

Ensuring equal rights for comprehensive school students to receive high quality education in music

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In the Finnish comprehensive schools the attitudes of principals have been shown to play a significant part in decisions concerning optional subjects in curricula, after-school club classes and the distribution of resources. Even through a majority of school principals in Finland see music as an im-

portant subject for the growth and development of a child, its status in the comprehensive school curriculum has declined in recent years. Equal rights for students to receive high quality basic education in music can be ensured by improving the level of and resources for teaching and learning.



photo: Marja-Leena Juntunen

This ArtsEqual policy brief offers school principals recent research findings on the current state of music education in comprehensive schools to support decision making.

We propose the following measures to school principals:

- Only formally qualified music teachers should be employed to teach music in lower secondary schools.
- In grades 3-6 music should be taught by a subject teacher or by a classroom teacher who has a minor in music (25 credits) or equivalent competence.
- Music should be offered as an elective subject: for example, three out of the six hours of elective artistic and practical subjects in primary school, and two out of the five in lower secondary school, could be allocated to music.
- After-school club activities in music should be available to all students.
- Schools should favor the practice of arranging of festivities, concerts and other performances.
- Resources for music education, especially for music technology, need to be increased.
- Stronger support is needed for the participation of teachers in updating training in music.

Music supports learning and enhances communality and wellbeing in schools

While Finland has excelled in PISA rankings, a large number of Finnish students in basic education do not feel good in schools or regard school as something significant to their lives.¹ The extent to which students enjoy going to school and find their studying meaningful is however essential to both their motivation and wellbeing.² Moreover, in recent discussion on Finnish educational policies concern has been expressed over the weakening PISA results among the Finnish students. But at the same time, discussion on the level of skills and significance of learning in artistic and practical subjects has for the most part been lacking. A majority of comprehensive school principals do however believe that learning music, visual arts and crafts is considerably or extremely significant to the students' development and that all students benefit from the study of these subjects.³ For comprehensive school students music means a lot. Music education enhances their wellbeing and collaborative "learning by doing" creates a sense of community in schools. Students in comprehensive school have positive attitudes towards music education. The atmosphere in music classes is experienced as pleasant and music is seen as an interesting subject to study. Students also feel that music is a subject with which it is possible to achieve good results.⁴

A majority of comprehensive school principals believe that learning music, visual arts and crafts is extremely significant to the students' development.

What is essential in music education is that it offers students opportunities to build up ways to deal with emotions and experiences as well as capacities to regulate their emotions.⁵ The gratifying experience of collaborative music making is important to the formation of group cohesion and the strengthening of social bonds.⁶ Practicing music together with other students also develops abilities to accept and value diversity in skills as well as cultural differences.⁷ Instrumental music learning has been associated with brain plasticity and the strengthening of not only musical but also various non-musical skills. Practicing music has been reported to affect e.g. hearing capacity⁸, linguistic memory⁹, literacy¹⁰, mathematical skills¹¹, visual-spatial processing¹², academic performance as measured by IQ tests¹³ and pro-social behavior¹⁴.

Especially important to the building of a sense of community in schools are school festivities and performances where music is in a central role.¹⁵ It is important that in the future, too, events centered on student performances will continue to be held in schools, as they offer experiences of inclusion and success, various forms of diverse cooperation and personal responsibility and support the holistic development of students.

Music skills at barely adequate level

According to a Finnish national assessment of learning outcomes in music¹⁶, there is a notable degree of variation in the music skills and knowledge students possess when they complete basic education. A large number of the students don't have a sufficient command of even the most essential contents of the teaching objectives for music. On the average the music skills of students completing basic education have been rated as barely adequate or moderate.

Many students leave comprehensive school with gaps in essential music skills.

Based on the assessment, students leave basic education with highly varying knowledge, skills and attitudes with regard to music both in terms of content and level. Most of the students have left primary school with serious gaps in essential music skills and they haven't had the opportunity to fill these gaps in lower secondary school. The learning outcomes are considerably better for those students who study music in all lower secondary school grades.¹⁷

Stronger competencies in teaching music

The assessment revealed that more than one third of the teachers who teach music in lower secondary school are not formally qualified for the work. This finding was self-reported by teachers themselves. The number is alarmingly high. In other words, more than one third of the students are not taught music by a subject teacher at any point during basic education. The principals thus need to ensure that teachers responsible for teaching music in lower secondary school are qualified for the task (subject teacher's degree or extensive minor in music, 60 credits).

More than one third of students are not taught music by a subject teacher at any point during basic education.

The foundation for music skills and knowledge is laid already in primary school, where music is usually taught by classroom teachers. The teacher's own music skills and experiences play an integral part here.

Since there have been steep cuts in the proportion of music studies as part of teacher education, classroom teachers' music skills and interest in the subject are often dependent on their personal interest in and earlier studies of music. According to various studies, classroom teachers don't feel that they have sufficient skills to teach music, they often feel reluctant to teach music and they don't perceive themselves professionally as music teachers.¹⁸ From a student's point of view, the chance of receiving high quality teaching in music is random. For these reasons, in grades 3–6 music should be taught by subject teachers or classroom teachers with at least a minor (25 credits) in music or equivalent competencies in the field. Ideally classroom teachers specialized in music together with subject teachers of music would make up a strong base of expertise in school culture.

More opportunities to learn music

In basic education, there is less teaching in music than in the other artistic and practical subjects. This – alongside the competence level of the teachers – seems to have the impact that music is also chosen as an optional subject more rarely than other artistic and practical subjects: by ninth grade only one fourth of the students still study music.¹⁹ On the other hand, the supply of optional subjects can also restrict opportunities to study music. According to the policy stance of the Finnish National Board of Education, the organizer of the education may decide how the hours for elective and optional classes devoted to artistic and practical subjects are used. There are many schools where music is not available as an optional subject. One way to improve the level of music education could, for example be, that three out of the six elective classes in artistic and practical subjects in primary school, and two out of the five classes in secondary school, should be allocated to music.

After-school club activities in music, in the form of orchestras, bands, choirs or music ensembles, are important to the achievement of the learning goals in the subject.²⁰ The supply of club activities has however notably declined since

the 1990s due to cost savings, which for its own part undermines the students' opportunities to learn music.

One system that increases the students' opportunities to receive high quality education in music is the so-called music class system.

The extended music curriculum offers students who are interested in music the possibility to study music several hours a week under a competent teacher and to thereby develop their musical strengths in a versatile manner. Collaborative music making develops many skills that are also professionally useful in, for example, the fields of art, culture, teaching, education and care. From this viewpoint, the music class system should not be dissolved but reinforced so that all interested students would have the opportunity to attend the classes.

More resources for music education

The financial resources for teaching play a major part in the implementation of music education. Studies²¹ have however shown that there are great differences between schools as to the resources given to music education, especially in the context of music technology. The principal needs to thus ensure that the school allocates resources also to music education in a way that makes it possible to teach according to the core curriculum.

Teachers need in-service training

The new national core curriculum challenges basic education in many ways. The challenges for music education involve, for example, the creative production of music and the use of music technologies. It goes without saying that the need for in-service training for teachers will keep continuously growing. According to the national assessment, only one fourth of music teachers take annually part in in-service training in the field. All the music teachers did however state in their responses that they were willing to take part in free in-service training during working hours.²² In decisions about this option, too, the role of the principal is pivotal.

Principals have been shown to have a key role in decisions concerning optional subjects in school curricula, after-school club activities and the distribution of resources.

Only one fourth of music teachers take annually part in in-service training in the field.

Notes

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|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1 Salmela-Aro & al. 2015 | 7 Westerlund 2009 | 13 Schellenberg 2006 | 18 Tereska 2003, Vesioja 2006, Russell-Bowie 2009, Seddon 2008 |
| 2 Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro 2015 | 8 Putkinen & al. 2012 | 14 Kirschner & Tomasello 2011 | 19 Juntunen 2011 |
| 3 Laitinen, Hilmola & Juntunen 2011 | 9 Ho & al. 2003 | 15 Nikkanen 2014 | 20 Juntunen 2011 |
| 4 Juntunen 2011 | 10 Moreno & al. 2009 | 16 Laitinen, Hilmola & Juntunen 2011 | 21 Juntunen 2011, Partti 2016 |
| 5 Saarikallio & Erkkilä 2007 | 11 Bahr & Christensen 2000 | 17 Juntunen 2011 | 22 Juntunen 2011 |
| 6 Särkämö & Huottilanen 2012 | 12 Sluming & al. 2007 | | |

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