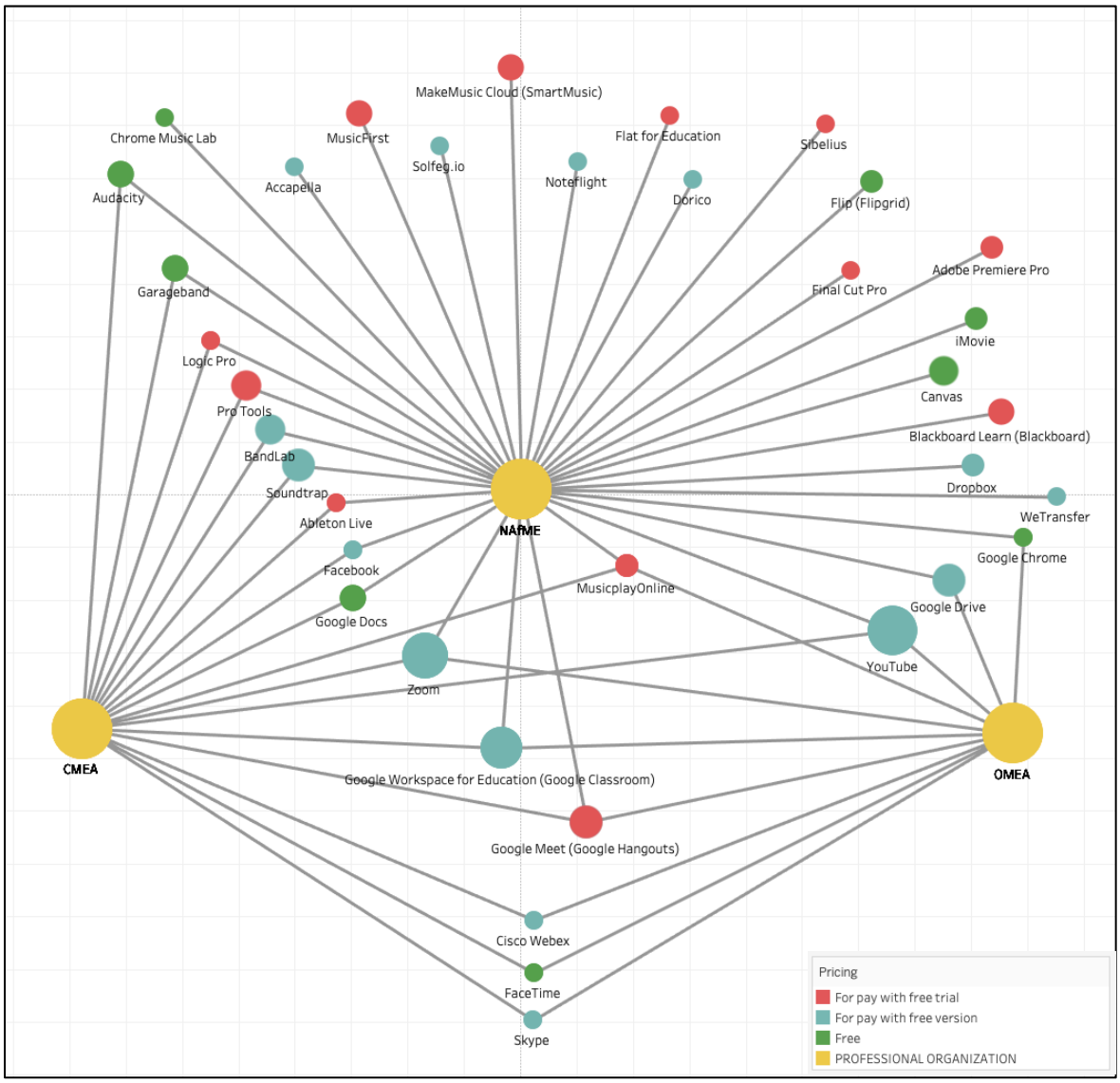

Figure 3. Network map of the three professional organizations and the digital resources they reference, color-coded by the resources' pricing scheme.

Three-quarters of the digital resources (twenty-seven in total) charge users to unlock their full capabilities. Among those, we noticed a variety of pricing schemes: some required a one-time payment, and others had a subscription plan; a few featured reduced educator pricing; and most included either a free version or a free limited-time trial that allowed music teachers to explore them before committing to a purchase. All twenty-seven of the for-pay resources have subscription-based pricing except Ableton Live, Logic Pro, Final Cut Pro, and Dorico, which have a one-time payment system (Ableton Live can be paid in six installments). Most of

the for-pay resources have per-user licenses, but a few of them like Bandlab, Soundtrap, and Pro Tools have education or academic licenses, as well (Cayari 2021). Designed to appeal specifically to schools, education licenses allow teachers to buy licenses in bulk for their students and add/remove users to reflect changes in their student body. Furthermore, some professional-grade, non-education-specific resources like Logic Pro, Pro Tools, and Adobe Premiere Pro have reduced educator pricing. The reduced pricing makes those resources more accessible and attractive to schools, particularly public schools with a tight budget. Twelve resources offer free limited-time trials and fifteen resources have a free version available and for-purchase options to unlock specific features. The capabilities of those free versions vary considerably from resource to resource. For instance, BandLab's free version has robust capabilities, while Soundtrap's free version features more limited options. The variance among free versions is so that some of the articles and blog posts we analyzed referred to certain for-pay resources with robust free versions as free. For example, Giddings (2020) describes BandLab in a *Canadian Music Educator* article as "a fantastic, free alternative" to Soundtrap, and Leverger (2021) refers to Flat for Education in a NAfME blog post as a "free alternative" to Sibelius and Dorico.

Some authors acknowledge that relying primarily on paid software raises economic and ethical issues for public schools. For example, Giddings (2020) notes that "the industry standards are expensive, and many of the Lite or 'Free' versions require a purchase of some piece of hardware or some type of membership. Thankfully there are online, free, or free-to-use alternatives that are much more appealing to schools" (41). Authors like Giddings comment on the resource's cost for schools and acknowledge that some schools may need to compromise quality for the resources' price.

While free versions and limited-time trials allow teachers to experiment with resources before committing to them, they also help companies attract potential customers. None of the articles and blog posts we analyzed acknowledged or problematized this fact. Taking advantage of free versions and trials, teachers can subvert some of the barriers to access that price tags create. In a way, these free trials and limited-time trials level the playing field for schools and districts with small budgets. However, for-profit companies offer those options first and foremost *because* they are profitable. Free basic versions and limited-time trials persuade teachers to try out digital resources that they may not have considered if there was

an up-front fee. As they explore these platforms, teachers develop brand-specific knowledge, and some may even create platform-specific instructional activities. As a result, teachers become increasingly dependent on those proprietary platforms to the point they may eventually feel compelled (coerced?) to pay a price to unlock their full capabilities or keep accessing the resource. Importantly, none of the articles or blog posts published by the three main US and Canadian music education professional organizations that we analyzed acknowledged this aspect.

Furthermore, some digital resources offered discounts and extended free trials during the height of the pandemic, and the articles and blog posts we analyzed tended to frame those as entirely positive. For instance, Soundtrap offered a free extended 90-day trial for education accounts (Giddings 2020), and the practice-aid software MakeMusic Cloud (formerly known as SmartMusic) offered a free subscription from March through June 30th, 2020, for schools impacted by pandemic-related closures (Caldwell 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, sponsored pieces discuss COVID-19 special offers in the most enthusiastically positive terms. For instance, LaCour (2020) wrote in a sponsored NAfME blog post that the music theory digital workbook Artusi (not featured in our network map) "generously offered free access to all affected institutions this past spring." Similarly, Breezin' Thru Inc. (2020) indicated in a corporate profile published in *The Recorder* that the company "decided to offer every school in North America a temporary free account [to their eponymous music theory and composition digital curriculum (not featured in the network map)] for the duration of the closures. There was a huge response and the messages of thanks and appreciation have been pouring in" (36). As these examples illustrate, the general discourse surrounding digital resources' COVID-19 discounts and offers is one of capitalist benevolence and for-profit companies' genuine concern to expand access to their resources to schools and districts for which their regular price tag may have been prohibitive.

While these special offers helped teachers find suitable digital resources at a time when they had to transition from in-person to remote teaching almost overnight, they also helped companies increase their market share. At first sight, the resources' extended free-trial periods and discounts may appear equity-driven. As previously noted, teachers had little preparation time to adapt their teaching to remote delivery, and many were looking around for suitable resources to facilitate the transition. Extended free trials and discounts probably eased that search, increased accessibility for schools with tight budgets, and, in so doing, contributed

to reducing digital gaps. However, we postulate that market interests may have influenced these companies' decision to provide special offers as much as their genuine concern for music teachers' work. For-profit digital resource providers likely experienced the transition to remote teaching as a time of great market opportunity and heightened competition to secure a slice of the public-school music market—a market that, up to that point, remained relatively impenetrable for most. The fact that most COVID-19 special offers expired in June 2020, returning to their regular pricing afterward, further supports our postulation because few public music teachers' budgets increased in the 2020–21 school year. For most, the new academic year brought additional budget cuts (Dik et al. 2022).

Discussion

In this section, we re-engage the constructs of network governance (Ball 2012), hidden privatization (Ball and Youdell 2007), disaster capitalism (Klein 2007), and capitalist realism (Fisher 2009) to contextualize our results and address the research questions that guided our inquiry.

What Public and Private Actors had a Hand in Shaping Music Education Policy in the United States (U.S.) and Canada since the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Ball's (2012) construct of *network governance* offers a fitting framework to interpret our analysis of key policy actors that shaped public music education in the US and Canada during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (see figures 1–3). Our network map highlights links between three non-profit professional organizations, the US-based NAfME, and the Canadian CMEA and OMEA, 24 private companies that own the 36 digital resources the organizations suggested at least twice in articles and blog posts from March 2020–June 2021, and public music teachers that likely turned to these professional organizations for guidance and advice. Some of those networks likely existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but they became critical during the lockdowns due to public schools' limited capacity to facilitate remote learning without the technological infrastructure of private companies. Private corporations became indispensable in providing remote public education through services like high-speed internet, hardware to connect to the internet and run computer programs, and software platforms (our focus). In the process, those companies participated in the governing of public education. They created digital

resources that shaped what public music education looked and sounded like during remote teaching. These resources fashioned what teachers could and could not do in their virtual classrooms in profound ways and, in so doing, they enacted public policy.

Public schools' uptake of privately owned digital resources to provide music education brought about two parallel privatization processes: endogenous and exogenous (Ball and Youdell 2007). First, public schools' adoption of proprietary digital resources intensified an ongoing process of endogenous privatization, or the normalization of market thinking in education (Ball and Youdell 2007). The logic underpinning the blog posts and journal articles we analyzed turned professional organizations into marketing agencies that advertised an array of for-profit instructional resources to teachers. Simultaneously, it turned schools and teachers into consumers of educational products from which they were expected to choose in a free market of ideas.

In addition to furthering market thinking in education, music teachers' adoption of digital resources their professional organizations recommended reshaped an ongoing process of encroachment of private sector capital into public schools, known as exogenous privatization (Ball and Youdell 2007). Exogenous privatization involves "the participation of the private sector in the delivery of public education" (Ball and Youdell 2007, 21). In our study, the articles and blog posts we analyzed suggest that, during remote learning, public schools and districts increasingly contracted out educational services like curriculum packages, videoconferencing platforms, LMSs, and music-specific software like DAWs and music notation programs, from private corporations. Furthermore, a few large companies like Alphabet Inc. and Apple Inc. owned many of the resources. Mapping these relationships reveals growing monopolies, resulting in a few private entities that have an increasing influence on how public education is done.

Furthermore, the shock and urgency that the COVID-19 pandemic caused when public schools had to transition from in-person to remote teaching almost overnight were impossible to predict; however, the privatization processes that ensued were not haphazard. Klein's (2007) notion of disaster capitalism helps explain this occurrence and contextualize it historically (see also Parker 2022, Verger et al. 2017). According to Klein (2007), neoliberalism approaches social crises like the COVID-19 pandemic as opportunities for predatory privatization. It takes advantage of the disorientation that crises cause on well-functioning public systems

to bypass the slow, often incremental, democratic decision-making processes to establish otherwise unthinkable policy initiatives. Private ventures capitalize on these moments of vulnerability to establish private endeavors as readily available solutions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the quick transition to remote instruction accelerated music teachers' role expansion and intensification (Valli and Buese 2007), a situation where they were asked to take on more responsibilities with fewer resources as a result of ongoing neoliberal school reforms. This situation left teachers and their districts with little time to consider the options available or their ethical implications. Understandably, they sought the fastest and easiest solutions in a time of crisis, which private for-profit companies were eager to provide.

Finally, while the blog posts and articles we analyzed covered a wide range of curricular and pedagogical options from virtual school music ensembles to less traditional forms of school music, such as songwriting, composition, and music production, in all cases proprietary resources emerged as the default instructional tool to teach music during remote learning. Fisher's (2009) notion of capitalist realism helps explain how this capitalist fantasy operates. Most of the sources from the professional organizations we analyzed introduced teachers to various digital resources. The horizon of curricular and pedagogical possibilities that COVID-19 opened ranged from mimicking traditional in-person instruction in remote format, primarily in the form of virtual school music ensembles and performances, to embracing starkly different practices, such as using DAWs for songwriting, composition, and music production. This variety of approach aligns with the principle of consumer choice as a form of accountability that neoliberalism advocates. However, the resources the professional organizations curated were often skewed toward proprietary options owned by private companies, most of them for pay. This tendency toward private, proprietary resources was particularly pronounced in US sources, indicating a slight difference in how the two countries under study see themselves in relation to ongoing processes of economic globalization (Woodford 2009). These results suggest that even in cases when a new pedagogical paradigm is advocated for, staying within today's capitalist reality remains the default. The backdrop of what is thinkable and doable pedagogically in school music, even at a time of unprecedented disruption, stayed within the confines of capitalist realism.

Ironically, the overall tendency to favor proprietary resources contradicts neoliberalism's principle of consumer choice, but it underscores neoliberalism's complex and often contradictory nature.

Although our data did not reflect this, there are free, open-source software options available with similar capabilities to those of the resources featured in our network map. For example, MuseScore is a free and open-source music notation software (owned by Muse Group), Jitsi.org is a free and open-source videoconferencing platform (owned by 8x8 Inc.), and OpenShot is a free and open-source video editing software (owned by FP OpenShot Studios, LLC). In sum, alternatives do exist; if not outside the privately-owned model, at least outside the proprietary licensing model (Thorgensen 2020). At the same time, most of these resources' functionality and interface mirror more popular proprietary software. Therefore, a different landscape from the one our data painted is not only possible but already existent. However, the workings of capitalist realism also limit the open-source programmers' imaginations and music teachers' avenues to learn about those resources.

What Equity Discourses Surround the Adoption of Digital Music-making Services in Public Schools since the COVID-19 Pandemic?

While our network analysis shows a clear dependence on private corporations to teach music in public schools during remote teaching, the articles and blog posts we analyzed seldom interrogate that trend. Ball and Youdell's (2007) notion of the hidden privatization of public education helps us contextualize this finding. For example, several journal articles and blog posts boasted companies' COVID-19-related discounts and extended free trials (e.g., LaCour 2020; Habersat 2020; Perry 2020; Caldwell 2020; Giddings 2020). Often, these publications couched the offers as an opportunity to level the playing field in terms of equity of access. Notwithstanding their usefulness for schools and districts with tight budgets, none of the sources acknowledged the companies' ulterior profit motives or how those discounted prices and trial periods may make schools and districts dependent on specific proprietary resources in the long term. Therefore, although the companies did not intentionally veil their market interests, the articles and blog posts rarely acknowledged them–hence why we characterize the privatization process as hidden (in plain sight).

Furthermore, Klein's (2007) notion of disaster capitalism illustrates how the COVID-19 pandemic created favorable conditions for private digital resource providers to capitalize on the sudden new needs of public-school teachers. Again, some companies offered limited-time discounts and extended trial periods during remote teaching. These COVID-19 sales illustrate how private digital resource providers seized the COVID-19 crisis as a moment of market opportunity. They saw remote teaching as a chance to attract music teachers and turn them into new customers once the sales and trial periods were over.

The professional organizations documented this process of predatory privatization the COVID-19 pandemic enabled through a largely uncritical lens. For example, a NAfME blog post written and sponsored by Soundtrap (2021) recounts how New York City public music educator D. Travis Washington used the DAW Soundtrap to facilitate a songwriting project with his students. The blog post's closing paragraph states: "As Washington realized that cuts in music programming were taking place, he reached out to social media to get the word out that music education can thrive in virtual settings, and maybe even better than within the classic classroom teaching models. Apps and virtual collaboration may provide sound solutions for schools and districts experiencing cutbacks and trying to get the most out of smaller budgets" (Soundtrap 2021, para. 9).

As this excerpt illustrates, Soundtrap leveraged an educator's social media post to advocate for a policy position, that of online schooling, in response to anticipated budget crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than advocating for robust public funding of music education, Soundtrap forwards a vision of online schooling that would no doubt open markets for their product. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the suggestion that the largest public school system in the US move to online instruction to save on educational costs may have been unthinkable. However, the disorientation and urgency the pandemic caused opened a space for this policy solution to become plausible.

Neoliberalism's ability to profit from the pre-existing cultural paradigms while still advocating for the disruption of public schooling, as in the Soundtrap blog, underscores that neoliberal policy suggestions do not have a fundamental ideological alignment beyond profit. In other words, technology companies invested in music education are not deeply concerned about the educational philosophies that drive music education; rather, they align with both dominant and alternative models to maximize profits.

For the most part, the articles and blog posts from the professional organizations that we studied echoed private sector messages about the advantageousness of their COVID-19-related offers and discounts. Publications showing reservations about this process or even serving as a counterpoint existed, particularly in the Canadian context (e.g., Giddings 2020, Stark 2020). However, they were still in the minority. Overall, NAfME, CMEA, and OMEA helped further their private sponsors' vision and interests. In many ways, those interests counter the long-term fiscal health of the public districts that employ most of their membership.

Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic ratified public schooling as an essential public institution in the protection and safeguarding of U.S. and Canadian children and youth. The pandemic also provided private interests an opportunity to deepen their hold on public schooling—one of, if not the last significant public institution left. These two conflicting realities highlight the importance of identifying and resisting a neoliberal logic in public education and amplifying ways to protect public schooling as a publicly funded and run institution.

Techno-skepticism and Re-investing in the Public Good

Much like the music teachers they set out to guide and support, the music education professional organizations in the US and Canada found themselves ill-equipped to provide pedagogical suggestions to their constituency to help them navigate remote teaching. As a result, they opted to help teachers with that transition by curating, and at times advocating for, already existing digital resources, most of them proprietary. While this strategy helped many teachers sort out their transition to remote teaching in the short term (O'Leary and Bannerman 2024), the organizations' uncritical presentation of the resources runs the risk of jeopardizing the long-term health of school music education as a public good (Winton 2022).

Public schools are ultimately responsible for the quality of education they provide, even if they have no say in designing the products and services they contract out to private companies to carry out their day-to-day work. In his description of capitalist realism, Fisher (2009) notes that neoliberalism's framing of governments as inefficient pushes public institutions to contract out public services to

private companies. While the public has varying degrees of oversight over public institutions, there are no such accountability mechanisms for companies when they fail to deliver the services for which public institutions contract them (Thorgensen 2020). As a result, if and when these private providers fail to adequately provide services, the state institutions still receive blame, creating bureaucratic cover for private companies. The loose and often blurred nature of the relationships between private corporations, non-profit organizations, and public institutions create favorable conditions for private companies to extract money from public coffers with little accountability to the public or consequences for their own failures and mistakes. Therefore, it is crucial that the music teacher profession identifies, critically interrogates, and ultimately interrupts these potentially harmful dynamics.

Postsecondary music education institutions were also complicit in ill-equipping music educators to make critically informed decisions about what digital resources to use. Not only are teacher educators responsible for preparing preservice music teachers to successfully navigate a changing educational landscape, but also practicing music teachers look to teacher educators for ideas and advice. Many teacher educators lead professional development workshops and hold leadership roles in those professional organizations. Relatedly, teacher educators penned a portion of the articles and blog posts we analyzed (e.g., Cayari 2021; Stark 2020).

It may seem as if the safest way to address the issues our analysis raised is not to use digital resources at all; however, we propose instead a techno-skeptical (Pleasants et al. 2023) approach to using digital technologies. Digital resources are not inherently good or bad. They exist; however, in a capitalist environment and, because of that, market values drive most resources' design and function (Benedict and O'Leary 2019). It is therefore key to use judgment and discernment when evaluating and selecting digital resources, rather than focusing exclusively on technology's affordances and possibilities. Along with a resource's function, schools must weigh the economic and ethical systems behind it when making decisions about what digital tools to use in a classroom (Bates and Shevock 2020). In addition to evaluating a digital resource's ownership model and pricing scheme, schools may consider prioritizing free, open-source software when available (Thorgensen 2020). Open-source code offers teachers and students the opportunity to learn not only how to use a piece of software, but also how it works by studying their source code and adapting it to best suit their interests and needs (Benedict and O'Leary

2019). Professional organizations that claim to have an equity-oriented mission should carefully consider these concerns when introducing digital resources to their constituents.

More structurally, we advocate for a re-investment in public schooling as a public good that would allow teachers the resources and time needed to make informed choices about what digital resources to use. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that schools were critical public infrastructure in a time of crisis in both the US and Canada. They not only carried out their education mission during a global pandemic, but also provided critical resources for families and communities, including mental health care, meals, and digital infrastructure, such as internet access and devices to access the internet (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; Rizk et al. 2022). Rather than accepting a decrease in funding for schools as an inevitable consequence of the economic turmoil the pandemic caused, we suggest a robust re-investment in schools and public education as a policy priority. Critical digital infrastructure for contemporary schooling, such as internet access and devices to access the internet, needs to be treated, distributed, and regulated as an essential educational resource. These measures would improve equity of access and ensure large corporations that provide essential services for schools receive adequate oversight from the public they serve.

There are concrete actions the music education profession could take toward the above aims. First, teacher educators could offer preservice and practicing educators the intellectual tools to critically appraise the political economy of schooling. Discussing how music education is implicated in and sometimes supports neoliberal aims can help music educators make more informed choices about their future selection of curricular materials and digital technologies. Second, teacher educators, professional organizations, and practicing music teachers could partake in organized labor as part of a larger struggle to demand improved working conditions and accountability for private actors. Normative approaches to policy change, such as lobbying state, provincial, and federal governments, generally rely on appealing to dominant neoliberal discourses about schooling (Helton 2021). This reliance limits the kinds of educational reform deemed feasible. Contrastingly, labor organizing and coalition building could help music educators, teacher educators, community members, and others with a vested interest in public education to leverage their collective power (Rogers and Terriquez 2009) to demand increased resources to support a more ethical approach to music teaching and increase local

control over schools. Third, power derived from collective action could demand transparency, regulation, and public accountability of private companies that interact with public institutions. This oversight could involve review committees of teachers, parents and community members at the school and district levels. Further, internet access in both Canada and the US could be treated as a public utility, and governmental bodies accountable to their constituents could regulate it as such. By taking a collectivist approach to resisting the further encroachment of private interest on public schooling, advocates can aim to transform systems rather than work within them (Anyon 2009).

Conclusion

Many people saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a time of unprecedented opportunity for public education. Among those were private corporations. In March 2020, public schools and districts found themselves needing more time to properly plan to shift their instruction from in person to remote in response to public health mandates. Professional organizations stepped in to provide public music teachers with guidance and advice in the absence of clear directives from governmental institutions. Primarily, they offered guidance by curating existing digital resources, most of them proprietary. Private providers of digital resources, which existed as part of policy networks prior to the pandemic, capitalized on this opportunity to deepen their reach into public schooling. The current educational policy landscape of network governance, in which the lines between state, non-profit, and private organizations are blurry at best, enabled this process.

While public schools did not have a chance to carefully evaluate their options in March 2020–June 2021, today they can take stock. In May 2023, the World Health Organization declared the end of COVID-19 as a global health emergency (United Nations 2023). Schools no longer have to modify their instruction to follow public health restrictions. With the help of studies like this one, schools and districts can reflect on what they experienced at the height of the pandemic and make informed decisions about moving forward.

In the US and Canada, the general trend in education policy post-COVID has been to focus on returning to "normal." For example, in the US, re-opening schools was a key part of President Biden's platform: the administration declared that it would re-open schools within the first 100 days of his presidency, stating "it should

be a national priority to get our kids back into school and keep them in school" (Weissert 2020, para. 5). In Canada, Ontario's Minister of Education Stephen Lecce said the following when introducing the *Keeping Students in Class Act* in October of 2022: "We are delivering on our promise to parents to keep students in class, so they can catch up and get back to the basics of learning" (Ontario Newsroom 2022, para. 2). As these examples illustrate, governments across the two countries determined that the best course of action after remote teaching was to mimic as best they could what public education looked and sounded like pre-pandemic.

However, we question whether there was a pre-pandemic normal (normal for whom?) and if getting back to how public education functioned pre-pandemic is the best possible way forward. Our study highlighted some concerning trends that were already happening prior to March 2020, which the COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated. The period of remote learning created more favorable conditions for private companies to expand their market share in public education. Likewise, the traditional large ensemble model dominated public school music despite ongoing calls to broaden the range of curricular and pedagogical options to fit the needs of a wider range of students. The COVID-19 pandemic confirmed private corporations' increasing reach into public schooling and the cultural stability of public-school music despite unprecedented contextual turmoil.

Informed by Fisher's (2009) notion of capitalist realism and also drawing on Ladson-Billings (2021) call for a hard reset, we suggest reappraising the pandemic as a wake-up call about the limitations of the so-called pre-pandemic normal, and instead redirecting public policy and budgets to re-configuring public music education, and schooling broadly, along more equitable lines. Ladson-Billings (2021) claims that "normal is where the [equity] problems reside" (p. 68). Echoing Ladson-Billings (2021), we call for a techno-skeptical approach to adopting private digital resources in public education, coupled with a reinvestment in schooling as a public good. Rather than accepting the pandemic as a time when private companies doubled down on the continued privatization of public schooling in the US and Canada, we hope this study provides policymakers, administrators, and educators with starting points to reimagine and reclaim public school music as an essential public good.

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About the Authors

Antía González Ben (PhD, Wisconsin-Madison) is an Assistant Professor of Music Education at the University of Toronto. Her scholarship focuses on equity discourses and the politics of diversity in music education. You can find her most recent work in the International Journal of Music Education (2022), Sound Studies (2023), and Curriculum Inquiry (2023). González Ben's teaching was recognized with a 2022 Teaching Excellence Award from the University of Toronto Faculty of Music. Prior to serving the U of T community, González Ben was an elementary public-school teacher in Madison, Wisconsin. She is a native of Galicia, Spain. She lives in Toronto, traditional land of the Anishinabek, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Jess Mullen is Assistant Professor of Music Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His areas of research include critical race theory, popular music, music teacher education, the political economy of schooling, and educational policy. His scholarship has been published in Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education, Journal of Music Teacher Education, and Philosophy of Music Education Review and has presented at national and international conferences sponsored by the International Society for Music Education, May Day Group, and American Educational Research Association among others. Mullen earned his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Prior to becoming a music teacher educator, he taught high school band and general music in the Chicago Public Schools.

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Notes

[1] We use remote teaching to describe the sudden shift from in-person to online teaching that music teachers had to implement in the US and Canada as a result of COVID-19-related public health restrictions. We use remote teaching as opposed to online teaching, which has traditionally been used to describe an intentionally created and carefully designed virtual teaching situation (Means, Bakia, and Murphy 2014).

[2] Data from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) shows by May 2021, about half of 4th and 8th grade students in public schools were in-person https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/mss-report/ By September, 100% https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/2021SeptemberSPP/

[3] https://nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/990-Tax-Return_Fiscal-Year-End-6.30.2020.pdf https://omea.on.ca/connections/ https://omea.on.ca/about-the-omea/

[4] The only exception to this trend was a QuaverEd-sponsored NAfME weblog post (Cho 2020). Sharon Cho, an Instructional Coach, Clinician, and Social-Emotional Learning training lead at QuaverEd and the author of this post, outlines three equity-focused advantages to e-learning, but she does not mention QuaverEd at all.

[5] Catholic school districts in Ontario are publicly funded (Urrutia Bustos 2020).

Appendix

Articles and blog posts that comprise our data set, organized by source and chronologically within each source.

NAfME Blog Posts

Caldwell, Elizabeth. 2020. Music teacher resources for school closures (including online and no tech ideas). *NAfME Blog*. March 17. https://nafme.org/music-teacher-resources-school-closures/

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