Hidden elitism: the meritocratic discourse of free choice in Finnish music education system

Lauri Väkevä a, Heidi Westerlund a and Leena Ilmola-Sheppard b

aSibelius Academy of the University of Arts Helsinki, University of the Arts Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; bInternational Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg, Austria

ABSTRACT

This study presents an analysis of hidden elitism in music education through the free choice argument – that individuals are fundamentally free to choose to study music – as a meritocratic power structure. Qualitative Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is applied to understand music education as a social system with a special structure in which its purpose regulates its functions and makes them meaningful in a given social setting through discourse. The study shows how free choice can appear both as a democratic principle and a legitimising discursive mechanism restricting the enactment of equality. Through a case, the study then demonstrates, first, how the relationship between the meritocratic discourse of free choice and hidden elitism can be identified by using SSM in the context of Finnish music education system, and second, how professionals can bridge social systems and transgress hidden elitist structures.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 August 2021
Accepted 2 May 2022

KEYWORDS

free choice; elitism; meritocracy; music education; soft systems methodology

Introduction

One might think that it is a truism to say that music education is for everyone. ‘Music is equally for all’ is a statement often heard in speeches in professional associations and repeatedly used to legitimise and advocate professional music education practices in contemporary societies. Yet, the request that publicly funded educational institutions should provide equal access for everyone to study music is timely. Whereas traditional music education policies have primarily emphasised artistic excellence and the selection function of the system to secure the longevity and quality of music institutions and professional education, today’s local and global policies set accessibility and participation at the forefront of developing music education as a public service system targeted to all (Abbing 2019, 45).

Evidence of exclusion is becoming increasingly recognised. Recent research has documented a range of tendencies related to inequality in the music field, including the middle-class culture of classical music practice (Scharff 2018, 96). It seems that we simply do not live in societies where everyone can freely find opportunities to achieve their ambitions regarding music and music education. Indeed, equality of opportunity in education is said to be a myth, since in reality there is no equal opportunity to have opportunities (Brando 2016). In music education the evidence begs the profession to ask the question: Who can, in reality, become a professional?
One of the scientific theories that has boosted the myth of equality of opportunity is the theory of education-based meritocracy. Developed mainly by American sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s, this theory is based on the idea that education is the chief means for social mobility in modern societies. The idea is still generally regarded as a basis for supporting an allegedly just and fair approach for distributing resources by attributing achievement with status. According to this theory, the connection between individuals’ initial class origins and their final educational attainment becomes weaker as human resources become exploited as fully as possible and educational expansion and reform are undertaken to increase educational equality of opportunity (Goldthorpe 2003, 234). Consequently, ‘as a result of greater equality of educational opportunity, the overall association between class origins and class destinations will then likewise weaken’ (235). Where the ideal of education-based meritocracy is taken to guide the reality, social mobility is expected to steadily increase; and where not, legitimate meritocratic reasons are often proposed for the failure (235). The theory that links education-based meritocracy to equality, fairness, and democracy in society has become ‘conventional wisdom’ through its general acceptance by academics, policy specialists, and politicians (Goldthorpe 2003, 234). However, it has also attracted increasing criticism in recent years.

In this study, we aim to shed light on the gap between the benevolent democratic professional discourse based on meritocracy and the concrete educational reality in music education, in which some are considered to be entitled to benefit more than others. We will look at hidden elitism as a meritocratic power structure in relation to what we call the free choice argument, an argument that, we claim, is manifest in various forms in the practice and professional discourse of music education. Paradoxically, on the one hand, the belief in free choice can be seen as an egalitarian principle, while on the other hand it can be seen as a ‘discursive mechanism’ (Irigaray 1985, 76) that restricts music educators from envisioning how the equality of opportunities could be enacted.

Underpinning the free choice argument is the modern liberal notion of an autonomous human being free from certain forms of interference and forces of socialisation. When paired with this argument, elitism can be understood as a power structure that justifies music education as if it would be accessible to all on an equal basis. We thus argue that meritocracy sustains elitism rather than enhances equality in music education, and that meritocratic elitism and the related free choice argument constitute a wider systems-level institutional structure and ethos that prevent institutions from creating inclusive social innovations that can enhance system-level resilience, or ‘ the capacity for renewal, re-organisation and development’ in a changing environment (Folke 2006, 253). In line with several social theorists (e.g. Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000), we further argue that institutional structures that frame music education need to be rethought as social systems to serve the emergent needs of late modern society, including the challenge of increasing inequalities. Whereas modern nation-states differentiated institutional structures in order to maintain the macro-level key functions of society (e.g. education and cultural services), in late modernity such institutional structures need to adapt to the rapid changes taking place at the local level (e.g. new consumption habits or immigration). Yet, it is essential to understand that these changes require more than acknowledging the micro-level dynamics of the society, such as the teacher-student interaction: a systems view is needed because all social systems, music education included, are subsystems ‘within larger systems’ (Senge 2006, 342), and their adaptation to changing environments requires adaptability at several levels simultaneously. This adaptability can be supported by a widened sense of professional responsibility (Dyrdal Solbirkke 2011, 11) that takes place through self-reflexive systems thinking aiming to reveal hidden elitist structures and their consequences.

Research questions and methodological approach

First, we will approach the problem of the free choice argument in education-based meritocracy by asking at the theoretical level (1) ‘What is the relationship between the professional discourse of free choice, meritocracy, and hidden elitism, and how might this relationship sustain inequality in society?
In order to address this question and lay the ground for further analysis, we utilise the work of Piketty (2014) and Dorling (2011), who have highlighted how inequality becomes justified in terms of elitism (see also Gale, Molla, and Parker 2017, 2). In education-based meritocracy typical of modern society, the elite presents itself as a select group of people attributed with certain intrinsic or acquired qualities, such as high intellect, wealth, special skills, or experience that is judged as merit in some domain and as a legitimation to enter into that domain. Elitism may also refer to a tangible situation in which power is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of people; for instance, a group that professes to possess merits in some area and thus claims the right to make decisions on behalf of others in that area. We claim that music education, understood as a professional domain, also falls into this category.

In line with Bourdieu (1986), we argue that elitism is not contingent, but can be seen as an outcome of hidden power structures. In order to unveil such structures we use system thinking, describing the interdependencies between the discourse of free choice, education-based meritocracy, and elitism with the help of systems mapping, which helps us to outline such power structures. With the help of systems mapping, we will focus on one concrete case – the Floora project – where the relationships within the power structure have been purposefully broken to increase access to musical studies, thus promoting equity. Within the limits of our case, we then seek answers to a more general question: (2) ‘How can systems thinking help in fighting against elitism and structural inequalities?’

Systems thinking refers here to Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), a qualitative approach that helps us to understand music education as a social system with a dedicated purpose in society (Checkland 1999). By ‘social system’ we refer to a complex configuration of human interactions where the system’s purpose regulates its functions and makes them meaningful in a given social setting through discourse (Luhmann 1995). The analysis is based on ongoing research in the ArtsEqual project, in which we applied SSM to data generation in the discussions of an expert panel consisting of seven senior researchers that had studied inequality in the arts through a variety of theoretical and empirical approaches and case studies (see www.arstequal.fi/about). The systems mapping process was conducted in three sessions, where the expert panel focused on identifying a variety of components that were judged to contribute to the increasingly clear inequalities in the music and arts education system in Finland. This discussion produced a shared mental model of the mechanisms of inequality that may be inherent in any music education system in Finland, and may likewise be rooted as taken-for-granted in professional practices.

**Producing inequality within a music education system through education-based meritocracy**

The idea of meritocracy is based on the liberal modern notion that there is no need to take into account socio-cultural and economic conditions in contemporary society, since ‘individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities’ (McNamee and Miller 2009, 2). According to the meritocratic principle:

> [s]ocial class has been declared as an irrelevant feature for an individual’s life prospects. There are no rigid social structures, and a person’s chances of getting to the top of the social ladder depends exclusively on how much she works for it … [A] person’s prospects cannot depend on gender, race or socioeconomic status, but on talent and effort. (Brando 2016, 584)

Meritocracy thus derives its legitimacy from a common-sense assumption that one earns rewards through hard work, and those who do not work hard enough deserve lesser rewards (Gale, Molla, and Parker 2017). According to Piketty (2014), it is the historical emergence of modern democratic societies that has led to the view that achievement and advantage ought to be the result of one’s own abilities and effort, rather than derived from kinship or inheritance (361). From this standpoint, ‘the
apparent fairness of meritocracy is in the perception that it designates certain individuals as ‘win-
ers’ and rewards them all the more generously if they seem to have been selected on the basis of their intrinsic merits rather than birth or background’ (334). Meritocracy can be seen ‘to emanate from the historical decline of hierarchical societies and the shift from honour to dignity and universal recognition as a basis for distributing social goods’ (Gale, Molla, and Parker 2017, 10).

The legitimacy of education-based meritocracy in the arts is based on allegedly equal opportu-
nities for anyone to enter art education independent of their socio-economic status. This was also the founding idea of the Finnish music school system in the 1960s: the institutional purpose of the social system was defined as being based on ‘selecting the musically talented in the population, providing the optimal conditions for training professionals, and leaving the roles of connoisseur audience member and educated amateur to those who do not continue their studies in secondary or tertiary level institutions’ (Väkevä, Westerlund, and Ilmola-Sheppard 2017, 138).

While meritocracy seems to herald an egalitarian society in which individuals can achieve social mobility through their own ability and effort, it can also function as a justification for social inequality. Piketty (2014) writes that meritocracy plays a very crucial role in modern society, for a simple reason: in a democracy, the professed equality of rights of all citizens contrasts sharply with the very real inequality of living conditions, and in order to overcome this contradic-tion it is vital to make sure that social inequalities derive from rational and universal principles rather than arbitrary contingencies. Inequalities must, therefore, be just and useful to all, at least in the realm of discourse and as far as possible in reality as well. (361)

Piketty’s main concern is that meritocracy is being used as a disguise for socio-economic privilege, including access to quality education. This trend, in turn, results in a hierarchy of qualifications that eventually reinforces inequality. As a result, the social mobility that might be thought to come as a result of meritocracy is by no means evident (Gale, Molla, and Parker 2017, 12). Hence, the meritocratic argument seems to imply social inequality, originating from how resources are mediated by the education system. For instance, in the arts, not only are artists with a lower-middle class and lower-class background still underrepresented, perhaps with the exception of the popular arts, but ‘lower-class people often also have a hard time to develop, produce and distribute worn art, that is, art which is appreciated by their own social group’ (Abbing 2019, 143).

Both Piketty and Dorling aim to show that the entire education system within modern demo-
cratic societies can be seen to be constituted by the elitist principle of meritocracy, which in turn structures the idea of equal opportunity. However, while prevalent in modern society, elitism as a concept does not always garner the same common-sense legitimacy, because ‘elitist beliefs persist in many forms that do not always amount to direct claims of special treatment’ (Gale, Molla, and Parker 2017, 9). In other words, elitism remains hidden. For example, as Dorling (2011) asserts, elitism is often given voice through mechanisms and technologies such as IQ tests and standardised student achievement tests (such as PISA or musicality tests). The role of elitist beliefs in maintaining material, social, and educational inequality is evident in the very ways in which merit is actualised, and does not simply rely on overt claims of superiority based on existing privilege (Gale, Molla, and Parker 2017, 9). According to Gale, Molla, and Parker (2017, 10), Piketty shows that ‘the illusory nature of merit impedes progress towards equality while hiding behind the rhetoric of egalitarian ideals’. In music education, such hidden elitism can be seen for instance in the belief that the power to decide who gets to study music, what music, and how, should be concentrated in the hands of those who are highly trained in music and have gained the highest position in music insti-
tutions – and who can, therefore, best estimate not just the quality but also the potential for quality. Such ‘elitism in education’, as Dorling (2011) notes, ‘can be considered a new injustice’ (34).

Elitism can also be understood ‘as a strategy of the privileged to preserve their privileges in response to increased educational claims for social groups who had previously been largely uneducated’ (Gale, Molla, and Parker 2017, 13). Such an increase in educational opportunities in society and their concomitant policies can threaten the status quo, because ‘[l]eft unchecked, education has
the potential to ‘rob’ the elite of their ‘rights’ or, more accurately, what they regard as their ‘rightful’ position in society, which raises a need for educational management (13). Dorling (2011) notes that ‘[u]nder elitism education is less about learning and more about dividing people, sorting out the supposed wheat from the chaff and conferring high status upon a minority’ (35). In advanced economies, this process of division has resulted in what Dorling refers to as ‘educational apartheid’ (26, italics added), in which ‘particular groups are increasingly seen as ‘not fit’ for advanced education, as being limited in their abilities, as requiring less of an education than the supposedly more gifted and talented’ (33). Modern educational management has devised an assortment of mechanisms to make sure that this selection function is realised. For instance, testing in educational regimes (such as music education) seems to be inherently biased towards those who come from a background similar to those who devise the tests (in Bourdieu’s terms, those who have high quantities of the dominant cultural capital), and those who are specifically coached to succeed.

Piketty and Dorling are not alone in their concern over the persistency of inequalities in societies that consider themselves to be democratic. For instance, Putnam (2015, 176) has shown in his extensive study in the North American context that the poor socio-economic status of a family is likely to widen the ‘opportunity gap’ more than the talent or innate potential of the child. According to Putnam, the opportunity gap in early life significantly decreases chances to improve the children’s future life, and it is intimately related to such extracurricular hobbies as music. For instance, poor children are three times more unlikely to participate in extracurricular cultural activities such as playing an instrument. The opportunity gap has been demonstrated to be an effect of meritocratic mechanisms and hidden elitism: ‘teachers and administrators serve as gatekeepers to slots in extracurricular activities, recruiting students they perceive to be talented while restricting others who are disqualified by academic standards’ (McNeal, Jr. cited in Putnam 2015, 178).

Consequently, social inequalities are not simply reproduced, but also legitimized through meritocracy and its ‘hierarchy enhancing ideology that provides moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that maintain group-based hierarchy’ (Darnon, Smeding, and Redersdorff 2018, 524). Therefore, meritocracy resists affirmative action, and has been shown to reduce positive attitudes toward practices that support more equality. For instance, individuals who strongly believe in meritocracy are likely to devalue programmes designed to provide differential opportunities to discriminated people (524). Consequently, the mechanism frees the system from the responsibility for ‘moving out to change their world’ (Greene 1978, 209) and acting towards potential change.

Utilising a systems view to identify hidden elitism in Finnish extracurricular music education

We will next apply SSM to identify relationships between the discourse of free choice and the meritocratic elitist power structures within this system in the context of Finnish extracurricular music education. In Finland, school music education is guaranteed for all as part of the comprehensive school curriculum, at a minimum for grades 1–7. In turn, extracurricular music education is provided for the few by music schools and institutes. However, several recent investigations from the public stakeholders and case studies from the ArtsEqual project indicate that access to Finnish music schools and institutes may be conditioned by a variety of structural factors, including age, gender, habitat, and choice of instrument and/or genre or area of living, but also by economic status, ethnicity, culturally marginalised position, non-citizen or immigrant status, and disability – all traits that may be judged as potential in terms of determining merit (see also Väkevä and Westerlund 2007; Westerlund and Väkevä 2010). In recent years, this situation has been recognised by several music schoolteachers and researchers (Elmgren 2019; Laes 2017; Väkevä, Westerlund, and Ilmola-Sheppard 2017; Westerlund, Väkevä, and Ilmola-Sheppard 2019). The most common selection mechanism is the entrance exam, meant to identify the applicants with the most potential. While there are also music schools and institutes that recruit students without such exams, at the time of writing these institutions are still exceptions.
In a series of workshops, the expert panel listed over 40 components that may have an impact on inequality mechanisms. All of these components were connected with links, and the most important components (19) were chosen to be included to the final map. Figure 1 describes a collectively produced systems map of the mechanisms that create inequality in the state-supported Finnish music education system. The map provides a wider context for our reflexive analysis of Finnish extracurricular music education – education in music schools and institutes – as part of this wider system.

The systems map describes how different components of the music education and service production system are interacting. Links have three values: (1) thin lines indicate that there is a link, but the impact is weak, (2) a medium strong line indicates a recognised impact, and (3) a thick line depicts a strong impact.

Here it is important to understand that every model of this kind is a representation of the mental models of the people that participate in the mapping exercise (Meadows 2009) and how they see the system’s functions. This system model was produced as a result of shared discussions connected to a larger research project where numerous sub-studies were conducted to describe and improve the system in terms of equal access to the arts and arts education. Systems mapping aims to provide a heuristic description of the system structure in order to help in orienting to the potential changes required in the system’s operations (Checkland 1999). Through understanding how the system is structured, one can identify potential remedies where the system’s performance and output do not meet the requirements and expectations of the changing society. Especially in situations where resources are scarce, it is essential to identify elements that could have a high impact on the system’s behaviour.

When thinking about how and why inequality is produced, our analysis shows that the most important (high in-degree and out-degree, high incoming and outgoing links) components identified are:

- Elitist structures (degree 12)
- Users’ lack of knowledge (degree 9)
- Elitist spaces (degree 6).

Our expectation of the importance of elitist structures and spaces as sources of inequality is thus supported by the model. However, analysis of the role of discourse is not automatically articulated in the systems map illustrated in Figure 1, but requires further analysis.
According to systems theory, the nature and number of the feedback loops will define how a system behaves. Even in a simple map, the most important feedbacks are not easy to detect. One of the motivations of systems analysis is to reveal those drivers of systems behaviour that are not evident (Sterman 2000).

Figure 2 displays three feedback loops that define how the music education and music service system is performing within the wider system. Two dominant loops, A and B, define the general elitist structures and practices in arts services that both have an impact on and are impacted by the music education process (feedback loop C). Examining Figures 1 and 2, it is clear that feedback loops A and B dominate the behaviour of the system as a whole, revealing how elitism is reproduced and sustained in extracurricular music education.

This kind of elitist structure is by no means unique to Finnish society. For instance, Wright (2015) argues that in the Canadian context education plays a trick on the less advantaged members of society. By wrapping education within a cultural code familiar to those from the dominant sectors of society, the children of the dominant social groups are predisposed to understand and benefit from education before their less advantaged peers (345).

Loop C in Figure 2 illustrates some aspects of the free choice discourse. In our example, elitist structures and practices define the curriculum and the entrance exams of the extracurricular music education institutions (here ‘music schools’) and select those that will have access to music education. All of those who want to participate in the exams have the opportunity to do so, but only those who meet the requirements defined by the elite are allowed to enter the system.

In turn, loops A and B suggest that the root cause for elitism is the meritocratic need to support the identity of the elite as an expert group that has the power to identify the purpose of Finnish extracurricular music education. In other words, the purpose of extracurricular music education and the professional identity of the teachers are intimately linked with each other. Accordingly, it can be suggested that hidden elitism plays an important role in the maintenance of extracurricular music education as a system, and that in this system elitism is not simply manifested in an individual’s attitude, but in a wider and unreflected ideology that is materialised in the structure as institutional spaces, established practices, and tacit knowledge (Lam 2000).

This finding is supported by Berger and Luckmann’s (1991) and Luhmann’s (1995) theories on social systems, as they argue that the main driver of a social system’s behaviour is a need to differentiate itself from other systems. The social system described in Figure 1 is a typical example of such differentiation. Discourse plays an important role in defining a system’s boundaries: in this case, we can say that the elite is defending its status with jargon that conceals the assumption that people are
free to choose whether to study music, what music to study, when, and how. The exceptions are thought to warrant the rule; for instance, if there are only a few immigrant students in Finnish music schools, it is because they themselves have chosen so, since nothing in principle prevents them from applying. This idea can be characterised as being based on the free will argument, as described above. According to this specific version of the argument, equality in extracurricular music education is based on the alleged positive freedom to apply to studies without anyone or anything hindering such attempts (see e.g. Greene 1978). In this scenario, then, equality of opportunities is judged to be sufficient to guarantee proper or substantive equality.

**Fighting against hidden elitism? Floora as a self-organised institutional innovation**

Sociologists and organisational researchers have conceptualised an alternative reality that can help us to redefine the purposes of such systems. From this standpoint, a music education system does not have to be seen simply as a static organisation with individuals working for better musical outcomes, interpreted as signifiers of merit. Most of all, as a social system that strives to maintain its boundaries and purpose in late modern society, extracurricular music education ought to develop what organisational researchers call *institutional resilience* (Senge 2006; Folke 2006, 253). Here we are most of all interested in late modern society as a dynamic context to which extracurricular music education institutions need to adapt. This means that the view of such institutions as closed expert communities, autonomous and independent from other institutions, needs to be expanded to allow for flexibility in how they can enact changes in themselves and other systems (cf. Luhmann 1995). They need to be examined as *adaptive systems*; that is, as systems that need to actively adjust to changes in their environment and accept that such changes may take place at several system levels at the same time.

Considered in this way, SSM can reveal a challenge related to access to extracurricular music education that becomes understandable when examined against the larger picture of how arts services are organised, and how extracurricular music education is adapting to the requirements of society. As we have argued earlier, this kind of theoretical framework also supposes that music education systems should be able to initiate ways to meet the equality requirement of their society (see also, Väkevä, Westerlund, and Ilmola-Sheppard 2017; Westerlund, Väkevä, and Ilmola-Sheppard 2019).

It is here that the more complex picture of extracurricular music education as a part of arts services becomes useful: instead of restricting our vision to the inner dynamics of the system (e.g. by concentrating on finding a better jargon to justify old activities), we benefit from envisioning it as part of a larger system of cultural service production, where the maintenance of elitist structures through social interaction is revealed to be a determining factor in making political decisions about the distribution of cultural and educational capital (see Bourdieu 1986). A resilient and dynamic music education system is able to cross its own boundaries by identifying and transgressing such structures.

Our case, the *Floora* project has created a new model of cooperation between the social sector, schools, and extracurricular music institutions for improving access to music education for socially and/or economically marginalised children. *Floora* recruits students according to the suggestions of social workers and school student services, with the criteria that these students should represent vulnerable groups and/or those coping with difficult life-situations. Many of the students are from migrant families and families that are considered to be ‘at-risk’ by the departments for social services, child protection, and other agencies. With the help of inter-professional collaboration, *Floora* has succeeded in offering instrument lessons for over one hundred such children. Moreover, the collaboration with the schools has often made it possible for the teaching in *Floora* to take place in school buildings instead of music schools, so that parents are freed from taking care of the transportation. With the help of applied extra funding, the project has also been able to provide instruments for students.
An important factor is that *Floora* was initiated by a group of individual instrumental teachers who worked within the system. Yet, whilst *Floora* has managed to raise interest around the country in establishing similar forms of cooperation, music schools and institutes have not unanimously welcomed the principle of an active search for students amongst vulnerable groups in society. One way of understanding this resistance is to refer to meritocratic elitism, according to which music schools do not need to carry responsibility as institutions for wider societal inequalities, because it is expected to be enough that anyone can apply to these schools.

Projects like *Floora* can also be resisted by the argument that *musical quality* is the most important criterion when determining who gets to study music and where. In this light, music schools have a responsibility to regulate who gets to study, and the expectations of musical quality are set by the entrance exams. It has been claimed that this single-minded emphasis on quality as the sole criterion is not uniquely characteristic of music schools: it is commonplace for the whole professional domain of Western art. According to Abbing (2019), ‘[a]lthough underrepresentation and de facto exclusion are usually ignored in art circles, when questioned, art-lovers occasionally attempt to justify them. The common justification is sought in the primacy of quality in the arts. The possibility of prejudices and discrimination is not considered’ (143). Based on our analysis, we suggest that the concept of musical quality combined with the principle of free choice is one of the key elements of the elite discourse in this domain (Figure 3).

In the context of systems thinking, *Floora* can be framed as an *institutional innovation* (Väkevä, Westerlund, and Ilmola-Sheppard 2017; Westerlund, Väkevä, and Ilmola-Sheppard 2019) that reflects and exemplifies *institutional experimenting, learning, and change* manifested in structural changes within social systems (Watts et al. 2007). In a systems view, such learning within systems can be understood as being triggered by changes in the systems environment, in the interaction both with other social systems and the whole of society (Luhmann 1995). In this case, the triggering force was the state level and local level reports that revealed statistics that pointed toward elitist structures behind the admission policies of Finnish music schools. Our case illustrates how

---

**Figure 3.** How *Floora* is changing the structure of the system by introducing four new components to the system described in Figure 1. These new components; ‘Social workers’, ‘Sponsored pricing’, ‘New thinking model of a group of artists’, and ‘No entrance exam’ change the structure of the system. As an outcome, some of the components of the elitism-driven system lose part of their impact (due the negative links, marked in red).
music education can tackle more extensive societal challenges when it emphasises institutional and professional responsibility, and how institutional practices are seen to require constant innovation and use of social imagination. Greene (1978) would call such activist intervention as *Floora* an exemplification of ‘negative freedom’ that involves *praxis*—with ‘*praxis*’ here not referring to existing, established ways of doing, as sometimes meant in music education literature, but to a transformation of an oppressive and dominating situation through collective self-reflexivity and self-realisation in concert with emergent social needs (see also Westerlund 2018) (Figure 4).

**Concluding thoughts**

We have addressed our research questions from two perspectives: by theoretical elaboration of the literature, and by examining one institutional innovation as a possible solution to structural inequality within the frame of SSM-based systems analysis. While seemingly egalitarian when judged in terms of equality of opportunities, the argument for *free choice* can be considered as concealing an elitist structure that provides conditions that restrict substantive equality and that can be used to wipe away responsibility for inequality. Our analysis suggests that the elitist structures and places, the elite-defined quality of art, and the mechanism of student selection constitute a dynamic core system that not only continuously produces inequality but also increases the power of the mechanism. The depiction of this system reveals that it is based on assumptions about the meaning and value of both free choice and quality of art, and furthermore, on the presumption that all people are capable of making autonomous choices, instead of recognising how these choices are conditioned by social, cultural, and economic factors. Moreover, the maintenance of the boundaries of existing social systems can be seen as a discursive mechanism that produces asymmetries in the meritocratic distribution of power, supporting inequality through regulating access to the system.

Yet, based on our case, it can be argued that music institutions and individual music educators can act as ‘boundary spanners’ between social systems, opening up new possibilities to contest prevailing discourses and, thus, to transgress the hidden elitist structures that restrict the resilience of such systems (Senge 2006; Folke 2006, 253). This requires that the operators within the systems

![Figure 4](image-url). The impact of *Floora* in systems behaviour is more distinctive when we focus our attention only on the feedback loops. The project did not challenge the perception of the quality of art directly, but had an impact on many components around it. As an outcome, both the system structure and its dynamics changed.
acknowledge the potential of alternative discursive orders to transform the conditions under which the systems operate – or, to use Greene’s vocabulary, realise themselves as agents of *praxis*.

As a conclusion, we state that whenever music educators lean on an expectation of free choice, they should also be aware of the conditions that frame human choices. As a result of modernist differentiation, these conditions often rely on unreflected status hierarchies produced by meritocratic and elitist policies that hide themselves behind expectations of equality. Furthermore, while it is important to reveal the structural mechanisms of exclusion hidden behind meritocratic and elitist discourses, there is a more practical task ahead. In order to survive as a public service in late modern society, music education needs to actively adjust to changes taking place in the more extensive social environment. This might require drastic changes in how such music education defines its own professional purpose and identifies itself. It is the actions that strive towards its purpose, not the final outcome, that define the social system within its environment. In this era, a music education system should thus develop a widened sense of professional responsibility and act against meritocratic elitism. The statement ‘Music is equally for all’, when used to legitimise and advocate for one’s own professional practices in contemporary societies, can be seen as an elitist hideaway without any further responsible consideration of what this promise might require from the music professionals, organisations, and institutions themselves.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This publication has been undertaken as part of the ArtsEqual project, funded by the Academy of Finland’s Strategic Research Council from its Equality in Society programme (project no. 293199).

**Notes on contributors**

*Lauri Väkevä* is the vice-rector responsible of education at the University of Arts Helsinki and a professor in music education at Sibelius Academy of the University of the Arts in Helsinki. A co-author of three books, he has also published several book chapters and numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, as well as presented papers in international conferences in the fields of music education, musicology, music history and popular music studies. His main research interests cover Afro-American music, popular music pedagogy, history of popular music, pragmatist aesthetics, philosophy of music education, informal learning, digital music culture, educational systems and history of education. Aside of academic career, his work assignments have covered working as a musician, music journalist, general music teacher, and instrumental teacher. Email: lauri.vakeva@uniarts.fi

*Heidi Westerlund* is a professor at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland, where she is also responsible for the music education doctoral studies. She has published widely in international journals and books and she is the co-editor of Collaborative learning in higher music education (Ashgate) as well as the Editor-in-chief of the Finnish Journal of Music Education. Her research interests include higher arts education, music teacher education, collaborative learning, cultural diversity and democracy in music education. She is currently leading two research projects funded by the Academy of Finland: The arts as public service: Strategic steps towards equality (2015-2020) and Global visions through mobilising networks: Co-developing intercultural music teacher education in Finland, Israel and Nepal (2015-2019). Email: heidi.westerlund@uniarts.fi

*Leena Ilmola-Sheppard* is a Senior Research Scholar in the Advanced Systems Analysis (ASA) Program. She was previously Project Manager in the Game Changers and the Global Economy 2030 project Seven Shocks Projects for Scotland, Finland and Korea. Her research theme is uncertainty and resilience of social systems. She is developing new modelling methods for foresight and tools for pragmatic decision making. Her current projects include developing management systems for resilience. Dr. Ilmola-Sheppard is Scientific Coordinator of the Global X-Network (GXN). Dr. Ilmola-Sheppard has also worked as an expert for the Futures Committee of the Finnish Parliament (since 2013) and for the Prime Minister’s Office for the Finnish Government’s Futures Review process (2012-2014). Since 2005, she has been a member of the Board of the Finnish Futures Association. Email: ilmola@iiasa.ac.at
References

Abbing, H. 2019. The Changing Social Economy of Art. Are the Arts Becoming Less Exclusive? Cham: The Palgrave Macmillan.

Bauman, Z. 2000. Liquid Modernity. Cambridge: Polity.

Berger, P. L., and T. Luckmann. 1991. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. London: Penguin.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” In Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology Education, edited by J. Richardson, 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.

Brando, N. 2016. “Distributing Educational Opportunities: Positionality, Equality and Responsibility.” International Journal of Children’s Rights 24: 575–598.

Checkland, P. 1999. Systems Thinking, Systems Practice. West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons.

Darnon, C., A. Smeding, and S. Redersdorff. 2018. “Belief in School Meritocracy as an Ideological Barrier to the Promotion of Equality.” European Journal of Social Psychology 48 (4): 523–534.

Dorling, D. 2011. Injustice: Why Social Inequalities Persist. Bristol: The Policy Press.

Dyrdal Solbrekke, T. 2011. “Professional Responsibility – Back to the Future.” In Professional Responsibility. New Horizons of Praxis, edited by C. Sugrue, and T. Dyrdal Solbrekke, 11–28. London: Routledge.

Elmgren, H. 2019. “Merit-based Exclusion in Finnish Music Schools.” International Journal of Constitutional Law 14 (3): 712–738.

Folke, C. 2006. “Resilience: The Emergence of a Perspective for Social–Ecological Systems Analyses.” Global Environmental Change 16 (3): 253–267.

Gale, T., T. Molla, and S. Parker. 2017. “The Illusion of Meritocracy and the Audacity of Elitism: Expanding the Evaluative Space in Education.” In Policy and Inequality in Education, edited by S. Parker, K. N. Gulson, and T. Gale, 7–21. Singapore: Springer.

Giddens, A. 1991. The Consequences of Modernity. Redwood, CA: Stanford University Press.

Goldthorpe, J. 2003. “The Myth of Education-based Meritocracy.” New Economy 10 (4): 234–239.

Greene, M. 1978. Landscapes of Learning. New York: Teachers College Press.

Irigaray, L. 1985. This Sex Which is not One. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Lam, A. 2017. The (im)possibility of Inclusion: Reimagining the Potentials of Democratic Inclusion in and Through Activist Music Education. Studia Musical 72. Helsinki: The Sibelius Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki.

Lanham, N. 1995. Social Systems. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Luhmann, N. 1995. Social Systems. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Luhmann, N. 2005. The Meritocracy Myth. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Meadows, D. H. 2009. Thinking in Systems. A Primer. London: Earthscan.

McNamee, S. J., and R. K. Miller. 2009. The Meritocracy Myth. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

McNamee, S. J., and R. K. Miller. 2009. The Meritocracy Myth. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Murphy, N. 2005. ” ‘Capacity for Growth’ and the Myth of School Meritocracy.” Acta Oeconomica 55 (2): 3–19.

Putnam, R. 2015. Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Scharff, C. M. 2018. “Inequalities in the Classical Music Industry: The Role of Subjectivity in Constructions of the ‘Ideal’ Classical Musician.” In The Classical Music Industry, edited by C. Dromey and J. Haferkorn, 96–111. London: Routledge.

Senge, P. M. 2006. The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. London: Random House.

Sternman, J. D. 2000. Business Dynamics: Systems Thinking and Modeling for a Complex World. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Väkevää, L., and H Westerlund. 2007. The ‘Method’ of Democracy in Music Education, Action, criticism, & theory for music education 6: 96–108.

Väkevää, L., H. Westerlund, and L. Ilmola-Sheppard. 2017. “Social Innovations in Music Education: Creating Institutional Resilience for Increasing Social Justice.” Action, Criticism and Theory of Music Education 16 (3): 129–147.

Watts, J., R. Mackay, D. Horton, A. Hall, B. Douthwaite, R. Chambers, and A. S. Acosta. 2007. Institutional Learning and Change: An Introduction. Rome: ILAC working paper 3.

Westerlund, H. 2018. “Introduction. Expanding Professionalism Through Social Innovations: Towards Wider Participation in and Through Music Schools in France, Sweden and Finland. Symposium Report.” Finnish Journal of Music Education 21 (2): 106–107.

Westerlund, H., and L. Väkevää. 2010. “Onko demokraattinen musiikikasvatus mahdollista 2010-luvun Helsingissä.” In Taidekasvatuksen Helsinki. Lasten ja nuorten taide- ja kulttuurikasvatus, edited by T. Koskinen, P. Mustonen, and R. Sariola Espoo, 150–157. Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskus.
Westerlund, H., L. Väkevä, and L. Ilmola-Sheppard. 2019. How Music Schools Justify Themselves: Meeting the Social Challenges of the 21st Century. European Perspectives on Music Education. St. Pölten: Musikschulmanagement Niederösterreich GmbH, 15–33.

Wright, R. 2015. “Music Education and Social Reproduction: Breaking Cycles of Injustice.” In The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education, edited by C. Benedict, P. Schmidt, G. Spruce, and P. Woodford, 340–356. New York: Oxford University Press.