

Jan Springob, Daniela Frison, Dagmar M. Benincasa,
Giovanna del Gobbo, Beatrix Busse (Eds.)

(Re)Imagining Teacher Education for a Future in Flux

Perspectives from the
Erasmus+ Teacher Academy *teff*

WAXMANN

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Isolde Malmberg & Karla Stolle

Music-Related Sustainability Competence

The Arts Subjects Between Social Impact and L'art Pour L'art

Abstract

Sustainability is increasingly recognised as a key competence in European education, yet its role in the arts, especially music, remains only loosely defined. Drawing on findings from the three-year Erasmus+ co-funded TEAM project (Teacher Education Academy Music), this chapter examines how sustainability is understood and implemented in music education and music teacher education across Europe. Based on survey data from thirty-one countries and the development of European learning outcomes, we show how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) appears in policy documents, curricula, and classroom practices. Interpretations vary widely, spanning cultural heritage preservation, ecological responsibility, and everyday eco-practices. Emerging competency frameworks reveal a persistent tension between narrow ecological definitions of sustainability and broader approaches linked to inclusion, global citizenship, and collaborative artistic practice. We argue that music education sits between two longstanding orientations – social impact/activism and l'art pour l'art – and that these perspectives can productively complement one another within ESD. Highlighting music's aesthetic, relational, and imaginative potential, the chapter offers a conceptual basis for strengthening sustainability education in schools and music teacher education.

Keywords: music education; music teacher education; sustainability education; art subject; Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

1. Introduction

In times of global crisis, education systems bear the responsibility of preparing learners for sustainable futures. The *OECD Trends Shaping Education 2025* identifies “learning in an AI-driven world” (OECD, 2025, p. 13) and “Education on a fragile planet” (ibid., p. 14) as current challenges, calling for creativity, collaboration, and ethical judgement. As the report stresses,

“the planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution intersect with education in various ways: education and training systems are both vulnerable to the impacts of socio-ecological emergencies, and crucial in shaping behaviours, collective action and skills that can support sustainable societies and greening economies.” (OECD, 2025, p. 14)

While education in a broader sense is called to contribute to shaping sustainable futures, the arts subjects hold particular transformative potential. As Niederhauser et al. (2023) note, contemporary debates on sustainability attribute a crucial role to the arts in fostering reflection, imagination, openness, and societal transformation. This transformative potential lies in the arts' capacity to connect emotion, cognition, and ethical awareness through aesthetic experience, creating spaces where learners can engage critically and imaginatively with complex socio-ecological issues (Bolden et al., 2021; Vella & Pavlou, 2022). As Malmberg (2023) further argues, music as an aesthetic and relational discipline, provides conditions for learning that are inherently connected to sustainability: awareness, empathy, creativity, and reflection. This understanding aligns with broader theoretical conceptions of music. König (2019, p. 8) describes music as "a social sphere [...] in which the values of the present are negotiated in an exemplary way and translated into sonic utopias." Such a view underscores both the aesthetic autonomy as well as music's societal meaning.

Based on surveys and analysis within the three year's Erasmus+ co-funded project TEAM¹, in this chapter we will explore Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in general school music education (ME) and in music teacher education (MTE) as a field situated between two long-standing conceptions of art and education. On the one hand, the concept of (artistic) activism, which emphasises the social, ethical, and transformative potential of music, and on the other, the ideal of *l'art pour l'art*, which values artistic creation as an autonomous space of aesthetic experience. Both perspectives have shaped how music education has been theorised and practised across Europe.

2. Sustainable (Green) Education in Music Education

Following the growing attention to sustainability education, music education faces the question of how this broad and multifaceted concept can be meaningfully related to subject-specific practices. In contrast to disciplines traditionally associated with environmental or socio-ecological learning, (future) music teachers must actively interpret how sustainability connects to artistic, cultural, and pedagogical aims and how it can be embedded in the music lessons in school.

Sustainability in music education can be examined across three interconnected levels: subject-didactic developments, teacher education concepts, and school curricula/classroom practice. The following sections explore how these dynamics currently unfold in European contexts: Section 2.1 analyses how national experts frame sustainability within ME using data from the TEAM WP8 survey, while section 2.2 turns to MTE by examining how ESD is reflected in the European-wide TEAM learning outcomes for MTE. Together, we aim to show how ESD is beginning to take shape across

1 TEAM – Teacher Education Academy Music. Future-Making, Mobility and Network in Europe <https://teacher-academy-music.eu/> is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

institutional layers of music education, even if the term itself remains only partly defined.

2.1 European Experts Framing Sustainability in ME

The *TEAM* project work package 8's task *Mapping Music Education in Europe* was designed as a large-scale comparative survey. Its purpose was to create a coherent overview of school music education in Europe in order to identify both shared tendencies and national particularities. The study was conducted as an expert-based questionnaire survey between December 2024 and March 2025. National experts, including the EAS² National coordinators from thirty-one European countries³, completed a structured questionnaire comprising seven thematic sections: governance, school structure, music in schools, curriculum, teacher profiles, current trends, anticipated future developments and selected examples of practice. The questionnaire included primarily open-ended questions and invited respondents to describe not only formal frameworks but also contextual realities and current debates.

For this article, the dataset serves as the empirical basis. Rather than conducting a re-analysis, our focus lies on a targeted thematic reading of the WP8 material to trace where and in what ways sustainability is mentioned or implied within the questionnaires. This analysis shows that the term sustainability is mentioned in different sections of the questionnaires. In some countries, it appears in the political framework as part of national education strategies; in others, it is mentioned within curriculum descriptions, current trends, or future developments. ESD is therefore not treated as a single, clearly defined concept, but can be found across political, curricular, and pedagogical dimensions. Depending on its placement, the term is associated with themes such as environmental education, cultural heritage, digitalisation, or teacher well-being. These differences suggest that sustainability in music education operates as a transversal principle, connecting diverse educational concerns. The following will give insights through two selected lenses: (A) cultural sustainability education and (B) ecological sustainability education. This allows for a differentiated understanding of how the experts frame sustainability and link it to diverse pedagogical concepts and practices in their countries.

2 The European Association for Music in Schools (EAS, see <https://eas-music.org/>) is an international network founded in 1990 to promote cooperation, research, and professional exchange in the field of school music education across Europe. The EAS National coordinators are appointed representatives who serve as liaisons between the EAS board and the National music education communities.

3 A total of 31 experts participated in the WP8 survey, representing a broad geographical and educational diversity across Europe. Information was gathered from the following countries: AT, BE, BG, BA, HR, CY, CZ, EE, FI, DE, EL, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, ME, NL, NO, PL, PT, RS, SI, SK, ES, SE, CH, TR, UK (EN, SCT, WAL) (country abbreviations follows the ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 standard).

(A) Cultural Sustainability: Between Awareness of Tradition and Renewal

National experts frequently describe ME as key for preserving and transforming cultural identity. Many experts connect the term sustainability to traditions, emphasising how musical heritage can support continuity while allowing creative renewal. Examples from the Baltic region are particularly telling. The Estonian expert notes:

“Students learn to understand the meaning of music in social communication, including song celebrations⁴ and other national events. They learn to understand the significance of music in society as a symbolic power that unites communities, studying national anthems and songs with cultural significance. This includes understanding the diversity of ethnic communities in Estonia and the importance of ethical and legal use of music” (E_EE).

Similarly, the Lithuanian report explicitly links sustainability to heritage preservation: “Music education incorporates sustainability by promoting awareness of traditional Lithuanian music as a cultural heritage that must be preserved” (E_LT).

The Lithuanian experts immediately associate the term sustainability with the preservation of musical heritage, which suggests that in ME sustainability is often interpreted implicitly through cultural continuity and the safeguarding of tradition. As the following example shows, this culturally grounded understanding appears even in cases where sustainability is not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum: “While the curriculum does not explicitly mention sustainability, through the study and preservation of musical heritage, students develop an awareness of the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage for future generations” (E_HR).

(B) Ecological (Green) Sustainability: Between Policies and Implementation

Alongside these culturally oriented interpretations, a second strand of responses highlights a more policy-driven and ecological understanding of sustainability. Here, sustainability is articulated through environmental education, cross-curricular frameworks, and national strategies. These perspectives broaden the picture by showing that sustainability is also addressed at systemic and curricular levels. In the Slovak curriculum, the notion of sustainability is embedded as part of the cross-cutting theme *Environmental Education* at ISCED level 1⁵, stating that “The goal is to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits that contribute to the protection and improvement of the environment, which are essential for a sustainable life on Earth” (E_SK).

4 The Estonian *Laulupidu* (Song Celebration) is a nationwide choral festival first held in 1869 in Tartu during the Estonian national awakening. Since 1950, it has taken place every five years in Tallinn, alternating with youth festivals, involving up to 30,000 singers and audiences of over 100,000. Recognised by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage (2008), it represents a living form of cultural sustainability, linking school music, community participation, and national identity, see <https://laulupidu.ee>.

5 ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) is a framework developed by UNESCO for internationally comparable descriptions of education systems. ISCED level 1 corresponds to primary education. When sustainability is defined as a cross-curricular theme at this level, it applies to all subjects, including music, which shares responsibility for fostering environmental and ethical awareness through artistic experience.

A similar approach can be seen in Luxembourg, where the concept of *Bildung fir nohaltege Entwécklung* (education for sustainable development) is formally anchored within the national education system and coordinated between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Environment, Climate and Biodiversity (E_LU). The same emphasis on ecological awareness appears in Sweden, where the national curriculum identifies sustainability as a transversal educational goal. The curricula for compulsory (2022) and upper secondary schools (2025) place sustainability alongside digital competence and factual knowledge as key cross-curricular priorities, linking ME to broader educational aims (E_SE). A similar approach can be seen in Norway, where sustainability is seen as a key cross-curricular topic: “Sustainability is a cross-curricular theme, encouraging students to engage with environmental challenges and adopt responsible practices” (E_NO).

In the Polish context, sustainability also appears explicitly among the “directions of state educational policy” (E_PL) which are announced every year, where sustainability is framed through pro-ecological behaviours and environmental responsibility. Whilst the mentioned countries frame sustainability mainly through curricular and policy initiatives, some respondents describe concrete classroom-level actions. In Bulgaria, for example, sustainability is reported to appear in everyday teaching practice: “Some schools encourage the use of recycled materials for musical instruments, promoting eco-friendly practices in music education. Digital resources are increasingly replacing printed materials, reducing paper usage in music theory instruction” (E_BG).

Together, these findings show that ESD in European music education currently operates on several levels: as a political commitment, a (cross-)curricular goal, and a set of practical actions in schools. This inconsistent picture suggests that while sustainability has entered educational discourse, its concrete realisation still depends largely on local initiative and teacher engagement. Returning to our initial question of societal versus *l'art pour l'art* ESD ME, the answer remains elusive. Sustainability appears in the data largely in broad terms, and we find hardly any related conceptual statements from the experts addressing whether these approaches emphasise primarily functional or artistic-aesthetic music educational practices.

2.2 European-wide Learning Outcomes for MTE

Work Package 6 *Learning Outcomes* in the TEAM project developed a set of descriptors (*TEAM learning outcomes*) to describe competencies that should be acquired upon completion of music teacher education programs across Europe. A pilot survey has been conducted with 18 experts from 14 countries to identify so-called emerging themes in the music classroom. Emerging themes referred to topics and content that were new or likely to become important in music education in the near future (De Baets et al., 2025).

The discussion of the analysed dataset illustrates the challenge posed by the parallel existence of both narrow and broad conceptions of sustainability. The code “sus-

tainability” was assigned to only three countries in this dataset, likely because it was defined in this study in a narrower sense, focusing on ecological sustainability. We posit that as the statements were coded inductively, the code sustainability had only shown in three countries. However, in many other emerging themes, we find aspects of a broader concept of sustainability, like global (artistic) citizenships, diversity and inclusion, collaboration, or musical cultures (ibid., p. 87). The members of WP6 are currently publishing the *TEAM* learning outcomes. However, they have recognized the problem of unclear terminology and objectives and are currently working with school music teachers in many countries through workshops, discussions, and the clarification of concepts and concrete implementation ideas.

3. Discussion

If we summarize the processes of implementing ESD in ME and MTE, as well as the multiple levels and definitions through which ESD is introduced across countries, we observe that ESD has so far been conceptualized very broadly and implemented and secondly in highly diverse ways. We can also observe that sustainability, as both a narrow and a broad concept, still leads to uncertainties in its conceptual discussion. Furthermore, the fact that ESD is a broad concept – as already evident in the large discussion about the breadth or focus of the SDGs (UNESCO, 2016 & 2017) – also places ME and MTE at risk of obscurity, which one may call “sustainability-washing.” If much of what is currently offered in ME is suddenly framed as serving ESD, it becomes unclear which specific music-educational and policy interventions genuinely help to prepare young people for the future.

At the same time, prospective music teachers specifically are expressing their urgent need for clarity and effective concepts for music lessons in schools. As Malmberg’s and Gall’s recent empirical study shows, music teacher novices across Europe express a high interest in sustainability education, yet lack conceptual understanding of how it relates to their subject music (Malmberg & Gall, 2025). A clarifying and comprehensive subject-didactic discourse is therefore more urgently needed than ever.

Music education can be linked to both activism and ecological sustainability education, addressing how social impact on the one hand and artistic individuality and intrinsic value (art for art’s sake) on the other interact. The emerging art genre of *data sonification* serves as an example (Roeder, 2018; Sheik, 2019). Here, environmental data is transformed into music (the music pieces’ genres range from contemporary electronic music to dance-floor and techno). The point at which data sonification (i.e., the purposeful, auditory representation of environmental damage) ends and at which art begins can provide a basis for clarifying discussions among young learners. In times of ecological, social, and cultural transition, the challenge is not to choose between activism and art, but to understand how they can coexist productively. ESD, we argue, can offer a connecting framework. Such a framework acknowledges music’s intrinsic aesthetic value while recognizing its capacity to foster empathy, awareness,

and imaginative engagement with what surrounds us all, and what we want to preserve.

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