

Critical Reflection in Music Teacher Education: Contradictions and Dilemmas in Theory, Policy, and Practice

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Abstract

In this article, three researchers and music teacher educators reflect upon the possibilities for and challenges of fostering preservice teachers' critical and democratic capacities and agency in music teacher education in line with recent 21st-century skills-oriented policy reforms. Based on experiences from participatory action research with preservice music teachers in general teacher education at two Norwegian institutions, the authors problematise how *critical reflection* is defined in educational literature, in policy documents, and by students participating in the referred participatory action research. The authors further discuss the different understandings of critical reflection, considering concepts such as *student-centredness*, *students as customers*, *student resistance*, and *student voice*. Inspired by critical pedagogy, the authors suggest that the preservice teachers' articulated reflections represent important steps in their progress toward becoming professional music teachers and that enduring the discomfort of loosening up the student-teacher dyad benefits the development of students' agency and critical reflection.

Keywords

Critical thinking and reflection, Freire, 21st-century skills, music teacher education, students as customers

During the first meeting of a participatory action research project, the teacher educator of a group of preservice music teachers¹ asked, “What would you consider the main challenges for your future practice as music teachers?” She continued, “How can we work with such challenges in music teacher education to prepare you for the future?”

After discussing it in pairs and later writing individual logs about it, the students addressed several challenges. One was the issue of how to adapt music teaching to the individual needs of students in school. To work with this issue in their education, the students suggested using discussions and making up relevant and realistic classroom cases as a starting point.

During the discussion, the teacher educator encouraged the students to consult the existing literature on the topic:

Teacher educator: Don't you think it could be clarifying to find existing definitions of adaptive teaching before you continue the discussion of how it can challenge your music teaching?

Student 1: I think the most important thing here is not to find the definition of adaptive teaching in the literature but what we mean by it. Our own thoughts about it are the most important.

These preservice teachers shared their immediate thoughts about what adaptive teaching in music could be and how it could be challenging. They were then divided into small groups to work in depth with some relevant cases they had constructed for this session. Again, the teacher educator encouraged the preservice teachers to consult some of the relevant literature made available to them in a Google document into which they could add notes and suggest further links and references. The literature could inform their work with the cases. During the next meeting, after the group had discussed the cases, the conversation continued to be marked by immediate thoughts based on personal experiences. No one referred to any article they had read, thus influencing the reflection level of the discussion.

Despite such limitations, student quotes from the very last reflection session of the action research revealed experiences of a space developed for critical reflection:

Teacher educator: If we look back at these meetings, do you think there has been any kind of development?

Student 1: We have become a bit more conscious about reflecting on topics that are more open to different opinions.... It has become a more open environment in which we give our opinions and discuss things.

Student 2: I also think that we seem to have begun to think better through what we want to say. The discussions seem to have become a bit deeper.

Student 3: I think that we have achieved a unique way of reflecting on music teaching. We have not had that opportunity with other subjects. It is about our thoughts on it.

Student 4: We seem to have become a bit more confident about our own opinions and more certain of our own view[s].

Student 5: I put myself on the various sides of what we are doing in the music course at this college, and what I should be doing in teaching practice.

The above vignette is extracted from a participatory action research project in a Norwegian teacher education institution facilitated by one of the authors of this article, in which preservice music teachers for primary and lower secondary school participated.² The overall aim of this participatory action research³ was to explore how music teacher education can foster students' critical and democratic capacities and promote future music teacher agency, in line with recent educational policy reforms (OECD 2022; Binkley et al. 2012). Earlier in this project, we investigated student agency through the lens of Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory. This analytical approach has enabled us to study music teacher education as part of a discursive practice in which certain positions are made available. Such discursive practices constitute certain ways to think and act, which then enact certain conditions for possible agency (Onsrud et al. 2022). In this article, we especially investigate the issue of critical reflection through the following research question:

- How can preservice music teachers' critical reflection be understood and promoted in general teacher education music programmes?

Through this question, we unpack the lack of clarity about the different concepts in use such as *critical thinking* and *critical reflection*. How are these concepts defined in different settings? How can we understand critical reflection in music education? What do we do when teacher educators and student teachers have a different understanding of what it means to develop critical reflection, as is the case in our example? We see a need to dig deeper into these concepts,⁴ which have an important impact on the further development of music teacher education.

OECD's Influence on Norwegian Education

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an intergovernmental organisation founded in 1961 with 36 members, with roots

in the 1948 enacted Marshall Plan (Thomas 2021). The OECD aims to set international standards:

From improving economic performance and creating jobs to fostering strong education and fighting international tax evasion, we provide a unique forum and knowledge hub for data and analysis, exchange of experiences, best practice sharing, and advice on public policies and international standard-setting. (OECD 2023, section 2)

OECD-induced policy reforms have strongly influenced Norwegian education since around 2000. The reforms resulted in a new school curriculum in 2006 that contained recommendations from the OECD. Norway's uncritical adjustment to OECD's guidelines, and especially the adoption of the OECD's most important instrument for quality control of education, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), has received criticism from many sides. The prominent Norwegian scholar Svein Sjøberg, for example, noted that the Norwegian Education Directorate is neglecting the highly political, normative, and narrowing nature of OECD's PISA programme and its use of concepts and ideas from the market economy in the education sector. Sjøberg contended that "the project is explicitly normative but presented and understood as a neutral and objective measure of the quality of a nation's school system" (Sjøberg 2018, 198). Paul Thomas (2021) similarly argued that "the language in the OECD documents secretes a particular common-sense and naturalized discourse that conceals the OECD's neoliberal machinations and legitimates unequal power relations" (6). He was concerned about "the legitimacy of an undemocratic organization's growing encroachment and influence in shaping educational policy in an egalitarian country," as Norway is (Thomas 2021, 6). Notwithstanding the criticism, when the Norwegian national curriculum for primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education from 2006 (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2006) was subject to minor reform, the OECD's guidelines were maintained and renewed in the 2020 curriculum reform (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2020).

The changes that occurred to the school system had parallels in higher education in Norway. At the turn of the millennium, about the same time as the reform of compulsory school commenced, the so-called *Quality Reform* was implemented in Norwegian higher education to comply with the Bologna process (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2000–2001). This involved introducing bachelor's and master's degrees instead of the old Latin degrees, a letter scale (A–F), and replacing the Norwegian system credits *vektttall* with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). A central goal of the

quality reform was to improve student throughput. The white paper (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2000–2001) that introduced the reform to the parliament (*Storting*) prescribed a stronger relationship between the institutions and the students, more frequent evaluation of the students, and overall higher efficiency of the institutions. As was the case in the curriculum reform of the schools, the individual institutions were granted more freedom and responsibility, but the freedom was coupled with accountability measures, such as making parts of the funding dependent on student performance and research results. For teacher education, both the quality reform of higher education and the OECD-inspired reform of compulsory school had a strong influence on content and values, as teacher education must keep in touch with developments in primary and secondary school and prepare for teaching according to the current curriculum. The student teachers became subject to a more performance-oriented education and training for a school system with some of the same values.

Democracy Education in Norway

The question of how schools can educate children and young people to meet future challenges served as a starting point for the recent curriculum reform (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2020). Three new key interdisciplinary issues are reflected in the curriculum, one of which is “democracy and citizenship.” The curriculum has a broad approach to the term democracy, and the students are expected to learn “about, through, and for democracy” (Lenz and Andersen 2019, our translation). The curriculum states that students “shall gain insight into the fact that democracy has different forms and expressions” (Core Curriculum 2020, 2.5.2). Different perspectives on democracy, such as democracy as a formal system, democracy as rights and responsibilities, democracy as participation, democracy as deliberation, and democracy as culture and a way of life, are suggested (Lenz and Andersen 2019). The aim of democracy education is to “stimulate the pupils to become active citizens and give them the competence to participate in developing democracy in Norway” (Core Curriculum 2020, 2.5.2). The notion of democracy and participation is further listed as one of the six core values of education and training. Here, “the school must be a venue where children and young people experience democracy in practice. The pupils must experience that they are heard in the day-to-day affairs in school, that they have genuine influence and that they can have impact on matters that concern them” (Core Curriculum 2020, 1.6).

Traditional and Modern Influences on Norwegian Music Teacher Education

Music education research indicates that the impact of educational policy changes on general teacher education music programmes has been almost non-existent (Rusinek and Aróstegui 2015). Other studies have highlighted the tendency of music teacher education programmes to maintain the status quo by reproducing traditions and conserving structures on different levels of music education (Bowman 2007; Gaunt and Westerlund 2013; Sætre 2014; Wright 2018). One of the traditions that contributes to maintaining the existing conditions in Norway is the Norwegian “seminarium” model of teacher education (Kvalbein 2003a, 2003b) and its traditional practice-based forms of knowledge. A characteristic of this tradition is its emphasis on a positive and caring social environment in which the near and well-known is highly valued, often at the expense of academic development. Teacher educators aim to create an atmosphere where students feel secure and comfortable and therefore avoid demands (Kvalbein 2003b, 103). At the beginning of this tradition in the late 19th century, political and cultural engagement was accepted but not encouraged, and ideas considered to be too radical were banned (33). We argue that some recognizable features of these practices remain in today’s teacher education.

A major reason for the development and maintenance of these values and practices was that the teacher seminars were largely seen as the continuation of primary and secondary school class structures and days that were filled with lessons. Considering this background, it is not surprising that in her dissertation on teacher identities in Norway, Søreide (2007) found that the dominant identities were “including,” “student-oriented,” and “caring.” This is in line with research on teacher motivation, in which altruism and social utility scored highly (Brandmo and Nesje 2017). The changes to school policy during the last decades have nevertheless made their mark on the teacher profession, as more recent research on teacher professionalism (Mausethagen 2013) describes the emergence of a new teacher, one who values accountability and testing more than their predecessors and more in line with a performative⁵ school. The change Mausethagen identified following the implementation of OECD policies has likely been strengthened in the subsequent years, as student teachers have now themselves been brought up in the performative school.

Although the teacher seminars have been replaced by more modern teacher

education colleges and universities, preservice music teachers still tend to consider seminarium-typical teaching and knowledge forms, such as representations of practice, exemplary models of teaching, and “how-to” skills, to be the most relevant knowledge forms in teacher education (Sætre 2014; Ballantyne and Packer 2004; Hallam et al. 2009). Such priorities may come at the expense of initiatives directed at enhancing critical thinking about educational issues (Joram 2007). Other conserving factors, such as novice music teachers’ strong influence by their own educational experiences and their preconceived conceptions of teaching, seem to make it difficult for them to acquire the critical distance needed to reflect on their own practice (Powell 2019, 207). Further, music teacher education programmes have been criticised for contributing to developing a type of preservice music teacher who is “passive, conservative, and overly focused on teaching technique over critical thought” (Powell 2019, 207; see also Elliott 1992; Regelski 1997; Woodford 1996b). The action research we present in the introductory narrative represents an attempt to break this circle of conservation and reproduction by inviting preservice music teachers to reflect critically on their own education and propose new ideas for a renewal of music education for the future.

Critical Thinking—A Buzzword with Implications

Critical thinking seems to have become a buzzword in education worldwide and is one of the core competencies of the 21st-century skills framework (<https://www.battelleforkids.org/networks/p21>) that has been central in the recent policy reform in Norway. The need for developing competencies connected to democratic citizenship, critical thinking, and innovation was addressed by two Norwegian official reports and a white paper about education in the future (Norges offentlige utredninger [NOU] 2014: 7; NOU 2015: 8; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2015–2016) and followed up in the new curriculum for compulsory school (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2020). On the level of higher education, the directive, *Regulations Relating to the Framework Plan for Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education, Years 5–10* (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2016, § 1.3) states that the programme “contributes to critical reflection” for the students. The national guidelines for the music subject in teacher education (Universities Norway 2017), however, do not use the terms *critical reflection* or *critical thinking*. The words critical and reflection are used apart from each other and are only related to issues such as the planning of music teaching and

the assessment of digital tools and learning material. The discrepancy confirms the impression of ignorance towards policy changes in music teacher education. Moreover, despite attempts to define the concepts, educational documents have yet to clarify what critical thinking and reflection should be in education.

Existing Accounts of Critical Thinking and Reflection in Education

There are several accounts of critical thinking and reflection in education. Burbules and Berk (1999) argued that critical thinking and critical pedagogy traditions share some common concerns. Both traditions see the need for more critically oriented classrooms. However, they seem to propose somewhat conflicting visions of what “critical” thought entails. The primary concern of critical pedagogy “is with social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations” (47). The critical thinking tradition, by contrast, focuses on “criteria of epistemic adequacy: to be ‘critical’ basically means to be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth-claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous, or obscure concepts, and so forth” (46). This focus often includes “an implicit hope that enhanced critical thinking could have a general humanizing effect” (46), which, again, points to the common concerns of the two traditions and to a possible benefit for developing democratic capacities. The focus of this article, however, precludes us from going deeper into a discussion of the possible cause-and-effect relationship between the development of critical thinking or reflection and democratic capacities.

The distinction between these two traditions may function as a main orientation towards the different accounts of critical thinking and reflection presented in this section and in the following short sweep through some of the literature on critical thinking and reflection in music education. It is a general observation that the terms critical reflection and reflection mainly seem to be used in the critical pedagogy tradition, whereas the term critical thinking most often appears within the tradition that carries its name. However, in the educational documents referred to in this article, the terms are interchanged and used almost synonymously, and they are most often referred to without definitions. Additionally, there is a third use of the term reflection that is not specifically connected to the critical pedagogy tradition but rather to the development of

the practical and performative sides of teacher professionalism (Schön 1983, 1987; Lauvås and Handal 2014).

The main tensions between these accounts seem to be their respective emphasis on epistemological versus ethical concerns (see also Lim 2011), whether the critical reflection or thinking should be theoretically grounded, or whether the issues on which to reflect should be “dictated” by the teacher or emerge from the students’ own lifeworld. There is also the issue of whether critical thinking and reflection should result in the finding of “truths” or if it should rather be more a type of creative thinking that results in imagined alternative realities and utopian thinking. This last point seems to be quite a common idea in the critical pedagogy tradition and has been relevant to our participatory action research, as one of our aims was to invite students to come up with ideas for re-thinking music education for the future (see Viig et al. 2023 for the study of utopian thinking in this project).

Freire’s (2005) thinking inspired the development of the participatory action research methodology (Orlowski 2019); thus, we have primarily oriented ourselves towards his understanding of critical reflection in our use of this methodology. However, we have also found it useful to consider the notion of reflection as it is used in Schön’s (1983, 1987) and Lauvås and Handal’s (2014) works. Thus, for the most part, the critical thinking tradition will be excluded from our subsequent discussion. We touch on this tradition again only when we examine how the issue of critical thinking and reflection has been treated in the music education literature. Before we move on to this brief overview, we review some central definitions and concepts of reflection and critical reflection in education in general.

Reflection and Critical Reflection in Education

The concept of “the reflective practitioner” (Schön 1983, 1987) has some similarities with action research methodology in that it aims to improve practice through cycles of reflection and action. When previously formed assumptions are reconsidered as situations unfold, and the practitioner can adjust the approach in the moment, such processes involve what Schön (1987) called “reflection in action.” Through “reflection on action” (Schön 1983), which involves reflection on an experience, the reflective practitioner is subsequently challenged to re-examine foundational beliefs and previously held assumptions.

Freire (2005) presented one of his main points about students’ reflection as follows: “To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named,

the world in turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in ‘action-reflection’” (88, emphasis in original). In other words, students start their reflection by being allowed to act, by naming the world the way they see it, and not least by addressing the problems, challenges, and needs they experience. According to Freire, students need to possess critical awareness to enter the historical process of becoming responsible subjects. Freire coined critical awareness into the concept of *conscientização*, which refers to the students’ emerging awareness of social, political, and economic contradictions (35). In Freire’s view, liberating education cannot be purely intellectual; it involves action and serious reflection, and then it becomes what he called a “praxis” (65). Learners are empowered to transform the world in that they move from being silent to speaking out and from being spectators to becoming actors.

The form of education that Freire aimed to overcome is what he called “the banking model of education.” In banking education, students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge and as “vessels” to be “filled” by the teacher (79). The teacher is the one who teaches, and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything, and the students know nothing. The teacher chooses the programme content, while the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it. The teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the students are reduced to objects. The banking concept of education attempts to control thinking and action, leading students to adapt to the world as it is and inhibiting their creative power by using propaganda-like methods (79). As a counterpart to the banking model, Freire suggested a “problem-posing education,” according to which both teachers and students together are enabled to become subjects of the educational process (86). Problem-posing education can help students become critical thinkers (83).

The practice triangle (Figure 1) depicts different levels of reflection in pedagogical practice (Lauvås and Handal 2014). On the first level, at the bottom of the triangle, there is “pure” action, whereas there are theoretical reflections before and after the concrete actions at the second level. On the third level, the actions are motivated, justified, and followed by critical reflection based on ethical and political considerations and values. The practice triangle corresponds, in part, to Schön’s reflective practitioner and Freire’s praxis.

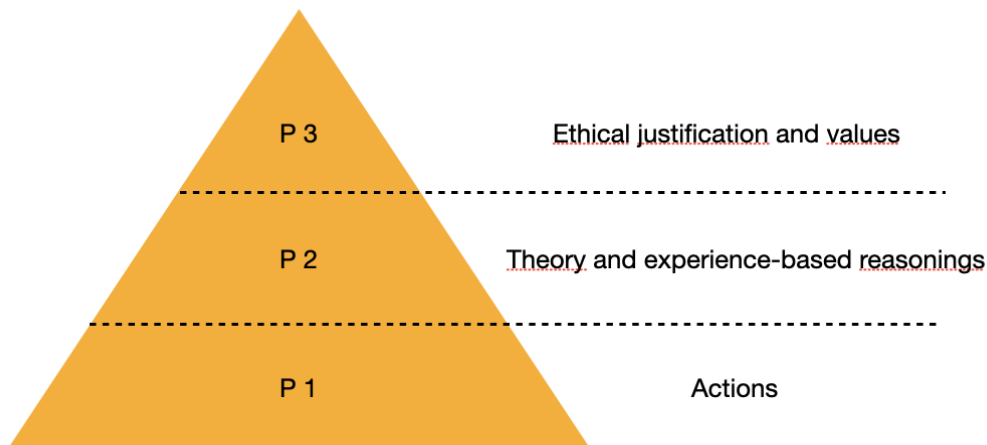


Figure 1. The practice triangle, modified after Lauvås and Handal 2014.

Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) contended that “(t)o be critical means first and foremost to be imaginative of alternative realities and thoughtful about their possible value or non-value” (612). Facione (1990), Halpern (1998), and Burbules and Berk (1999) also included the ability to imagine alternatives as a critical thinking ability, thus reflecting utopian ideas (see, e.g., Freire 1998).

Ellsworth (1989) called into question the rationalist assumptions underlying critical pedagogy. The notion of critical reflection implies that students engage in rational argument, which favours students’ analytical and critical skills as well as “propositions of universal validity” (304). Thus, critical reflection may contribute to hiding notions of privilege and oppression and silencing some student voices (301–304, 323). Further, Ellsworth criticised strategies such as “student empowerment,” “dialogue,” and “student voice” for giving the illusion of equality while leaving the authoritarian nature of the student-teacher relationship intact (306). She asked, leaning on Kant’s well-known “educational paradox,” “How do I [as educator] cultivate freedom through coercion?” (Kant in Biesta 2022, 46); “How does a teacher ‘make’ students autonomous without directing them?” (308).

Critical Thinking and Reflection in Music Education

Several attempts have been made to apply definitions of critical thinking to music education (see, for example, Small 1987; Richardson and Whitaker 1992; Woodford 1996a, 1996b; Younker 2002; Colwell 2011; Kokkidou 2013). Although these scholars have proposed frameworks and ideas for how critical thinking skills may be developed in the music classroom, none of these studies

relate to critical thinking in the sense that we apply the term, that is, oriented towards Freire's thinking. Similarly, this holds true for some empirical studies examining the advantages of critical thinking in fostering the growth of problem-solving abilities and enhancing music listening skills within the realm of music education (see, for example, Reahm 1986; Pogonowski 1987; Smialek and Boburka 2006; Johnson 2011). Furthermore, there have been studies conducted on music composition activities (Younker and Smith 1996) as well as investigations into choral rehearsals (Garrett 2013). These applications of critical thinking seem to relate to the issue in a somewhat similar way as the makers of the Norwegian national guidelines for the music subject in teacher education (Universities Norway 2017), who merely relate critical reflection to concrete teaching contents, such as the planning of music teaching and the assessment of digital tools and learning material.

West (2013) discussed the use of video cases of school music rehearsals from sites such as YouTube to promote preservice music teachers' reflections. Case studies, especially when presented using videos and discussed in line with Schön's account of the reflective practitioner, "are effective tools for helping preservice teachers sharpen their reflective skills, critically examine their previous beliefs, and shift their focus from teacher to learner" (15). Reporting on systematic experimental work with her preservice music teachers, Hanley (1993) indicated that they became more reflective as active learners instead of passive receivers when engaged in tasks that connected theory and practice. She stated that "planning, delivering, observing, and reflecting on lessons while capitalising on individual strengths are important to the development of the future teacher" (13). Atterbury (1994) argued for developing music teacher students' reflective thinking, which she described as "the ability to look back, to reflect upon what happened during an instructional encounter, and thus to learn about oneself as a teacher" (7). She claimed that music teachers often focus mainly on "what," "how," and "why" but never have the time to think of the essential "and then what?" (8). Although the studies by West, Hanley, and Atterbury are change- and future-oriented in a reflective practitioner sense (Schön 1983; Lauvås and Handal 2014), none of these studies sought to critically reflect on and subsequently transform music teacher education to the extent that our participatory action research endeavours sought to achieve.

However, there exists a substantial body of literature dedicated to social justice, with the aim of uncovering and addressing inequality and power imbalances within the realm of music education (see, for example, Benedict and

Schmidt 2006; Bradley 2006; Gould 2007; Gould et al. 2009). Hess criticised critical pedagogy for its failing ability to address white privilege, which could lead to a re-inscription of the very conditions it seeks to undo (Hess 2017a, 185). She pointed to the role of utopia, hope, dreaming, and imagining in the critique of the status quo. Drawing on ideas from the movements of critical reconstructionism, abolitionism, and critical pedagogy, she further argued that music educators should cater for “freedom dreaming” and for enacting critique and imagining a different possible future (Hess 2019, 2021). While this literature is critical in the sense that it addresses ethical concerns and occasionally adopts an activist perspective, it generally does not explicitly target the cultivation of critical thinking and reflection in preservice music teachers within a broader, *Bildung*-oriented educational sense (see, for example, Biesta 2022, 34–36; Rolle 2017). This goal remains pertinent in Norwegian educational guidelines, notwithstanding the influence of the OECD, and aligns with Benner’s non-affirmative pedagogy (Benner 2023). The criticism in this literature tends primarily to focus on issues related to social justice, often tracing their origins to perceived hierarchical structures in music educational practices linked to the “Eurocentric patriarchy” and Western classical music (see, for example, Hess 2017b, 17), or in philosophies of music education centred on aesthetic experience (see, for example, Regelski 2022). Much of the literature on social justice in music education originates from the American sphere. Consequently, not all the concerns raised, and examples used in this body of work may be perceived as immediately pertinent or applicable to societal and educational contexts in other parts of the world (see, for example, Fossum [now Rinholm] and Varkøy 2013; Varkøy and Rinholm 2020; Berger 2022, 211).

Kertz-Welzel (2022) criticised the social change-enthusiasm in social justice-oriented literature for often having led to an under-theorised and one-sided understanding of music’s societal goals. She called for rethinking music education for social change through a critical but imaginative approach that builds on insights from research and scholarly work from various countries. She suggested combining ideas from Asia and the Northern European tradition of *Bildung*, where the idea of music for its own sake is not dismissed but combined with an approach that aims at enhancing political and social engagement. “Music education has not only a social, but also an artistic and aesthetic mission, both relying on each other and being crucial for music education in the 2020s,” (Kertz-Welzel 2022, 12). Such an approach, which she called “music education

as utopian theory and practice” (17), offers a space for critical reflection, discussions, reconsiderations, and imagination.

Studies of Nordic music teacher education have focused on professionalism (Holst 2014; Jordhus-Lier 2015; Georgii-Hemming et al. 2016) and touched upon critical reflection only to a limited degree. Angelo and Georgii-Hemming (2014), however, claimed that music education institutions fail if they do not provide students with a qualified and sustainable language of reflection for discussing the knowledge base of music pedagogy, quality standards, and key responsibilities. Rinholm (2019) found that novice preservice music teachers considered “here-and-now” knowledge, especially practical teaching activities, for their use in practicum, and discussions based on personal experiences as the most relevant course content in their education. Later in their education, they seemed to develop a deeper understanding of the value of theory-based reflection.

Johansen (2017) addressed the need for “self-critical music education” that can change and enhance music educational practices in line with current societal challenges and new insights from the fields of music educational research and practice. Johansen argued for the importance of uncovering, pointing out, and scrutinising practices and ways of thinking that are taken for granted in music education. In recent years, such self-critical music education has come to the fore predominantly in the field of music education theory and research. Therefore, one of the most important challenges raised by self-critical music education is establishing better and more fruitful connections between the fields of research and practice (Johansen 2017).

This brief overview reveals that the issue of critical thinking and reflection in the context of music teacher education, especially with the aim of fostering preservice teachers’ critical reflection for educational change, is an underexplored field in music education research. Since music education has been dominated by practical “how to” skills (Sætre 2014), there is a need to explore and implement a more well-informed and self-critical music education. Our attempts to develop spaces for critical reflection through participatory action research can be regarded as an answer to Johansen’s (2017) call to establish better connections between music educational research and practice.

Students' Resistance to Theory

Thinking back to the introductory narrative, we can sense a discrepancy between the teacher educator's aims and expectations for participatory action research and the students' positive judgement of developing spaces for critical reflection as successful. The facilitator had expected a "higher level" of reflection informed by literature, whereas the students were satisfied with expressing and sharing their own opinions. Student 3's statement, "We have not had this opportunity with other subjects," shows that the students had not spent much time on reflection so far in their education. This participatory action research seemed to be a starting point for their reflections on their future profession. The student further claimed, "I think that we have achieved a unique way of reflecting on music teaching.... It is about our thoughts on it!", an utterance consistent with one of Freire's main points about students' reflection: "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires a new naming by the namers. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (Freire 2005, 88). In other words, students start their reflection by being allowed to act by naming the world the way they see it and not least by addressing the problems, challenges, and needs they experience. Teacher educators may expect all activities in teacher education to be research-based to a certain degree. Yet, the student may have a point. Both Schön's (1983, 1987) and Freire's (2005) accounts of reflection suggest that practitioners do not necessarily need to base their reflections on theory.

Student 3's utterance is also supported by the Norwegian law of universities and colleges, which stipulates the provision of an education that is both research- and experience-based (University and University Colleges Act 2005, § 1-3). Thus, students' experiences should be valued as equally important to their education as research-based knowledge. Similarly, the new Norwegian national core curriculum for compulsory school claims that "critical reflection requires knowledge, but there is also room for uncertainty and unpredictability. The teaching and training must therefore seek a balance between respect for established knowledge and the explorative and creative thinking required to develop new knowledge" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2020). Further, it is argued that "ethical awareness, which means balancing different considerations, is necessary if one is to be a reflecting and responsible human being" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2020). Examining Student 1's utterance—"We have become a bit more conscious about reflecting on

topics and more open to different opinions”—with an open and accepting mind could indicate that the students showed ethical awareness by “balancing different considerations.” Such ethical awareness arguably belongs to the third level of the practice triangle (Lauvås and Handal 2014). Still, the political and societal implications of the discussed themes, which also belong to this third level, seem to be missing in the students’ deliberations, as well as in the balance between “respect for established knowledge” and the students’ own ideas. This resembles the traditional Norwegian seminarium model’s view of the role of political engagement in teacher education: that teacher students should not be very politically interested (Kvalbein 2003b, 33). Student 1’s remark, “I think the most important thing here is not to find the definition of adaptive teaching in the literature, but what we mean about it” resounds Rinholm’s (2019) observation that novice music students found discussions based on their own experiences most relevant for their education. Nonetheless, the advanced students in Rinholm’s (2019) study seemed to develop a more positive attitude towards research-based reflection. It may be assumed that the possibilities for providing the students with a qualified language of reflection, in line with Angelo and Georgii-Hemming (2014), are enhanced by the new and extended Norwegian model of teacher education as a five-year integrated master’s programme.

In the participatory action research project on which this article rests, we also came across students who expressed opposing views concerning the need for theoretical knowledge (Onsrud et al. 2022). These students were asked to take part in and change the teaching in a course on the history of Western classical music. As they felt they lacked a proper understanding of the content, they wanted the lecturer to teach instead of the students taking the lead. This indicates that the need for theory depends highly on the pedagogical topic and situation. When there is concrete content to teach, a need for content knowledge emerges to allow for criticising and changing teaching practices. Yet, when the topic is a broad concept with practical repercussions, such as *adaptive teaching*, it is much easier to rely on one’s own experiences.

The introductory narrative may also be analysed more critically. At first glance, Student 1’s utterance—“I think the most important thing here is not to find the definition of adaptive teaching in the literature but what we mean by it. Our own thoughts about it are the most important”—could seem to reflect Freire’s (2005) thinking, to which the students had been introduced at the beginning of the action research. However, this might represent a weakened understanding of Freire’s notion of naming the world.

Freire indeed argued that the teacher should not only listen to the students but also challenge them. He suggested involving specialists such as a psychologist and a sociologist to comment on the generative themes during the discussions with the students, and the students were expected to write brief essays about them. He regarded this essay writing, to which literature suggestions should be annexed, as “valuable aids” in the training of the teacher-students (120). Moreover, Freire did not condemn science. On the contrary, when employed well, without reducing the oppressed to mere objects of scientific inquiry, science holds the potential to promote the humanisation and liberation of the oppressed and oppressors alike (133). Both the students and the teachers need to give up the dehumanising and oppressive relationship that characterises the banking model of education. Instead, they should engage in the relationship that Freire calls “dialogue” and together become responsible for the liberating educational growth process (Biesta 2017, 65). Hence, there are responsibilities and serious work connected to having a “voice” and becoming a subject in Freire’s thinking. Freire also addressed the necessity of humbleness from both sides of the dialogue: “On the other hand, dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility” (Freire 2005, 90). Student 1 did not seem to want to participate in any dialogue outside of the closed world of fellow students, either with the teacher or with the literature. Such an individualist interpretation of student voice could result in the creation of echo chambers with little space for the sort of critical reflection Freire promoted.

Might it be that the market-oriented language and the failing or superficial definitions of central terms such as student agency and critical reflection in the OECD guidelines and the Norwegian educational documents have contributed to influencing the students’ view of education as something commonsensical, that does not require digging deeper into the meaning of concepts and problems they meet? Has modern Norwegian teacher education become a place where “certainty of our own views,” “what we mean by it,” and “our own opinions” are seen as *the* critical thinking and reflection of today that can replace definitions of central concepts as well as informed and justified argumentation and deliberation in education? Is the new European democratic citizen mainly in need of innovation competence to create economic use value for his or her country? Where is the ideal of the independent, inquisitive, and mature citizen who can

engage with the world outside of himself or herself and to learn from this engagement and thereby become the capacity of critical judgement, as the German tradition of *Bildung* promotes (see Biesta 2022, 34–36)? Does the critical reflection in the introductory narrative represent the “self-critical music education” Johansen (2017) asked for? Or does it instead represent the opposite, a “chatification” of education as an expression of the “selfie” world, where we send each other our mirror images, as a modern form of narcissism?

Another pathway to understanding the students’ reliance on their own experiences is via the dominant teacher identities highlighted by Søreide (2007). Progressive values such as “student-centred” and “including” are prevalent in Norwegian schools and should not be abandoned, but, as Biesta (2022) maintained, solely being student-centred is just as big a pitfall as being curriculum-centred. Instead, he suggested an existential, “world-centred” view of education. It can involve “highlight[ing] the importance of giving our intentions, actions, and desires a ‘reality check’” (91). He connected world-centred education with his idea of subjectification and stressed the importance of interruption (50). Interruptions are necessary for the “*transformation of what is desired into what is desirable*” (Biesta 2013, 3, emphasis in original). In hermeneutical terms, the particularity of the students’ experiences is not sufficient to gain an adequate understanding of the matter at hand. Input from the outside, for example, through reading theory, is necessary to see the potential shortcomings of our own intentions, desires, and prejudices.

The Student as a Customer

The change towards OECD-inspired practices and policies and the quality reform in higher education, as described above, implied a more performative education system, in which the output in the form of measurable results became the benchmark for success. McKenzie (2001) claimed that “performativity is legitimation defined as the maximization of a system’s output and the minimization of its input” (163). This logic is often accompanied by what Lyotard (1984) called a certain level of terror: “be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear” (xxiv). This terror also affects teachers in schools, and Ball (2003) connected it to the introduction of the OECD policy. In his discussion of performative education, based on Lyotard’s (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*, McKenzie sums up the argument as such: “Performative education emerges when the university student’s goal of ‘learning a philosophy of life’ is replaced by ‘learning a job skill’” (McKenzie 2001, 163–64).

Within higher education, the change towards performative education has in turn changed the role of the student towards being a customer and commodified education by turning it into a form of transaction. The idea of a transaction is not necessarily new in Norwegian teacher education, as the seminarium model involves a transaction between the student teachers' time and authorisation as a teacher, without the teacher educators demanding too much from their students. What has changed is the nature and content of the transaction. The present student teachers seem to be more aware of their rights and expect to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their tasks as teachers—that is, job skills. The commodification of higher education has been further strengthened by making university funding reliant on the number of students graduating, as described above. It has therefore become an economic incentive to “produce” as many graduates as possible, conceivably at the expense of quality.

While learning a job skill seems to fit the long-term motivation of student teachers, their short-term goal is often *exam skills*. The introductory vignette of this article is from an extracurricular offering and does not necessarily contain this dynamic. However, when we conducted participatory action research within the confines of a regular course (see Onsrud et al. 2022; Fredriksen et al. 2023), the exam waiting at the end of the course guided the students' (lack of) participation and affected their agency to a significant degree. A result was that they themselves preferred a form of banking education as relevant for the exam, asking the teacher educator to lecture. Their apprehensiveness about the exam waiting at the end of the course echoed the terror of performativity that Lyotard (1984) identified, but this terror is largely self-imposed. Even in a course where the student teachers were invited to participate and bring their views of the topic to the table and even participate in formulating the exam, the thought of an exam made them opt for the more authoritative alternative: banking education. As Biesta (2022) contended, following Kant (1983, 41), critical thinking necessarily involves courage, and teachers should “encourage children to ‘take up’ their subject-ness, helping them not to forget the possibility of existing as subjects of their own life” (7). Biesta here referred to in-service teachers, but in our opinion, this is even more pressing for student teachers, as to be able to teach for subject-ness, they need to lay claim to the very subjectivity themselves. Without the courage to reflect freely on the purpose of education, it will be difficult to climb the ladder of the practice triangle (Lauvås and Handal

2014). The terror of performativity seems to impede the courage necessary to think critically.

Some of the student teachers mentioned above embraced banking education, as they saw it as an effective way to redeem the revenue of the educational transaction. However, Biesta (2015) contended that Freire's critique of banking education has contributed to the discursive shift into the "learnification" of education and thereby to the development of "the student as customer" (76). Treating students as customers is, in Biesta's view, one of the results of this shift that undermines opportunities for the development of genuine teacher professionalism. Biesta argued that teachers are not just expected to give students what they want but to move them beyond what they want by opening new vistas and new possibilities. Biesta does not thereby suggest that students should not have a voice in what is going on, which would turn education back into authoritarian modes of teaching. However, he pointed to the circumstance that the voice of the student and that of the teacher are very different voices that come with different responsibilities (Biesta 2015, 83). He highlighted the teleological character of education, that is, the fact that education always raises the question of its purpose in relation to the three domains of subjectification, qualification, and socialisation (77–78).

It is not very surprising that student teachers, and all students who train for a profession, evaluate the content of their studies from a utilitarian viewpoint; thus, McKenzie's (2001) comparison of "philosophy of life" to "job skills" is therefore not necessarily pertinent when applied to teacher education. If the students are adopting a philosophy of (professional) life, it is connected to the prevailing teacher identities mentioned above, but when these are not combined with critical thinking, they can become dogmatic rather than liberating.

Discomfort as a Virtue

Considering the aims of this study, our participatory action research may, at first sight, have been somewhat unsuccessful. The types of student agency, critical reflection, and utopian dreaming that we hoped for are not particularly visible in our material. We did not foresee the strong impact of structural constraints, such as the exam, on students' motivation to engage in critical reflection and imagination. Moreover, the action research appeared to cause strong discomfort for both the students and educators, as they were displaced from their traditional roles. With hindsight, however, we recognise that the

study has brought about vital insights and that the discomfort has been productive.

First, we realise that the action research process may have changed us as educators and researchers the most. One concrete practical outcome is a transformed music history course in its content, working methods, and student activity. Perhaps more importantly, our views of the student-teacher relationship have changed. We have become especially aware of how the power relations connected to the student-teacher dyad, despite our intentions to foster student agency, are not easily put aside. As teacher educators, we are still in a more powerful position—deciding what is valid and relevant knowledge and concerning how we value the students' critical reflection. At this point, we acknowledge as appropriate Ellsworth's (1989) criticism of strategies such as student empowerment and student voice for giving the illusion of equality while leaving the authoritarian nature of the student-teacher relationship intact (306). Her question, "How does a teacher 'make' students autonomous without directing them?" (308), is a dilemma we as researchers often experienced during the action research.

Second, and consistent with Freire's (2005) concept of naming the world, we recognise that the students were able to reflect critically within the space for agency that was available to them and that their articulated reflections represent important steps in their progress towards becoming professional music teachers. On the surface, Freire's thinking could seem to oppose both Angelo and Georgii-Hemming's (2014) notion of providing students with a qualified language and the idea of the practice triangle (Lauvås and Handal 2014) with its advancing levels of reflection. Some would even say that these ideas represent exactly the practices that favour the rational argument criticised by Ellsworth (1989). However, in our action research, we observed a correlation between students' knowledge, agency, and critical reflection. It is more fruitful for students to reflect critically on issues about which they know something, and increased knowledge creates more opportunities for agency. Therefore, we suggest that fostering student agency and empowering students in music education includes encouraging them to seek relevant knowledge to build a qualified language. In accordance with Garber (2004), we argue that it is crucial that preservice music teachers strive to see "themselves as intellectuals—that is, as professionals able to conceptualise, design, and implement ideas and experiences in educating pupils—rather than as technicians implementing pre-packaged content and instructional procedures" (7). However, developing such

professionalism and a qualified language takes time; it cannot be accomplished within a few weeks of action research. It is a complex process dependent on gaining both knowledge and experience and is connected to personal development (Biesta 2022). Participatory action research, as conducted in this study, might be understood as a “methodology of discomfort”⁶ that provokes the beginning of such development processes. In line with this insight, we previously suggested the inclusion of participatory action research in generalist teacher education music curricula as an approach to enhancing student agency (Onsrud et al. 2022).

We conclude by suggesting that the most beneficial teacher educator attitude for furthering student agency and critical reflection in accordance with the participatory action research philosophy is the ability to endure the discomfort that follows from loosening up the firm structures of the teacher–student dyad. This includes being responsive to the students’ own critical reflections, regardless of level, at least at the beginning of a reflexive process (Freire 2005; Lauvås and Handal 2014). Paradoxically, it seems that by loosening up, we can capture and start pursuing the vital aims of this study.

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Notes

¹ For the sake of convenience, *preservice music teacher* is frequently replaced with *student* or *student teacher* in this article.

² These were second-year students in a five-year teacher education program.

³ The study referred to in this article is a sub-study of the project FUTURED (2019–2022), which took place at two teacher education institutions in Norway and was funded by the Norwegian Research Council under Grant Number 288436. The study is reported more thoroughly in Onsrud et al. 2022 and

Fredriksen et al. 2023. The project's website: <https://prosjekt.hvl.no/futured/>.

⁴ We acknowledge the long history of these rich and nuanced concepts going back to Greek Antiquity. In this paper we focus on and discuss some selected contemporary notions.

⁵ Performativity here refers to an increased emphasis on student performance, testing, teacher and school leadership accountability, and the external control of professional work in educational policies and school cultures.

⁶ We are here paraphrasing the notion of a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler 1999; Hess 2018).