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Developing Visions for the Future? A Reflection on Utopias in Music Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

As society changes, new challenges arise for education. Major social upheavals have led to increasing awareness of social justice issues and critical reflection within the field of music education, as well as calls for social and educational change. In this article, five music teacher educators discuss how music teacher educators and pre-service music teachers can develop spaces for envisioning future music teacher education through utopian thinking. We consider utopias as social dreaming reflecting a desire for a better way of life, and utopian pedagogy as experimenting to envision new alternatives, tell new stories and construct new realities. The article starts with outlining theories of utopia and utopian pedagogy, before moving on to reflecting on challenges related to music teacher education. A situation where pre-service music teachers were invited to think utopian is then critically explored, as is our double position as researchers/educators. Finally, we address the envisioning of possible futures within the field of music teacher education.

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Keywords

music teacher education, utopias, change, transformation, future music education, utopian pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Music teacher education happens in the present, while dealing with issues concerning the future. Teacher educators choose ideas, strategies, and content for the music education programs, but are not necessarily able to predict the future. Pre-service teachers, on the other hand, could be seen as representing the future of music teaching, but are not necessarily involved in the choices made for their education. The authors of this article are music teacher educators involved in a research project about music teacher education for the future. An important objective for this research is to involve pre-service teachers in developing their own education. Involving students in educational change could be done in different ways. They could, for example, address generative themes and verbalize their experiences, challenges, and fears; they could suggest methods and content for their education, or they could be asked to envision future scenarios, hopes and dreams. All these approaches have been examined in our research project, but in this article, we particularly focus on developing visions for the future.

We consider utopias as reflecting a desire for a better way of life (Levitas, 2010), and follow Coté, Day & De Peuters (2017) in their view of utopian pedagogy as experimenting to develop spaces for resistance and reconstruction (p. 317). Democracy, empowerment, and agency can be understood as important features in education (Biesta, 2019; Giroux, 2010; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). While promoting student voice and agency is considered an educational ideal, the very process of envisioning future scenarios is challenging, which we will illustrate with an empirical example later in the article.

In this article, we aim to critically investigate some of these challenges by asking how music teacher educators and pre-service music teachers can develop spaces for envisioning future music teacher education through utopian thinking. We start by exploring utopian thinking within educational theory as well as within music education. To elaborate on these utopian ideas, we reflect on some particular challenges related to music teacher education. We then explore a situation where pre-service music teachers were invited to think utopian. In light of this situation, we critically reflect on our positions as educators and researchers. Finally, we discuss how to explore issues of critical utopian practices and how to envision possible futures within the field of music teacher education.

UTOPIAS AND UTOPIAN PEDAGOGY REVISITED

While ideas of utopia have always existed in different cultures, utopia has often been linked to 20th century totalitarian regimes, world wars and genocide, and therefore has a somewhat bad reputation. According to Giroux and McLaren (1997), the history

of utopian thinking in critical education can be traced back to at least the 1930s, when Ernst Bloch wrote about “concrete utopia” referring to real, material conditions necessary to make utopia possible.

Critics of utopian theory have emphasized the dangers of so-called “blueprint” versions of utopias that could produce totalizing systems for human life (Webb, 2017). A pragmatic way forward can be found in the so-called “real utopias” that anchor utopian thinking in existing life and society. E. O. Wright (2013), for example, eschews romantic visions of fantasy futures unconstrained by reality, and instead seeks “utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity” (p. 167). “Real utopias”, then, are based on ideas of immanence, partiality and process (Webb, 2016, p. 433-434). From this perspective of “real utopianism,” utopian thinking should be grounded in that which already exists, be situated in partial and localized contexts, and focus on the explorative process of becoming. This grounding of critical transformation in the immanent and local provides a glimmer of attainability, but as Webb (2017) warns, utopian realism could end up confining itself to “modifying techniques of governance within specific institutional parameters” (p. 441).

Notwithstanding these concerns, utopian thinking in education, specifically utopian realism, has experienced a renaissance, and is now more or less mainstream. With reference to the utopian desire for creating better lives (Levitas, 2010), utopian education is concerned with the formation, or even transformation, of subjectivities (Jameison, 2005, p. 168), that is, the (trans)formation of subjects that can create and inhabit a new world (Webb, 2017, p. 553). According to Coté, Day & De Peuters (2017), utopian pedagogy and the concept of utopia should not be used “in the sense of rationalistic dreams of a future perfect society. Rather, it refers to an ethos of experimentation that is oriented toward carving out spaces for resistance and reconstruction” (p. 317). Firth (2013), inspired by critical and public pedagogy, starts from existing practices in a bottom-up approach, perceiving utopian spaces as sites of learning with a potential to open up and question existing structures and institutions.

Moss (2014) takes a unique position in the conversation of utopias in education. His focus is on the concept of *transformative change*, which reflects continuous movement, open-endedness and constant becoming, and therefore something more than meddling with the existing realities (p. 8-10). Central to Moss’s conceptualization of transformative change and utopian thinking is the notion of *story*. He writes:

It starts by telling a new story or put another way, adopting a new mode of thought, thinking differently, which, in Foucault’s terms, occurs when ‘one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them’. With this new story, we weave a new reality, viewing the world in a different light from a different perspective – the familiar is made strange, what was formerly self-evident no longer seems so. (Moss 2014, p. 8)

In other words, utopian thinking tells “a new story” and in doing so, reveals the dominant discourse as just one possible story, thus deposing it as a “DONA – a dictatorship of no alternatives” (Moss, 2014, p. 4). Embracing transformative change, then, requires a focus that is less directed toward an endpoint and more on the idea of utopian *thinking*.

Moss suggests that utopian thinking requires a critical attitude, curiosity and imagination, innovation and experimentation, courage, and self-criticism. Utopia within education through this perspective becomes more than tinkering, more than local educational reforms, and also more than open-ended experiments; Utopia requires constant critical reflection, a vision and a direction, as well as somebody who facilitates the process; such as the educator.

CONTEXTUALIZING UTOPIAN THEORY IN MUSIC EDUCATION

In light of major social upheavals, such as globalization, migration, digital disruption, civic unrest, war, and COVID-19, to name but a few, there has been an increasing awareness of issues of social justice and critical reflection within the field of music education. Notwithstanding this critical turn and its associated calls for social and educational change, the concept of utopia within music education has, with a few exceptions, rarely been applied.

Kertz-Welzel (2020, 2022) looks into how utopian thinking can provide important and useful methods and concepts to music education. In her book (2022), she critically examines the societal mission of music education, and challenges the idea of music and music education as being socially transformative *per se*. Instead, she offers the concept of utopia as a tool for rethinking the potential for change in music education. Kertz-Welzel particularly draws on Ruth Levitas' ideas of utopia as a "desire for being otherwise" (2013, xiii), and as a method for critically analyzing the existing conditions (political, societal, and economical) to imagine and develop a better future. According to Kertz-Welzel, the concept of utopia represents a tool for critically re-imagining and reconceptualizing the foundations for music education, both as a pathway for change *as well as* supporting music for its own sake. Utopian thinking, thus, can accommodate both a socially responsive *and* an aesthetic approach to music, while simultaneously taking human flourishing as a fundamental value (2022, p. 162-163).

R. Wright (2019) builds on E. O. Wright's (2013) concept of real utopias when investigating spaces for students' voices and autonomy within music education. According to E. O. Wright, the two first tasks are to diagnose the problem and envision viable alternatives. R. Wright diagnoses the cultural hegemonies and colonialism of Western music education as causing harm by not developing all children's musical identity and abilities. Thereafter, she points to relational arts projects as potential "subordinate spaces" that can be viable alternatives to the Eurocentric canon, before taking on the third task of discussing different obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of a viable transformation.

Music education has increasingly been seen as exclusionary and disconnected from students' reality (Allsup, 2016; Talbot, 2018; Woodford, 2012). As a result, opening spaces for students' voices and expressions of agency has been recognized as an ideal, worth not only theoretical reflection, but also action. Activism, consequently, has been introduced to the music education scholarship over the last few years, and can be

seen in relation to utopianism. Activism transcends mere reflection, as it entails intervention into “normative processes and practices that govern the world in which we live” (Hess 2019, p. 6). Music education activism thus entails reflexive action directed towards social change, “in contexts relevant to education and beyond, thus creating new sites for learning and participation” (Laes, 2017, p. 43). By extension, activism includes both critical and creative elements in its resistance towards the status quo, which implies imagining something different. In keeping with Levitas (2010), we could call this “the pursuit of a better way of being” (p. 221), where otherness is envisioned in relation to the existing reality. However, how visions for change and for the future in music education might be developed, remains a challenge.

Nevertheless, topics of change, envisioning and developing new ideas are identified as important in music education. Jorgensen (2003) writes that in order to transform music education, music educators play an important role in the evaluation of past ideas and drawing out approaches for the future (p. 62). Ideals, values, and assumptions permeating practice within each institution need to be “fleshed out” (p. 120) in order to answer questions about what directions towards a “good” music education could or should take:

The only way of continuing a culture of civilization is to actively resist this process of fossilization and atrophy, and rejuvenate or transform it. In music, this means continuously changing a musical practice to reflect the society of which it is a part or foreshadow an imagined society of the future. (Jorgensen, 2003, p. 41)

Rinholm (2019) addresses the multiplicity of today’s societal and educational structures and envisions a space where music education could be “re-romanticized,” using Foucault’s notion of a heterotopic garden. She urges an openness and passion for music and music education that calls for approaches to teaching and learning where students and teachers are involved as *persons*, not only as *knowers*. In heterotopias, a diverse, manifold, and compound composition of meaning in several different layers can be brought to the table, rather than a dialectic between “perfect” utopias or “bad” dystopias.

Opening up for the concept of utopia in music education could stir a critical debate about the aims of music education, and what kind of good and just society music education would possibly endeavor as its mission. Following in the wake of several crises in our society today, Hess (2021) turns to Small’s inclusive conceptualization of *musicking* to consider how the arts can play a role in imagining a path ahead. She concludes:

Giving voice to experiences, recognizing and naming the conditions that shape those experiences, coming face-to-face with the humanity of others, and imagining different possible futures position musicking as an important contribution indeed. (Hess, 2021, pp. 281)

The interactions of musicking, including creative music making, listening, and performing together can therefore provide a potential starting point for utopian music education practices.

UTOPIAS AND MUSIC TEACHER EDUCATION

This article starts from the premise that pre-service teachers, as future music teachers, are important stakeholders who should be involved in processes of educational change. The aforementioned scholars, however, do not target music teacher education specifically. Based on the previous theoretical exposition, as well as insights stemming from our teacher educator experience, we will elaborate on some possible challenges related to working with utopias in music teacher education.

Education in general can be seen as utopian of nature, insofar as it is understood as a form of social engineering built on visions for the making of a good society. Jorgensen (2003), for example, considers the purpose of education to be directed toward humane ideals like freedom, civility, freedom, and inclusion. Jorgensen contends that education “ought to take a broad view of the world’s cultures and human knowledge and prepare the young to be informed and compassionate citizens of the world” (p. 20).

The notion of *future* is an inherent characteristic of education, but perhaps particularly so within teacher education, that, by its very nature, has a certain responsibility for forming future generations. Still, the means by which education for the future is carried out (such as institutional structures, curricula, and methods) are creations of the past. Music education practices are commonly recognized as conservative, colonial, and hegemonic (Christophersen, 2021; Hess, 2019; R. Wright, 2019), posing a particular challenge for developing utopian visions. It could be difficult to overcome the naming and framing of topics according to one’s own access to and knowledge about the field (Ellsworth, 1989). Music teacher education could be considered a discursive practice, where utterances, thoughts and visions inevitably will be shaped by larger educational societal and institutional ideas of what music teacher education and the subject of music is and can be (Onsrud et al., 2022). Consequently, it could be challenging to break free from the “dictatorship of no alternatives” (Moss, 2014), that is, established discourses of what is considered right, important, and possible within music teacher education, thus limiting the potential for a creative envisioning of alternatives.

Further, the voices of teacher educators and pre-service teachers are different and “come with different responsibilities and expectations” (Biesta, 2015, p. 83), as well as different perceptions and opinions about what are the important aspects and assets of the subject, yesterday, today and in the future (Christophersen, 2021). Institutional policies and strategies may formally recognize pre-service teachers as important stakeholders in the forming of educational programs, but the institutions may not do more than routinely reserve a seat at the table for a student representative in forums where decisions are made. A systematic work with developing visions and ambitions may not be so common within music teacher education institutions.

Finally, there is the issue of content. Musical styles as well as music technology and digital tools are constantly developing and changing. How can music teacher education envision what is relevant for the future, when keeping up with the present is already a struggle? Utopian thinking for music teacher education may first and foremost

be a method for bringing new ideas into practice. To follow Firth (2013), utopian thinking could also be viewed as a process of deconstructing the distinctions between music teacher educators and pre-service teachers. The following empirical example illustrates what a first attempt of utopian thinking in music teacher education can look like.

PRE-SERVICE MUSIC TEACHERS ENVISIONING DREAM SCENARIOS FOR THEIR EDUCATION

The social dreaming that is characteristic of utopias reflects a longing for something better than the present, as well as envisioning new possibilities. When trying to engage pre-service teachers in processes of educational change, educational dreaming, that is, the development of alternative educational visions, could represent fertile ground for change.

As mentioned in the introduction, this article is authored by five teacher educators, who are researchers in a project focusing on challenging the existing state of affairs in music teacher education in Norway, as well as developing new approaches to teacher education with a particular focus on pre-service teachers' voices. In this section, we draw from a situation that took place in one of our studies within the larger research project *Music Teacher Education for the Future* (FUTURED 2019-2022). The situation forms the basis for our further reflections on how a space for encountering and exploring possibilities can be developed. The researcher involved created the following narrative from a participatory action research session with a group of pre-service music teachers:

I raised the question: What dream scenarios can you envision for the music subject in teacher education – if you could think beyond limiting structures and resources, educators, and peer students? Next, I divided the students into two discussion groups in breakout rooms on Zoom and encouraged them to think as concretely as possible and perhaps visualize their imaginings to illustrate them for presentation in plenum.¹

The first group used their negative experiences from music teacher education as a starting point. By drawing on experiences of what had not worked well or was lacking in their education, they presented this list of dream scenarios:

- More focus on the reality in everyday school practice
- More in-depth learning instead of many small and fragmented topics
- A more structured schedule for each course
- Better information before applying to the program
- Better equipped and maintained music rooms
- Better organized teacher practice in schools
- Better learning outcome
- More focus on ensemble play (popular music band) and concerts
- More time and resources for music theory (particularly auditory training)

In their oral presentation of the list, the students used an evaluative language, supplied by phrases like: “We would like to have more...” and “We wish we had better ...” which referred to the existing, from the past. It was not before they presented a list they had named “Dream scenarios – the crazy part” that they started to become something more in the direction of a visionary. This list was as following:

- A new musical project every semester

- Free coffee
- Composition with Grieg, Beethoven, Schubert, Smetana, Stravinsky and Händel
- Songwriting with David Bowie, Freddie Mercury and Prince

In my research log after this session, I wrote: “It is interesting to see that the students don’t start to become visionary or really dreaming before they start thinking beyond reality and modify their suggestions to not being seriously meant by calling it ‘the crazy part’. It was first when they started to think utopianly through their ‘not serious’ and ‘crazy’ suggestions that they managed to move beyond the evaluative language they usually use. It also strikes me that the students, who are all male, only suggest male composers and artists in their utopias.” (Research log, April 23, 2020)

The second group session from the same action research project started with a wish to have the music teacher education program as similar as possible to the upper secondary school music program many of them had attended before starting in the generalist teacher education music program. One of them said: “I wish we could have the music program in upper secondary all over again,” which expressed a wish to stay in the familiar—dreaming of something you already know. The students emphasized that upper secondary schools had a more successful music program than the generalist music teacher education. The same student continued by addressing the different musical level of the students as the main problem for the quality in their education and suggested that they should be divided into groups based on musical level. I interrupted by asking the others: “Do you all agree that music teacher education should be modeled after the music program in upper secondary school?” Another student responded: “I have a comment: I think we would lose something important if we were divided into groups based on musical level. There is a lot to learn from each other when the levels are mixed.” This statement turned the conversation into a discussion about how the pre-service music teachers could become resources and contributors in their education by learning from each other. As the researcher noted in the research log after the session:

I was surprised, maybe a little disappointed, and even a bit provoked by the statement “I wish we could have the music program in upper secondary all over again”, so I couldn’t stop myself reacting by asking if the others shared the opinion or dream that teacher education should be like upper secondary school. I really hoped that some of them had other views. When I went through the video afterwards, I realized that no one really answered my question, but after posing it, the conversation took a new direction, with help from this student talking about mixed levels, and learning from each other. It was as if their language and thinking turned from dreaming about the past to dreaming about new or different ways of learning. (Research log, April 23, 2020)

UTOPIAS: DREAMING THE REAL OR ENVISIONING THE IMPOSSIBLE?

Revisiting our initial question, how can music teacher educators and pre-service music teachers develop spaces for envisioning future music teacher education through utopian thinking, the empirical example above provides an interesting starting point for

a discussion. Educational utopias involve visions of a “good” education, and how education could contribute to the transformation, or possibly the emancipation, of the subjects involved. Utopian pedagogy thus inevitably contains an element of social engineering and is therefore also representational (Webb, 2017). This may not be exclusive for utopian education as such. There is an inherent hierarchy in education that mandates educators make decisions on behalf of others with the intention of fulfilling broader goals; which, in education, often revolves around a humanistic idea of creating a better society. Utopian educators, even when aiming to transform and emancipate, will have a hard time escaping issues of representation and hierarchy. When the starting point is dissatisfaction with the existing situation, this could lead to the articulating of an alternative vision. This vision may then lead to actions, new measures, and reflection. The progression could again point us in the direction of new questions: *Whose* visions are represented, and *how* is the process facilitated?

Implicit in the details of the assignment described in the narratives, there is an urge to go further than what structural limitations and institutional constraints allow in the current context. The group task is designed as a way to form visions that could be understood as “social dreaming” (Sargent, 2010). However, the first list of bullet points presented by the pre-service teachers seems paradoxical: the bullet points are intended to answer a call for envisioning the future, but read more like comments on existing conditions, based upon on the pre-service teachers’ educational experiences. The pre-service teachers voiced strong opinions on present issues that need improvement in order to meet their expectations. A conflict appears as shown in the researcher’s log, illustrating how researchers and educators may challenge pre-service teachers to articulate visions for the future, while they are still dreaming of a more desirable present built on their experiences from the past. Their discontentment leads to the articulation of multiple alternative visions and measures that aim at changing the present to be a more *desirable now*. Utopian realism connects to real possibilities of change and changes that are viable (E. O. Wright, 2010). According to this view, a utopian realist should concentrate on changes that are achievable now or in the near future, in our localized contexts and institutions, instead of chasing rainbows. On the other hand, Webb (2016) is critical of this: the emphasis on *becoming* and the rejection of a totalizing vision places severe limitations on utopian realism, thus creating a “provincialism of the immediate” (Howe, 2004, p. 250 in Webb, 2016, p. 438). Consequently, researchers and educators end up fiddling with the already known in the name of utopia, in effect doing little more than adjusting the established order and suggesting modifications (Webb, 2016, p. 444).

The focus on recreating a desirable present could also be a consequence of the differing time horizons students and educators relate to in music teacher education. Pre-service teachers are involved in education for a relatively short time, while educators stay in the loop, meeting new groups of pre-service teachers every year. Pre-service teachers may come to the educational institutions with vastly different expectations of what is needed and what will transpire (Biesta, 2015, p. 83). Teacher educators and pre-service teachers could therefore have different perceptions and opinions about what

the important aspects and goals of music education actually are, today as well as in the future. The different positionalities may further reflect differences in experiences, expectations and in views on the importance of music education.

Imagining a critical utopian pedagogy in music teacher education could also start, as mentioned earlier in this article, through an aim of envisioning possibilities for systemic change. In the session described above, the researcher took on the role of a facilitator when engaging the students in a discussion of “dream scenarios.” The way the task is designed, as well as the comments that follow in the discussion and the researchers’ log, could be understood considering Moss’ (2014) conceptualization of DONA’s, that is, a “dictatorship of no alternatives” (p. 4-5). The future could be unavailable when caught within prevalent assumptions, ideals and values in the field. Väkevä, Westerlund and Ilmola-Sheppard (2017) suggest that institutional systems, like music education, naturally generate social systems that resist change, and that may serve to exclude both individuals and groups. Research on generalist music teacher education supports an understanding of such a challenge, where educational systems tend to embrace a preservationist, conservative doxa that encourages existing structures to be reproduced rather than transformed (Sætre, 2017). Notions of change and transformation then become reciprocally linked with those of social reproduction and the continuity of traditions. This supports the urgency of questions about where the desire for a better way of life (Levitas, 2007, p. 290) can be co-constructed, developed and supported in music teacher education.

The thin line between transformation and reproduction could also be seen as evident in the student’s descriptions of their “crazy dream scenarios,” including new musical projects each semester, free coffee, as well as composition and songwriting classes with famous composers and rock stars. The experienced educator would recognize the well-known and traditional masterclasses idolizing dead, mostly white, male icons from music history. Free coffee might be stretching it, but it could be done. Communicating musically with the dead could perhaps be considered one of the most creative of their ideas; it defies traditional logic by involving time travel and a leap of faith. Still, one might wonder, what was the vision for music education behind their “crazy”? How far would they be able to develop their thinking beyond the “real” and the inherent? As Webb (2016) also acknowledges, students must be prepared for a world they will actually inhabit and work in. The discussion on utopianism in education therefore could be seen as stuck between visions and “reality,” the totalizing and the local, blueprints and iconoclasm. On the other hand, opinions voiced by the participating pre-service teachers may, as this discussion shows, also contribute to challenging the researchers’ conceptions of utopian thinking. Raising questions such as: *Was it visionary?* *Was it utopian?* and *Who decides?* can lead to new reflections on how, what and where future directions for music teacher education can be explored and developed.

DEVELOPING VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE: SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS

For music teacher education and state-funded schools in many democratic countries, values and ideas are often taken for granted, as they have been articulated in curriculum texts since reform pedagogical thoughts impacted educational systems from around the 1930's—the time when Bloch first wrote about concrete utopian thinking. Still, as we see it, the ability to imagine a better way forward is essential to improving and developing music teacher education programs and practices.

Though we, the authors of this article, have explored the option of envisioning new possibilities together with pre-service teachers, a utopian pedagogy will necessarily involve the “indignity of speaking for others” (Coté et al 2007, p. 325), as well as the risk of imposing future visions onto someone who may or may not share the same visions. As Sargent (2010) writes,

Utopians are always faced with this dilemma when they attempt to move their dream to reality – is their dream compatible with the imposition of their dream; can freedom be achieved through unfreedom, or equality through inequality? (pp. 8-9)

The teacher educators' dreams and visions may differ vastly from those of the pre-service teachers. However, to encourage curiosity and open-mindedness among both pre-service teachers and teacher educators, the pedagogical practices of music teacher education could model a learning space where participants challenge each other and are willing to share ideas and visions. Utopian theory and methodology could possibly function as a tool to open spaces for critical reflection on the past, present, and future of music education, thus reflecting an inquiry-based and open-ended *critical utopian practice*. That said, it could be debated whether it is sufficient to engage pre-service teachers in micro-level social dreaming within one's own educational practices without also ensuring that it is possible to create resonance for such visions and dreams within the institutions.

ENDNOTE

¹ Due to the pandemic situation in 2020, parts of this action research happened online.

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Author Declaration

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