

Article

Norm-Challenging Pedagogy *as, Through* and *in* Music Education

Cecilia Ferm Almqvist ^{1,2,*}  and Linn Hentschel ³¹ School of Pedagogy and Special Education, Gothenburg University, 40530 Göteborg, Sweden² School of Educational Sciences, Södertörn University, 14189 Huddinge, Sweden³ Department of Creative Studies, Umeå University, 90187 Umeå, Sweden; linn.hentschel@umu.se

* Correspondence: cecilia.ferm.almqvist@gu.se

Abstract

In this article we highlight and discuss how norm-challenging pedagogy in music education can be encouraged and executed from three different angles. We primarily focus on activities such as democratic learning situations for pupils and teachers, to be explored as safe and brave spaces. With a starting point in norm-critical pedagogy, we explore the possibility of using norm-challenging pedagogy *as, through* and *in* music educational settings. Norm-challenging pedagogy *as* music education can challenge dominant ways of assimilating, processing, and expressing knowledge, whereas norm-challenging pedagogy *through* music education concerns how traditional views on, for example, gender, race, or disability identities can be challenged through music activities. Norm-challenging pedagogy *in* music education critically reflects on who has the right to learn and express themselves musically and in what ways, related to gender, race or disability. The article is based on a phenomenological view of aesthetic experience and music education as a life of equal value, where de Beauvoir's concepts of freedom, facticity, and ambiguity constitute crucial analytical concepts. The author's own experiences of ambiguous norm-challenging situations *as, through* and *in* music education will be used and discussed in relation to the philosophical framework. The results of the exploration will be critically reflected upon in relation to organisational, collegial, didactic and relational aspects of music education.

Keywords: norm-critique; norm-challenging; safe and brave spaces; music education and democracy; gender; race; intellectual disability; diversity

1. Introduction

Established norms are often presented as neutral or self-evident, yet research shows that they can act as powerful obstacles to equal education (Andersson, 2017). By shaping how knowledge, learning, and assessment are understood, such norms quietly determine which teaching practices are valued and which students are recognised as successful learners. As Moss and Schutz (2001) and Shepard (2000) argue, this process inevitably includes some educational activities and learners while marginalising others. Norms connected to gender, race, and disability are particularly influential, as they affect students' self-image and sense of self-efficacy, thereby constraining their opportunities to learn (Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003; Obindah & Iminabo, 2024). Rather than challenging these assumptions, educational contexts often risk reproducing and reinforcing them, allowing established ideas about who can learn, and how learning should look, to persist over time (McDonald et al., 2007; Roberts & Jesudason, 2013). Music education is no exception. Here too, deeply rooted norms concerning knowledge, ability, and conceptions of the human



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being continue to shape educational practices and outcomes (Karlsen, 2025; Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2023).

With a starting point in norm-critical pedagogy (Björkman et al., 2021), in this article we investigate the possibility of using norm-challenging pedagogy *as*, *through* and *in* music educational situations (Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2023). The reason for choosing to explore the concept of norm-challenging rather than norm-critical pedagogy, is that our primarily aim is to highlight some opportunities to actively challenge traditional norms in music education practices rather than merely criticise them. Norm-critical pedagogy primarily aims to form awareness of the role of norms in shaping domination, subordination, inclusion and exclusion, and focus strongly on how language is used (Reimers, 2023). Instead, norm-challenging pedagogy encourages teachers to go beyond norms that hinder equal education in their teaching practices, in action. Norm-challenging pedagogy *as* music education can challenge dominant ways of assimilating, processing, and expressing knowledge (e.g., to use a song to teach mathematics), whereas norm-challenging pedagogy *through* music education concerns how traditional views on for example gender, race, or disability can be challenged through music activities (e.g., to write songs about one's gender identification). Norm-challenging pedagogy *in* music education critically reflects on who has the right to learn and express themselves musically in what ways, related to gender, race or disability (e.g., who are allowed to play the electric guitar?). The different perspectives will be exemplified through narratives, related to the researchers experiences of earlier performed studies (Ferm, 2007; Hentschel & Ferm Almqvist, 2024; Hentschel, 2022, 2025).

The philosophically based study presented in this article aims to explore how norm-challenging pedagogy can be enacted *as*, *through*, and *in* music education, focusing on how established ideas of knowledge, dimensions of diversity and participation can be challenged in music educational practices. We examine this by posing the following question: How can music education serve as a safe and brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013) for equal music education through challenging established norms?

Our reasoning on norm-challenging pedagogy is a development of the Swedish concept norm critical pedagogy. Over the past decade, norm-critical pedagogy and perspectives—both as concepts and as practices—have gained widespread traction in Sweden, particularly within the education and school systems (Björkman et al., 2021). In 2010, the book *Normkritisk pedagogik—makt, lärande och strategier för förändring* (Norm-Critical Pedagogy—Power, Learning, and Strategies for Change, Bromseth & Darj, 2010) was published, introducing the term “norm-critical pedagogy”. Since then, in Sweden, several methodologies and handbooks concerning the concept norm critical pedagogy, have been published, educational companies specialising in the field have been founded, research has been conducted, and reports have been released according to Björkman et al. (2021). The concept has its roots in feminist (Butler, 2020) and poststructuralist theory (Foucault, 1970) as well as in critical pedagogy (Freire, 2020). Questioning and challenging power relations, conscious and unconscious norms were early and important starting points. Norm-critical pedagogical work is defined as process-oriented reflection in which equality, norms, intersectionality, anti-discrimination, and power are central (Bromseth, 2019). Norm-critical pedagogy is seen as a force in democratising efforts, challenging power and offering shifts in perspective—in other words, making visible and breaking down norm-creating processes. Drawing on Freire (2020), Bromseth (2019) highlights the importance of teachers offering students a critical perspective on the narratives created in social contexts—narratives that set the agenda for what is considered acceptable and expected, and what falls outside the norm. Based on that, in this article, we strive to explore how it

becomes possible for teachers to work in norm-challenging ways through, in, and as music educational practice—that allow students to explore and reflect critically.

Furthermore, Bromseth (2019) uses Foucault's theories to show how intersectional power hierarchies are maintained through such narratives, which calls for process-oriented reflection. An important task of norm-critical pedagogy is, according to Bromseth, to uncover how the school's narratives about "truth" is related to societal power structures, and to critically explore the ethical consequences that such a view of reality has for individuals and groups. Further, it is emphasised that other narratives need to be brought to light—something we are convinced that conscious music educational practice can contribute to. Recent research highlights the growing need for norm-critical and feminist-informed approaches in music education (Ferm Almqvist & Hentschel, 2023) particularly in response to contemporary societal challenges such as gender norms (Green, 2023), social justice (Hess, 2017), and cultural diversity (Campbell, 2017). A central theme across the literature is the importance of challenging binary conceptions of gender and creating space for diverse gender expressions through music teaching.

Strategies such as queer pedagogy—challenging both the heteronormative assumptions of most language textbooks, and classroom practices that erase LGBTQIA (Nemi Neto, 2018) visibility and transcendence—are proposed to move beyond stereotypical musical practices and foster inclusive learning environments (S. V. Onsrud et al., 2021). Earlier research in the field encourage music educators to critically reflect on how norms are reproduced through repertoire choices, pedagogical traditions, and historical narratives (Karlsen, 2025). This includes questioning established practices such as the master-apprentice model and seeking alternative theoretical frameworks and stories that broaden the understanding of music's role in society. Structural efforts to address the gender imbalance and disrupt normative citational patterns are also emphasised (S. V. Onsrud et al., 2021; Karlsen, 2025). As Karlsen highlights, music teachers' responsibility to facilitate students' knowledge development, in a broad sense, entails an obligation to create interpersonal relationships that make such development possible. Hence, adopting a norm-critical perspective on music education can contribute to enabling this inclusivity.

Music education is positioned as a potentially transformative practice, where students' lived experiences, continually made in the classroom, serve as entry points for learning. Such an approach contributes to renegotiating classroom power relations and supports the development of more equitable and inclusive pedagogical settings (Abrahams, 2012). Silverman and Niknafs (2025) suggest that educators in such contexts, are urged to engage with theories such as critical race theory, culturally responsive pedagogy, and social-emotional learning to better respond to the complexities of contemporary educational landscapes. They also note that the literature overall calls on music educators—regardless of prior engagement with feminist or norm-critical perspectives—to actively reflect on how their practices both shape and are shaped by prevailing norms and structures within music education. In this article, we contribute to the field by exploring the more active concept norm-challenging pedagogy in relation to music educational practice.

Creating emotionally secure learning environments—often referred to as *safe spaces*—where norms can be challenged, is essential for enabling students to take both musical and personal risks, which are central to meaningful learning and assessment in music education (Hendricks, 2023; Hendricks et al., 2014). However, Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that the concept of *brave spaces* offers a more dynamic framework, emphasising the importance of discomfort, accountability, and active engagement in dialogue around identification, power, and divergence. In this view, brave spaces do not replace safety but reframe it as a condition that includes challenging of norms. Teachers play a crucial role in cultivating these environments by balancing emotional safety with pedagogical risk-taking,

encouraging students to step beyond their comfort zones while feeling supported. [Payne-Rios \(2023\)](#) shows how theatre education operationalizes brave space principles through five tactics—*We Challenge, Not Attack, We Pay Mindful Respect To Everyone, We Will Have Humane Controversy, I Accept Personal Responsibility, and Reflect On Our Decisions*—which align with core social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies such as self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. These strategies are not only taught but also remembered by students, suggesting their deep impact. In music education, similar principles can guide teachers in designing inclusive and norm-challenging pedagogical practices that allow students to express themselves authentically while engaging critically with various norms. Here, we complement the theoretical base for norm-challenging perspectives, safe and brave spaces with a phenomenological way of thinking, in music education, not least by a close reading of [de Beauvoir's \(1949/2012\)](#) thoughts regarding equal lives.

2. The Philosophical Exploration

To reach the aim of this article we have read de Beauvoir's philosophy, specifically her writings on equal lives, and ambiguity, closely with a phenomenologically interpretive attitude to the phenomenon *norm challenging pedagogy* situated in music educational practice ([van Manen & van Manen, 2021](#)). With a starting point in research-based inspiration and motivation for conducting the current philosophical investigation, we share our close reading of de Beauvoir's philosophy and continually relate to phenomenological examples of norm challenging pedagogy, drawing upon own experiences made in earlier studies within the field of music education, presented as narratives. By building narratives partly based on memories of previous research studies, we have aligned with a phenomenological perspective: experiences reveal themselves through lived consciousness. Memories are not mere recollections but expressions of how phenomena appeared to us in the "now," carrying interpretations and meanings ([van Manen, 2016](#)).

[Frank \(2005, 2012\)](#) suggests a dialogical narrative approach based on Bakhtin's idea that human beings are inherently relational, rather than bound individuals, which in turn works well with a phenomenological way of thinking. He underlines that no one person's voice is ever his or her own but is always permeated with the voices of others. Thus, creating relational dialogues yields meaning in another way than would result from separately presented excerpts ([Smith & Sparkes, 2009](#)). Additionally, according to [Frank \(2006\)](#), dialogical histories situate readers in social contexts, which implies that if something is to be changed, it must be done in relation to others. Hence, the dialogic narrative approach strives to communicate the results in a sensitive, situated way ([de Beauvoir, 1948](#)), this, in turn, aims to offer the reader an opportunity to understand our experience from "within". The approach helped us to put earlier experiences of the material aside and to let the phenomenon show itself to us. It should be underlined that a phenomenological text should never be read merely for its surface message. The goal is that the reader should start to think and relate the results to their own experiences and practices ([van Manen, 2002](#)). The result makes a base for a developed thinking about norm-challenging pedagogy *as, through, and in* music education, and how such a thinking might influence organisation of and teaching in practice.

3. Norm-Challenging Music Education on Phenomenological Ground

To discuss the relationship between norm-challenging pedagogy and music educational practice, it is essential to clarify what is meant by music educational practice. This article adopts a phenomenological perspective on aesthetic expression and experience ([Ferm Thorgeresen, 2013](#); [Dufrenne, 1954](#); [Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962](#)) and approaches music

education as a lived, equal-value practice, where the concepts of freedom, facticity (de Beauvoir, 1949/2012), and ambiguity (de Beauvoir, 1948) serve as central modes of thinking.

From a phenomenological perspective, the starting point for music educational practice is to make lived musical experiences possible. This enables learning about form, depth, tone, harmony, lines, rhythm, and movement within time-, space-, and tradition-shaped contexts, where students understand how these elements are typically combined. Music as an artistic expression is inseparable from life more broadly: humans experience music through multiple senses and acquire structural, performative, dynamic, emotional, existential, and bodily knowledge simultaneously (Dufrenne, 1954; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962; Ferm Thorgersen, 2013). Musical worlds are intersubjective, as humans are always interwoven with others through perception and expression, and within this context, the world becomes meaningful and manageable. Musical aesthetic experience is multidimensional; therefore, existential and emotional aspects must be considered in planning and practicing music education. In schools, norms determine where, when, and to whom music education—as defined here—is accessible (Ferm Thorgersen, 2013).

Accordingly, it is important to allow space for expression, interaction, emotions, sharing of experiences, and life itself, in contexts where music is central, integrated, and surrounding. Within music educational practices, learners are offered not only the opportunity to acquire musical expressions but also experiences of belonging, presence, and emotional engagement with the music, the activity, and its context. Musical experience requires active participation, drawing on prior experience, imagination, emotional involvement, and reflection (Dufrenne, 1954; Ferm Thorgersen, 2013).

In musical aesthetic experiences, the musician as a person becomes visible—forming a basis for norm-challenging pedagogy. Such experiences can surprise and disrupt habits, offering new ways of relating to the world. They show that perception involves emotional living, requiring openness and full engagement of the self. Interacting musically is thus a way of being and becoming (Blacking, 1973). Music education entails exploring expressions (Benson, 2003), discovering and combining musical building blocks, and creating meaning in the in-between spaces—both individually and collectively (Ferm Thorgersen, 2013). Music educational practice should be offered in ways that affirm and challenge traditions, genres, and styles.

In other words, music educational practice has several interconnected purposes. First, it provides opportunities to learn musical expressions, structures, tools, and traditions. Second, it enables learners to step outside conventions, exploring new ways of being and engaging with the world. Third, it allows for creative expression—assembling building blocks in novel ways, improvising, choreographing, directing, and composing. Finally, it fosters the development of one's musical identity, a sense of “I can,” such as “I am a singer,” “I am part of the music,” or “I am someone who likes writing music”—opening new ways of being and becoming. All four purposes are engaged when music educational practice is applied in norm-challenging pedagogical situations.

Such approaches require reflection on views of knowledge and learning. What counts as knowledge in music education—and which knowledge is prioritised—is shaped by curricula, teachers' motivations and ideals, and established traditions. It also reflects assumptions about learning, the forms of engagement schools offer, and how acquired knowledge is permitted to be expressed.

Complementing post-structural theories that underpin the Swedish concept of norm-critique, de Beauvoir (1948) emphasises that humans are free to create themselves through their projects, with no predetermined essence. Humans are responsible, active subjects with the freedom to choose. One of the most important tasks for music educational practices, then, is to offer all learners—regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnic affiliation, sex,

gender identification, or intellectual disabilities—opportunities to make choices, pursue projects, and challenge existing norms. This, in turn, requires teachers to take responsibility for their own decisions rather than relying on agreed-upon structures of “truth” about how music education should be conducted.

According to [de Beauvoir \(1949/2012\)](#), the body constitutes both a situation and exists in situations. The human body and the world are interwoven—encounters between human freedom and conditions that are not perceived as optional (e.g., background, sex, gender identification, or disability). Situations should not be seen as absolute but as changeable interactions between people and the world. Bodily experience is inseparable from human projects, making understanding the world a holistic, sensory process engaging the whole person. Transcendence (active agency) and immanence (passive repetition) describe whether individuals can move beyond given conditions. When learners are prevented from transcending, they become enclosed in their bodies and situations. Education should enable transcendent projects—for example, through music—engaging the whole self and multiple senses. Without conscious norm-challenging efforts, restrictive structures risk defining what is possible for each learner.

The view of future possibilities affects how people act in the present. Participation in creative and intellectual activities, according to [de Beauvoir \(1972\)](#), challenges everyday structures and offers new possibilities. Music educational practice can therefore be seen as a way of taking life seriously and offering oneself opportunities for being and becoming. Some situations are more demanding than others in terms of supporting transcendence and enabling learners to pursue projects through music, which underscores the necessity of norm-challenging pedagogical work.

[de Beauvoir’s \(1948\)](#) theory of ambiguity is particularly useful for understanding the complexity of norm-challenging work in music education. Humans possess inherent freedom, though constrained by norms; true freedom requires goal-directed projects and acceptance of possible failure. Ambiguity designates activities of consciousness as both insistent—spontaneous and unstoppable—and ambiguous, as they hinder self-unification or closure. Constraining social structures, reinforced through education, can persist because people are raised to believe the world is fixed and unchangeable. While humans choose who to become, choices are shaped by prior conditions and social contexts. Understanding norm-challenging music education through ambiguity highlights discomfort, as seen in “brave spaces,” as a necessary condition for freedom: learners must confront societal constraints, embrace failure, and engage in meaning-making within complex, often contradictory educational contexts.

True freedom requires stepping beyond constraints, which involves ambiguity and moral dilemmas, as closure is impossible ([de Beauvoir, 1948](#)). To live fully, individuals must act outside imposed “boxes,” otherwise growth and freedom remain unrealized. Ambiguity must be faced despite discomfort; learners should be supported in handling it. Freedom is intersubjective, as all depend on each other to create conditions for transcendence. Music education must therefore ask: does it encourage learners to go beyond, or remain confined within, specific normative expectations?

4. Norm-Challenging Pedagogical Work *as/Through/in* Music Educational Practice

In the following we present three narratives developed from our own experiences of norm challenging scientific music educational work aiming to explore the phenomenon further, presented under the headings Norm-challenging Pedagogical work *as* music educational practice, Norm-challenging Pedagogical work *through* music educational practice, and Norm-challenging Pedagogical work *in* music educational practice. After this presen-

tation, we conduct a close reading of the outcomes considering de Beauvoir's ideas and the other empirical and theoretical perspectives discussed in the article.

4.1. Norm-Challenging Pedagogical Work as Music Educational Practice

Cecilia: I think back to one of the first studies I performed rather shortly after my PhD-defense (Ferm, 2007). It was an action research study, which was norm-challenging at that time, where hard-of-hearing children were to develop their communication skills through dance in relation to music. The agreed upon norm was that hard-of-hearing children should have spoken training. The children were un-engaged, they already managed to communicate, via their first language, dactylology. The principal at the school, took responsibility in his position, and dared to challenge that norm, and employed a dance teacher, who was expected to offer the children dance as a language. Together with the dance teacher, I as the researcher explored what communication skills were possible to develop through participation in dance activities, here seen as music educational situations. The norm that hard of hearing-children can't participate in musical activities, was also challenged. Yet a norm was that the children's ordinary teacher did not participate in arts activities, they were just expected to translate into dactylology if a child didn't understand messages from the dance teacher, was challenged, and the teachers were actually expected to go through the same exercises as the children. It became clear that the children, through participating in these norm-challenging music pedagogical activities, developed communication skills such as awareness of how to use their body to express what they wanted, awareness of how to be clear with the people they communicated with, and awareness of how to be open to and participate in dialogue. In addition, they developed musical abilities through dance participation.

In the account above, the principal's approach challenges dominant ways of assimilating, processing, and expressing knowledge in the form of a norm based on hard-of-hearing learners' artistic expression and aesthetic experience. The norm is based on a Kantian view of the senses and forms of expression. As such, Kant valued sight and hearing, writing and speech—values that still strongly shape school practices (Elam, 2005). Processing content and articulating insights through writing and speech are prioritised in both teaching and assessment in schools. Even in art subjects in schools, such as music and dance, bodily and sensory expressions of learning often take a back seat. Offering aesthetic experiences through music educational practices as a means of learning about oneself and the world can be said to be norm-challenging in itself—norm-challenging work *as* music educational practice. A previously conducted study by Christophersen and Ferm Thorgersen (2015) clearly showed how aesthetic expressions, including music, were put into play in fourth-grade classrooms in Norway and Sweden. At these schools, aesthetic practice took place across multiple subjects, in hallways, performances, and schoolyards—while being given resources such as teacher allocation, small group sizes, and extra instruction for those in need. When aesthetic expressions and subjects, as music, were treated as equal to other subjects, they were perceived as prioritised. The Kantian view—that different forms of expression hold different status—still shapes education at many levels in our society.

As mentioned, the norm visualised in the narrative was based on assumptions that verbal and written expressions are more valued than other forms of expression in school. Challenging this norm can be especially important when it comes to offering learners opportunities to absorb, process, and express knowledge through aesthetic modes, including music. But this act requires courage, safety, and respect, as the principal in the narrative above expressed. By taking the risk of employing a dance teacher, the principal embraced the potential discomfort of challenging the agreed-upon norm. Norms established in schools are also linked to a desire for order, structure, and control, which may lead

teachers to hesitate in using aesthetic forms of expression in their daily work. As a result, opportunities to create intersubjectively, to explore each other's ideas in varied ways, and to discover the unknown by sharing visions, sounds and imaginations—are lost.

Following the principal's initiative, hard-of-hearing learners developed communication and dance skills by engaging in norm-challenging music pedagogical activities that fostered bodily expression, clarity in interaction, and openness to dialogue. Letting learners feel that they are part of something bigger—something that can be shared, leave a mark, and make a difference—is another benefit of allowing them to process and express themselves artistically. In earlier studies, it has become clear that if learners' expressions are taken seriously, their projects transcend further, and they can reach a larger audience and see themselves together with others—like in dance seen as a language, own created songs, a concert or a professional musical theatre.

4.2. Norm-Challenging Pedagogical Work Through Music Educational Practice

Cecilia: I am thinking back on the musical theatre project Level 7 we followed as researchers Hentschel and Ferm Almqvist (2024) as an example of norm-challenging pedagogical work through music educational practice. I mean, through participating in the project they got the chance to use (use what) and express themselves musically, make their voices heard, not least express themselves about their situation.

Linn: Yes, I agree! Level 7 is a good example of how pedagogical leaders can act carefully and mindfully in designing and guiding participants in a norm-challenging music educational project. As we found in our research, the participants in the project came from quite different backgrounds shaped by norms of who is allowed to participate in professional musical performances.

Cecilia: Yes, active participation in the three-year long project, where adults with intellectual disabilities interacted with musical theatre students as well as artists and pedagogues from Kulturverket, showed different ways of being and becoming artists, and human beings.

Linn: It was a unique project since the participants were quite diverse. One situation that specifically comes to mind is the creation and performance of one particular song which was a part of the project's earlier stages, when all participants co-wrote the script and music for the production. The lyrics of the chorus capture what became one of my main take-aways from the project: "This is my life, I hold it deep in me. If you could shift your view, you'd see we agree". (my translation)

Cecilia: Yes, it was much about being and becoming one's full potential, taking different roles, and participating fully out of their conditions. And, I remembered that they also expressed that they learnt to handle other social activities in life as well.

Linn: A subjective process of being and becoming a musical theatre artist, and at the same time, an intersubjective process of taking the perspective of the other.

As presented above, Level 7 was a project that challenged traditional views on how participants' diverse identities were expressed through music activities. The project included students at a highly ranked musical theatre educational program, professional musicians as well as participants at a local community centre for intellectually disabled adults creating and performing a professional musical theatre production together (Hentschel & Ferm Almqvist, 2024). The project additionally questioned the conventional working structure of musical theatre productions, where performers typically join only in the final stages and are excluded from the creative process. In contrast, this project embraced a collaborative design, with all participating groups actively involved in writing the story, composing the music, choreographing, and developing the acting. Another norm challenged in the project

was the act of voicing a musical narrative centred on both loneliness and togetherness as a fundamental existential condition—one that all participants had experienced, regardless of ability. This was made possible by the design of the project and the way it was carried out by the leaders.

With the perspective of norm-challenging pedagogy *through* music educational practice, the focus is directed toward how established norms and structures can generally be noticed, processed, and expressed through work with aesthetic forms. This involves both engaging with and expressing oneself through music. It can involve listening to a piece of music, watching a musical, attending a concert, or seeing a film to identify norms and their consequences in a particular context. Getting to know each other across boundaries and taking the perspective of the other, by participating in a music activity, is one example of norm-challenging pedagogy *through* music educational practice. In *Level 7*, this was deeply rooted through the principle that all participants, regardless of ability, should be equally involved in all parts of the creative and performative process, and fulfil their goals of becoming musical theatre artists regardless of ability. At the same time, opportunities were adapted to meet the participants' diverse functional needs. The project leaders devoted significant energy to acting both safely and bravely. They were carefully creating a secure process in which all participants felt encouraged to engage in gradually more challenging ways. The result was a professional musical theatre performance in which all participants were actively involved on stage.

Another example of norm-challenging pedagogy *through* music educational practice might be offering learners the opportunity to reflect on varied gender identities (S. Onsrud, 2021), by watching and listening to popular music videos together, opening a broader space for wonder and formation. It could also involve exploring and discovering established norms related to ethnicity, by processing content and expressing it through (creating) music or dance. As participants explore, process, and artistically express norms, they simultaneously internalise a distinct artistic language—through presence, imagination, prior experiences, and the contextual development of musical practice. Such an holistic approach to learning and music required that the educators were not only knowledgeable in the art form but had insights into the norms being challenged and understood why it was important to offer this type of activity to its participants. Such an approach may involve stepping outside existing agreements, as mentioned above, and instead step into various roles and try out different ways of being human, and thereby become aware of norms and values. It also showed to be important to collectively work with norm-challenging approaches through music educational practices, which should be important to consider in schools, after-school centres, and preschools.

While educators contribute with diverse skills, they can also help each other to recognise norms and traditions that might otherwise go unquestioned. In addition, it should be important to be cautious about the norms embedded in the art form the artist brings in—something that will be discussed further below. When artistic expressions are used, one must be attentive to the norms being conveyed, for instance, when using visual/sounding examples. Which movements are considered acceptable or not, who can and is allowed to do what and what expectations exist? This leads us to what norm-challenging work *in* music educational practice can be about.

4.3. Norm-Challenging Pedagogical Work in Music Educational Practice

Linn: During my dissertation study (Hentschel, 2017), I visited a lower secondary school with a music profile to explore singing in music education from a gender perspective. On my first day, I entered a music classroom to introduce the study and was immediately met with norms and expectations. When I explained I was interested in students' experiences

of singing—positive or negative—a student shouted, “You should interview Andreas! He lip-syncs in the choir, haha!” The room filled with students’ laughter. After the lesson, several students volunteered for interviews, including Andreas, who said, “I think you might want to talk to me.” I certainly did.

In interviews with Andreas, it became apparent that he was indeed lip-syncing in choir, and he had even gone so far as learning to move his larynx to mimic singing. But, over the two following years, with support from one of his music teachers, he gradually began to sing. In follow-up interviews years later (Hentschel, 2022), it became clear that Andreas continued singing in upper secondary school, even joining the school choir. His initial lip-syncing was driven by fear of being seen as a norm-challenging boy—singing wasn’t considered “cool” among his male peers. He also feared his voice wouldn’t match the expected “Swedish choral ideal” and didn’t want to appear musically unskilled. With the help of his music teacher, Andreas challenged these norms and became a singing teenage boy, who eventually identified himself as “a singer”.

To develop the idea of norm-challenging pedagogical work *in* music educational practice, it is essential to discuss views of humanity, and how genres, styles, and traditions are interwoven with norms of who has the right to learn and express themselves musically and in what ways related to gender, race or disability. Norms in music fields are strongly tied to whether we see a person as a “what” or a “who” (Arendt, 1958). Seeing people as a *what* means putting categorization in the foreground—such as gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or disability. In the above example, we met Andreas who struggled with orienting himself as a boy wanting to develop his singing, a feminine coded instrument (Hall, 2018). The expectations about what singers should be able to do, learn, and perform often become unconsciously tied to gender-normative views of singing. This can hinder singing development as in Andreas’ case. Such norms could be particularly problematic in music educational practices that include traditional choirs, where singers’ voices may not align with the conventional model of voice-gender traditions (girls as soprano/alto, boys as tenor/bass). At worst, narratives from trans singers reveal that they leave choirs during transition due to fear of being outed or feeling incompetent (Hentschel, 2025).

Seeing someone as a *who*, on the other hand, means prioritising their ideas, dreams, goals, and visions. A conscious awareness of one’s view of humanity is important to bring into norm-challenging pedagogical work in music educational practice. By choosing to see Andreas as a ‘who’ rather than a ‘what’, his music teacher created a space that was safe enough for him to step into, a brave space where he eventually began to sing. The process was marked by discomfort and required a carefully designed approach that allowed Andreas to gradually build the confidence to sing in front of others.

If we turn back to the project described in the former narrative, *Level 7* we find that the project actively challenged norms surrounding disability and artistic participation by creating a collaborative musical process where all participants—regardless of ability—contributed equally to the creation and performance. The norm of who is allowed to perform on stage in a professional musical theatre production was challenged. It is uncommon for casts in professional musical theatre productions to include disabled performers, which can be regarded as a form of ableism within the music industry. Rejecting the “us-and-them” thinking of the industry, *Level 7* fostered mutual recognition and shared authorship. As phrased by one of the project leaders: “It doesn’t matter what diagnosis or (dis)ability a person has—art becomes art somehow.”

Within music educational practice and pedagogy, many structures have been established that preserve inequality. It involves questions like: Who is welcome? Who gets the opportunity to develop, in what ways, and into what kinds of musicians? Which forms

of expression are available to whom, and in what ways? Norm-challenging pedagogical work in music educational practice, therefore, revolves around encounter, encouragement, response, and vision. Accordingly, it becomes important to reflect on which people are expected to participate in music educational activities at all, what instruments they are expected to play, how they might use their voice and body, as well as how they might be expected to create music or express themselves through sound.

It would be easy to imagine both images of what is considered “within” the norm, and images of what breaks the norm. Role models and examples become crucial in this context: Which role models learners encounter in connection to music, and how they are shown to use their bodies “correctly” (in relation to specific musical instruments), can have decisive influence. Hence, it is essential to clearly define the values brought into the classroom through collaborations with for example musicians. What should be conveyed to learners? How should the internalised, possibly unconscious norms that a particular musical form or genre might carry be handled? When working with examples, educators need to be aware of how those examples relate to existing structures. What norms and structures are being brought into the learning environment? And which examples already exist in the lives of learners? How can those examples be challenged and reflected upon in ways that lead to plurality and inclusion? The risk that learners’ “own choices” reinforce norms regarding ethnicity, functionality or gender has to be continually reflected upon. For example, [Pastorek Gripsson \(2017\)](#) shows how ideas of “boyishness” and “girlishness” are reinforced in dance education within the school context.

Again, the teacher is key—particularly in terms of guiding and challenging learners through: The use of their own bodies and varied, intentionally designed activities.

5. Safe Spaces, Brave Actions, and Discomfort in Music Education

The narratives illustrate how entrenched norms in music education—related to ability, gender, and conventional artistic participation—can limit learning opportunities, self-efficacy, and inclusion ([Andersson, 2017](#); [Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003](#); [Obindah & Iminabo, 2024](#)). In the dance project, challenging the assumption that hard-of-hearing children could only communicate through speech allowed them to develop bodily, musical, and social skills, demonstrating how aesthetic and embodied forms of learning can expand participation ([Moss & Schutz, 2001](#); [Shepard, 2000](#)). The musical theatre project *Level 7* shows that collaborative, inclusive pedagogical design can disrupt ableist norms and hierarchical structures, enabling diverse participants to co-create and perform as artists, rather than being marginalised ([McDonald et al., 2007](#); [Roberts & Jesudason, 2013](#)). Andreas’ experience in choir highlights how gendered expectations influence engagement and identity, and how careful, relational pedagogy can support students in challenging these norms to develop confidence and agency ([Karlsen, 2025](#)). Across these examples, educators play a pivotal role in mediating norms, creating safe spaces for experimentation, and recognising multiple forms of expression, confirming that while established norms persist in music education, norm-challenging pedagogical practices can foster inclusion, creativity, and self-efficacy ([Andersson, 2017](#); [Moss & Schutz, 2001](#); [Shepard, 2000](#)). Further, this section offers a deeper exploration of what these situations consist of, viewed through the theoretical perspectives adopted in this article.

Regarding *norm-challenging pedagogy as music education*, the norm that spoken language is superior in communication was challenged through the introduction of dance as a musical and expressive medium. The principal made a brave decision by hiring a dance teacher—thus creating a space where learners could explore alternative modes of communication ([Arao & Clemens, 2013](#); [Payne-Rios, 2023](#)). This initiative exemplifies how music education can function as a norm-challenging aesthetic practice where bodily movement

becomes a legitimate and empowering form of musical expression. The learners engaged in a musical world shaped by multi-sensory and intersubjective experiences, emphasising presence, emotion, and imagination (Dufrenne, 1954; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). From a philosophical perspective, the learners' bodily engagement with music allowed them to transcend communicative limitations and participate in projects that affirmed their agency and freedom (de Beauvoir, 1949/2012). Such experiences demand going beyond traditional views upon what forms of expression that are expected to use in learning situations in schools (Elam, 2005; Moss & Schutz, 2001; Shepard, 2000). Even the musical project function as an example of how reflection on epistemological assumptions were invited—questioning what counts as valid knowledge and who is allowed to produce it (de Beauvoir, 1949/2012). As participants navigated the discomfort and complexity of creating something unconventional, they confront ambiguity and moral dilemmas, illustrating the existential challenges inherent in norm-challenging pedagogy (de Beauvoir, 1948, 1972).

When it comes to *norm-challenging* through *music education*, we saw how the rigid structures often associated with professional musical theatre productions were challenged and offered disabled young adults to explore and express themselves as human beings. In this case, the participants got the chance to explore and express their diverse ways of being, related to gender, sex and disabilities, through music activities that allowed them to engage as co-creators as well as actors. The project leaders and participants collaboratively established a brave space that redefined roles and expectations, enabling everyone involved to contribute to the writing, composing, choreographing, and performing of the musical (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Payne-Rios, 2023), and thereby got the chance to be and become themselves through musical activities. This approach reflects a norm-challenging aesthetic practice, where traditional boundaries between creator and performer are dissolved, which opens for existential exploration. The participants explored new artistic ways of being and engaged in creative experimentation, which supported personal growth, and strengthened self-images and self-efficacy (Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003; Obindah & Iminabo, 2024).

Finally, *norm-challenging pedagogy in music education*, was presented, partly through the musical example, where disabled young adults entered several musical roles, and partly by the boy that was not expected to sing. The “boys-don’t-sing” norm was challenged through the actions of the music teacher who created a safe and supportive environment. By modelling singing himself and offering tailored support, the teacher enabled the learner to take the brave step of beginning to sing (Arao & Clemens, 2013). This example highlights the importance of musical worlds and aesthetic experience, where singing becomes a bodily and emotional act that affirms the learner's presence and belonging (Dufrenne, 1954; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Through such an experience, the learner developed a new musical way of being as a singing boy and was supported in making choices that reflected his own agency and freedom (de Beauvoir, 1949/2012). Singing thereby became a way for the learner to transcend societal expectations and engage in a project that affirmed his subjectivity. At the same time, the learner was forced to confront internal and external norms, embracing the discomfort and ambiguity of becoming something new—an essential aspect of existential freedom and moral responsibility in education (de Beauvoir, 1948).

In sum, there is always a risk that norm-challenging work (as well as through and within music educational practice) becomes *normative* in itself. For example, who is given the opportunity to make their voice heard among musicians, educators, and learners in music educational projects? There is a challenge for educators to avoid that some learners are placed in *immanence*, while others in *transcendence*. Starting from the idea that people are embodied beings, situated in situations (de Beauvoir, 1949/2012), every context needs to be continuously examined: What forms of learning and knowing are offered? Who should be offered to lead which project, and how can the context be best arranged? What needs to be

affirmed, and what needs to be challenged? “Everyone shall create songs” can be seen as a democratic opportunity—to try to challenge norms—but it can also become a meaningless task if continuous reflection does not occur. In other words, norm-challenging pedagogy implies a constant balancing act between breaking boundaries and building walls. Our shared experiences represented through the narratives in the article showed that traditional norms can be challenged in music educational practice, when music as a form of expression as well as the learners’ own musical experiences and expressions are taken seriously. Then, their life projects get the possibility to transcend further, they can reach a wider audience together with others become cultural citizens on equal grounds.

The outcomes of this article may serve as a ground for reflection among music educators, from pre-school to higher education, regarding seeing, reflect upon, but not least actively challenge norms in music educational settings. Those actions should 1. Justify music as a way of learning, treat and perform knowledge in all school situations, 2. Let subordinated groups of students explore and express their identifications as human beings, with music, 3. Let all students develop any musical ability independent of sex, functionality or race. Such actions put demands on school leaders, institutions and politicians.

This study is limited by its philosophical and phenomenological design, which draws on close readings of de Beauvoir’s work and the presented narrative examples. While this qualitative approach (Teherani et al., 2015) allows for an in-depth, interpretive exploration of norm-challenging pedagogy, it is necessarily shaped by the authors’ situated perspectives and does not aim for empirical generalisation. The findings should therefore be understood as reflective and generative, inviting recognition and critical engagement rather than definitive claims. In the future, it would be relevant to develop empirical phenomenological studies examining how music teachers and students experience norm-challenging pedagogy in everyday practice across different educational contexts. Also, one option would be to perform practice-based research that focus on how philosophical concepts such as ambiguity, relationality, and freedom are enacted, resisted, or transformed in concrete teaching situations.

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