

Ethical Considerations on Conducting Research about Music Teaching in Primary Schools:

A Virtue Ethics Approach¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore a specific normative ethical approach, virtue ethics, with respect to its potential to support ethical considerations related to music education research. The work we report on here has been carried out in preparation for a study on music teaching in Finnish primary schools. As in many other countries around the world, there are well-known challenges for music education in primary schools in Finland: many teachers feel that they lack the qualifications for teaching music, and music courses in primary teacher education have been cut to a minimum. One central ethical dilemma, then, is to conduct a study that is trustworthy and does not embellish problematic situations while remaining supportive of good practices, fair towards the teachers who participate in the study, and constructive with regard to the potential of improving music teaching through future collaborative projects. What virtue ethics might have to offer as we strive for a relational and sustainable approach to music education research is not only a theoretical framework for thinking about how to conduct a study ethically, but also a reorientation in what we mean by ethical guidance. Its radical suggestion is that we move beyond compliance with research procedure and develop instead a deep commitment to practical wisdom, connected to the persons we hope to become and the lives we want to live.

Keywords: music education, primary school, research ethics, virtue ethics

Ethical Considerations on Conducting Research about Music Teaching in Primary Schools:

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Introduction

Ethical considerations are of central importance in all fields of study where human beings are involved. In research about teaching and learning in schools – including studies on music education – discussions of ethics should constitute an integrated part of the study from the initial research proposal to the final report. Moreover, while principles and established procedures are indispensable for research ethics, compliance with protocol is rarely sufficient (Elliott 2018). Even general handbooks on research design will remind readers that the practice of ethical research can involve complex and thorny issues that require consideration for the particular circumstances and possible harmful consequences of the study (e.g., Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018; Creswell 2009). Still, there is sometimes a tendency among researchers to approach ethics as matters of procedure: conform to norms established by institutional review boards or national advisory

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boards, make sure consent forms are completed, and mention in the report that all required measures have been taken. The scope and quality of discussions regarding theoretical premises for ethical decision making seem to vary in research reports. Comments may be limited to a single paragraph, line, or even footnote. Extensive references to particular theories that underpin the chosen ethical approach in the study are rare and often perhaps seen as implicit.

The purpose of this article is to explore how a discussion of ethical issues that is explicitly based on one specific theoretical approach can inform a music education research project at its outset. The work we report on here has been carried out in preparation for a survey-based study on how the national core curriculum for music is realised in primary schools in Finland. Previous research indicates that we are stepping into a field characterised by significant challenge, and that while an investigation may be helpful for improving music education in primary schools in the long run, it also runs the risk of adding insult to injury for teachers who are already burdened by feelings of inadequacy. We will begin with a presentation of the research project, its background, purpose, research questions, and critical dilemmas. We will then explore one normative ethical approach, virtue ethics, with respect to its potential to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for ethical research about music teaching in primary schools.

Preparing for the research project

International research from several decades has documented that music courses in primary teacher education programmes are often insufficient to prepare students for their work in schools, and that self-efficacy and confidence tend to be low among both preservice and inservice classroom teachers with regard to their ability to teach music (Alter, Hays, and O'Hara 2009; Bresler 1993; Garvis 2013; Hennessy et al. 2001;

Holden and Button 2006; Suomi 2019; Wiggins and Wiggins 2008). Our research project is motivated by worries about the current situation for music teaching and learning in Finnish primary schools. In Finland, music is a compulsory school subject throughout grades 1 to 7 (or 8). Classroom teachers are usually responsible for music in primary schools (until grade 6), whereas students in higher grades are mainly taught by subject teachers. As in other countries, several studies have suggested that Finnish preservice classroom teachers often feel that they do not have the skills and knowledge required for music education in primary school. They may not identify as music teachers, and many of them would prefer not to teach music at all (Anttila 2007; Vesioja 2006; Suomi 2019).

The sense of lacking qualification for music education is not just a matter of overly critical self-images among teachers. Since the late 1980s, Finnish primary teacher education programs have reduced their music courses considerably (Suomi 2019, 29–30) and also discontinued the practice of taking previous musical experience and skills into account in admission examinations (Hyvönen 2006). As a consequence, future classroom teachers begin their studies with varying knowledge, skills, and experiences of music, and the education they receive may not provide adequate preparation for teaching music as a school subject. Most students graduate with only one compulsory music education course of 3–6 ECTS. Judging from 9th grade students' learning outcomes in music, the challenges are real. A Finnish national assessment of learning outcomes in music (Juntunen 2011; 2017) suggested that pupils' learning outcomes by the end of lower secondary school were not just uneven, but generally “modest” at the best. One likely reason for these learning gaps, Juntunen (2011, 89) argues, is that pupils fall behind in grades 1–6 to such an extent that by grade 7, it is too late to compensate. Factors beyond teacher competence are also important to consider; for example, schools may differ with regard to the

resources they allocate to music education and the priority given to the subject (Juntunen 2011; Sandberg 1996).

According to Finnish law, one aim of basic education and compulsory schooling is “to secure adequate equity in education throughout the country.”⁴ Given the variation in preservice teachers’ confidence and competence for teaching music and the uneven learning outcomes in music by grade 9, there seems to be reason to believe that music is not taught on equal terms across Finnish primary schools and classrooms. The aim of the research we are preparing for is to examine the variation in how the national core curriculum for music is realised in primary schools, based on reports by teachers. Our hypotheses at the outset are that (1) there is considerable variation in how teachers experience their ability to realise the aims of the national core curriculum for music in grades 1–6, that (2) the variation is related to differences in teachers’ educational background, their interest in music and music education, and the resources for music education provided by their schools, and that (3) primary schools differ significantly in the ways they organise music education.

Data will be generated through electronic surveys sent to teachers and analysed mainly with quantitative methods, combining descriptive statistics with analyses of variance as well as regression analyses. In addition, we will interpret open answers from teachers using qualitative content analysis. Our ethical considerations in this article focus on how to relate to teachers during the study and how to report on the research, knowing that music as a primary school subject is potentially problematic and maybe even a sore spot for many teachers. Our ambition is to conduct the research in a way that will be as constructive as possible throughout the project, and the long-term aim is to apply knowledge from the study to support and improve preservice and inservice teacher education.

4 Basic Education Act 628/1998, Section 2(3).

Theoretical considerations on ethical approaches to research in music education

We view our study as situated in the larger field of educational research. Several of the ethical requirements for conducting a study in music education are provided by law and/or by guidelines issued by national advisory boards for research ethics. Requirements include responsible conduct of research, prevention of misconduct, and competent, fair and expedient handling of any alleged violations (e.g. Finnish Advisory Board on Research Ethics 2009; 2012). Handbooks on research in education (e.g. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018; Mertler 2018; Palaiologou, Needham, and Male 2016; Punch and Oancea 2014) usually provide advice of a general character, focusing on broad ethical principles and on the nature of ethics in educational research. In addition, they offer guidelines for formalities regarding institutional review processes, informed consent, privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Some handbooks provide more detailed discussions of specific ethical concerns; for example, how to keep participants in research projects safe from harm and how to build trust (e.g., Busher and James 2012), how to show care and respect, and how to treat participants equitably (e.g., Hammerley and Traianou 2012). Professional integrity is often highlighted as crucial for trustworthy outcomes as well as for reciprocal or mutual benefit for researchers, participants and society (e.g., Busher and James 2012, 92).

Although both general and more specific ethical principles such as handbooks provide are often duly cited as part of research reports, Figueroa (2000, 82) remarks that discussions in the ethics sections of reports tend to be so short that they can even seem contrived. As music education scholars who have read many hundreds of studies in our field, we find that although there are brilliant exceptions, music education research (including some of our own previous studies) shares the overall

tendency. Sometimes, there is no explication at all of the ethical precautions that have been taken or decisions that have been made during the study. Sometimes, researchers report that they have respected the official routines of required ethical procedures, but the mention is fleeting, and there is no further elaboration on ethical issues. While brevity is most likely related to limited space in publications, it can also be used as cover-up for a lack of theoretical reflection. We believe that deeper awareness and theorisation of ethical issues in their complexity can benefit the process of decision making throughout research projects, and improve the overall quality and potential benefits of scholarship in our field (see Mustajoki and Mustajoki 2017). Sustainability in educational research is a matter of producing reliable and trustworthy results, but also of creating constructive long-term relationships between those conducting the research and those who are involved in the study and/or might be affected by its implications. We take our cue from what Schwandt (2000, 203) calls “the fundamental question” in social inquiry: “How should I *be* towards the people I am studying?” This question is ethical in nature and leads us to an examination of possible theoretical approaches.

The terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morals’ are etymologically derived from terms referring to characteristic behaviour (from the Greek *ēthē*) and customs (from the Latin *mores*). The original modifiers of these terms (*aretē* and *virtus*, respectively) have fallen from use: in Greek, *ēthē aretē* meant excellence of character, and the Latin equivalent *virtus moralis* referred to excellent character or behaviour (Chappell 2013, 150). Both terms are therefore connected with notions of what is admirable and worth striving for. In contemporary language, ethics and morals are sometimes used interchangeably, but right professional conduct is usually referred to as ‘ethical’ rather than ‘moral’. One common distinction is to understand ethics as comprehensive systems of thought that deal with larger questions about how one ought to live, whereas morals are referred to as principles that regulate specific

conduct, especially between human beings. For researchers, then, ethical questions are not just a matter of good behaviour, but of understanding how and why certain decisions make research ethically excellent. Such decisions align with rules and codes of conduct that are defined within the profession, but they can also be considered part of a well-lived life; in other words, what it means and what it takes to be a researcher whose professional activity contributes to the living of a good life.

This article centres on virtue ethics, one of the three current major normative ethical approaches alongside deontology and consequentialism.⁵ A normative ethical approach claims to provide some theoretical criteria and practical guidance for right action, and the three approaches differ in their views of how these aims can be fulfilled (see Johansson and Svensson 2018, 491–492). Deontology focuses on right action guided by duty and obligation: what is morally required and what is forbidden, and what may be allowed under certain circumstances or when dilemmas arise. Consequentialist theories assess right action on criteria having to do with producing and increasing some kind of ‘good’, e.g., happiness, welfare, or satisfaction; in utilitarian versions of consequentialism, the aim is to maximise this ‘good’. Virtue ethics is agent-centred: it focuses on the qualities of the persons who act; their dispositions to act, think and feel in certain ways and their tendency to be a certain way (Pettigrove 2018, 359).

With regard to Schwandt’s question, “How should I *be* towards the people I am studying?”, virtue ethics with its emphasis on what kind of person one ought to be seems like a promising place to look for answers. As Hursthouse and Pettigrove

5 Many other relevant approaches exist and would have been fruitful to discuss in this article; notably ethics of care (Noddings 1984) which also is considered an agent-centred account. Our main ambition here is to probe the potential of virtue ethics for music education research. A thorough comparison in this respect between the advantages of virtue ethics and other traditions, even one of the two other major approaches, would have required more space than we have.

(2016) remark, “this is not to say that only virtue ethicists attend to virtues, any more than it is to say that only consequentialists attend to consequences or only deontologists to rules. Each of the above-mentioned approaches can make room for virtues, consequences, *and* rules.” Our intention is not to show that a virtue ethics approach is superior to or excludes elements from consequentialist or deontological approaches. Rather, we examine how our ethical thinking might be informed by virtue ethics, and what resources it might offer for a project such as ours.

Virtue ethics as a normative ethical approach

Virtue ethics has been one of the most influential approaches in moral philosophy in both Western traditions, where it is connected to the thought of Plato and Aristotle, and in the East, where it builds on Confucius and Mencius (for an excellent overview, see Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2016). It also holds great importance in major religious worldviews, including Buddhist, Hinduist, Judeo-Christian, and Muslim beliefs. The approach centres on excellences (virtues) of character that are considered to contribute to the flourishing of human lives and communities (Russell 2013, p. 1). In the Western tradition, the four cardinal (indispensable) virtues are practical wisdom (phronesis in Greek; prudentia in Latin), courage, justice, and temperance.

Following a temporary decline in the West during the 19th century, interest in virtue concepts was renewed notably with the publication of G. E. M. Anscombe’s paper *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958), in which she points out weaknesses in deontology and consequentialism as they were articulated at the time. Anscombe’s main objection is that both approaches open for the possibility to justify “the vilest things” (ibid., 2) by referring either to duty or to expected consequences. In other words, it might be possible to do what one ‘ought’ to do, or the ‘right’ thing, follow stipulated principles and make correct calculations, but still fall short of being

virtuous (just, truthful, and so on) and neglect consideration for the deeper aims of virtue.

In his seminal work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre ([1981] 2007) follows Anscombe in arguing that a major challenge for moral theory is the loss or fragmentation of knowledge about the complex historical traditions that have given meaning and intelligibility to virtue concepts such as excellence, justice, or the good life. According to MacIntyre, this has left us in a situation where we are poorly served, even “betrayed” by the uninformed, mixed-up, and therefore incoherent language we try to use when examining moral issues (ibid., 5). Without an understanding of virtue and its immense influence on Western moral philosophy, MacIntyre argues, the use of words such as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ may become arbitrary, disconnected from any coherent frameworks of thought, or simply dependent on personal, emotivist preferences.

One subsequent major work in which an ethical approach based on virtue is developed in detail and its differences with deontological and consequentialist theories are thoroughly examined is Rosalind Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* (1999). For Snow (2018b, 1–2), this study marks a shift from virtue theory, which can be a part of any larger ethical worldview, towards an ethical theory where virtue is the central concept. Hursthouse argues that a better understanding about virtue ethics will make its concepts familiar such that “future generations of moral philosophers, brought up on all three approaches, will lose interest in classifying themselves as following one approach rather than another; in which case all three labels might become of merely historical interest” (1999, 5). She rightly predicts that many more books on the subject will follow; as Snow (2018b, 2) observes, “since 1999, a veritable deluge of philosophical work has been done in virtue ethics and virtue theory, and even more new fields have emerged,” among them the field of applied virtue ethics.

A virtue is a deep, persisting and characteristic feature of a person, “a tendency for the person to be a certain way” (Annas 2011, 8), which in turn disposes the person to feel, think and act in certain ways that enable excellent responses to practical situations that are important for human well-being (Annas 2011; Banks 2018, 25; Wood 2014, 37). Here, the term ‘excellent responses’ refers to ways of acting that show expertise in exercising virtues such as practical wisdom, fairness, or benevolence. Virtue is seen as acquired, improved and sustained through patient, deliberate practice. In philosophical literature, music education researchers can find helpful analogies between the process of learning to be virtuous and learning to play a musical instrument. Aristotle notes that we “become lyre-players by playing the lyre” (Aristotle 2009, 1103a32–b1). Annas (2011, 14) has elaborated on the skill analogy in her description of how a pianist improves her playing: “The way she plays exhibits not just increased technical mastery but increased intelligence – better ways of dealing with transitions between loud and soft, more subtle interpretations of the music, etc. . . . the ability, though a habituated one, is constantly informed by the way the person is thinking.”

Virtues, then, are comparable to skills in that they are developed with time and life experience, and that they are strengthened and become more effortless the more they are practiced (see e.g., Stichter 2018). The assumption that developing virtue is a gradual and cumulative process makes it logical, for example, that inexperienced researchers are expected to learn about ethics from more experienced colleagues through graduate courses and supervision, and that researchers at any stages of their careers are expected to learn from their mistakes and improve as they move from pilot studies to main projects and from one study to the next. Growing expertise involves developing an ability to understand and explain not just *that* this conduct is ethical, but *why* (Annas 2011, 19). Virtue is not something that can be exercised reliably by adhering to a set of rules; instead, it is assumed to develop along with maturity and

increased wisdom about human life (Annas 2011; Hursthouse 1999). This does not mean that older persons or more experienced researchers are automatically or invariably more virtuous; only that if they have been practising deliberately, they may have done so for a longer time, encountered a larger variety of dilemmas, and therefore have had opportunity to hone their ability to identify situations that call for particular attention. Following the example of an older researcher with a history of ethical misconduct is of course not advisable, and a brilliant young researcher can come up with excellent solutions to difficult problems. What is important is that as our existence and our research projects constantly present us with new situations and challenges, attending to virtues “enables us to respond in creative and imaginative ways,” and that this – at least potentially – allows for learning that no rule-following or routine could accomplish (Annas 2011, 15).

The most common objection levelled against placing virtue at the centre of an ethical approach is that virtues do not seem to provide clear-cut guidance for action. Hursthouse (1999, 28) suggests the following criterion:

An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances.

For someone expecting waterproof rules or decision-making procedures, this specification will seem much too vague. What is a “virtuous agent,” and what does such a person do? Answering that the virtuous person does the virtuous thing seems to land us in a circular argument; however, in their parodic form, similar statements also cause problems for deontology (doing the right thing is doing what is right) and consequentialism (the good thing to do is what generates good consequences). Johansson and Svensson (2018, 505) find reasons to doubt that virtue ethics can fulfil the theoretical aim of providing criteria for rightness, wrongness, or obligatoriness, such as deontology or consequentialism claim to supply. But this does not mean that

virtue ethics has nothing to offer by way of fulfilling the practical aim of guiding action. To begin with, most people already have at least some intuitive notions of virtue, use them in ordinary life, and have been confronted with virtue dilemmas in practical situations: trying to think of what would be the wise, honest, or fair thing to do (Annas 2011, chap. 2 and 3; Johansson and Svensson 2018, 503).

Instead of procedures for decision making, Hursthouse (1999, 37) offers what is referred to as “v-rules”, i.e., rules related to virtue and vice: do what is virtuous (honest, etc.); do not do what is not virtuous (uncharitable, etc.). The task remains to find out how each particular virtue should be exercised in different circumstances, but this can in fact be considered a strength rather than a weakness of the approach. As stated by Annas (2011, 48–51), there are no shortcuts: doing what one has been told to do (by authority figures or by a moral theory) is not the same as learning – with time and life experience – what it means to be honest or generous in different situations, taking relevant aspects of those situations into account. In addition, as Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2016) wryly observe, the list of commonly recognised virtues is short whereas the list of terms referring to vices is helpfully long:

Much invaluable action guidance comes from avoiding courses of action that would be irresponsible, feckless, lazy, inconsiderate, uncooperative, harsh, intolerant, selfish, mercenary, indiscreet, tactless, arrogant, unsympathetic, cold, incautious, unenterprising, pusillanimous, feeble, presumptuous, rude, hypocritical, self-indulgent, materialistic, grasping, short-sighted, vindictive, calculating, ungrateful, grudging, brutal, profligate, disloyal, and on and on.

In most versions of the approach, the virtues are considered to be interconnected such that, for example, “generosity involves considerations of fairness and justice” (Annas 2011, 84; see also Timpe and Boyd 2014, 9–11). Avoiding vice is not as simple as avoiding the literal opposite of the virtue. Instead, it is a matter of finding the right

measure in particular circumstances: for example, aiming for courage as the right mark between cowardice and recklessness. The unifying, overarching virtue is the virtue of phronesis or practical wisdom: the understanding that makes it possible for a person to discern salient features of any given situation, and to apply that understanding while acting in appropriate ways that promote human well-being (flourishing, or for the Ancient Greeks, eudaimonia). It is such wise, balanced action that is defined as excellent, or virtuous. Decision making in research projects is a good example of a context when this kind of discernment and accuracy is needed; for example, when formulating research questions, when thinking about what level of participant anonymity will be appropriate, and when planning how to report and disseminate findings.

Applied virtue ethics and music education research

Applied virtue ethics is still a relatively small field compared with approaches that build on deontology or consequentialism/utilitarianism. Since the beginning of the 2000s, however, there has been an increase in scholarly activity and publications on how virtue ethics might be applied in domains such as law, medicine, and education (for a good overview, see Snow 2018a, Part VI, *Applied virtue ethics*; on virtue ethics and education, see Carr 2018). Given the enormous and global environmental emergencies that humanity is facing, applied virtue ethics is also expanding as an important approach in environmental ethics (see e.g., Hursthouse 2007; Kawall 2018; Zwolinski and Schmidtz 2013).

As classic virtue concepts are being interpreted and translated to contemporary researcher language, new terminology emerges within the scientific communities. In the social sciences, one central term is ‘research/researcher integrity’ which refers to “the overarching capacity or disposition to hold true to the values of the research

discipline of field and to balance other virtues as necessary” (Banks 2018, 33). Efforts to compile lists of researcher virtues have also been made, based for instance on national legislation or on principles and guidelines issued by national advisory boards on research ethics (e.g., Banks and Gallagher 2009; Macfarlane 2009; van den Hoonaard 2017). The items on the lists vary, but often include respectfulness, care, and terms related to honesty: openness, transparency, and sincerity. In addition, some of the established criteria for quality and rigor in research may be understood as virtue concepts: reliability, trustworthiness, and reflexivity. Although empiricist and interpretive research approaches use different concepts because of their different epistemological presuppositions (Schwartz-Shea 2014), there is similarity at the core: the scientific community and general public should have the right to expect that the research has been conducted to the best of the researcher’s capability, both with regard to the collective knowledge within a discipline and to principles of responsible behaviour.

In educational research, the clearest specific references to virtue theory tend to be found in action research, which builds on neo-Aristotelian assumptions about the connection between phronesis, practical wisdom; and praxis, virtuous action (see e.g. Eikeland 2006; Noffke and Somekh 2009). Action research and its relatives, participatory research, practice-based inquiry and applied research, have a long history of deliberate inquiry into virtuous action in particular cases (Elliott 2007; 2018). However, many principles that guide action research are relevant regardless of methodological approach: informed consent, confidentiality, the right to turn down or to discontinue participation, and careful handling of data (e.g. Elliott 2018, 151–152). Researchers across methodological and epistemological traditions also share the responsibility to scrutinise power issues in their projects (Munro, Holly, Rainbird, and Lesten 2004). Such power relations can be immediately visible; for example, the researcher often decides in advance what the study will focus on and has the final

word on how to interpret findings. But they can also be more challenging to discern, as within power structures where researchers may occupy privileged positions because of their ethnicity, social class, or age. A researcher who is inspired by virtue ethics may find support in the advice to strive for justice (one of the ancient cardinal virtues) and for humility, and also note that grandiosity, domination, and vicious paternalism are not considered to be virtuous dispositions (Swanton 2003, 219).

Music education as praxis in a (neo-)Aristotelian sense and the centrality of virtue and virtue ethics for this theoretical approach have been examined by many well-known music education scholars and used in philosophical studies (Bowman 2012; 2014; Elliott and Silverman 2015; Higgins 2011; Lines 2012; Regelski 2012; 2016; Silverman 2012). However, and perhaps surprisingly, virtue ethics is rarely mentioned in empirical music education research. Although many recent studies have a strong focus on ethical conduct in both scholarship and teaching (e.g., Kallio 2015; Laes 2017), we have not been able to find publications in English within music education literature that specifically draw on virtue ethics as a theoretical framework and source of guidance for the ethical issues involved in the research project. In the absence of examples from our own specialised field, we draw on Banks (2018) who suggests (roughly) the following steps: (1) Consider what it means for researchers to be regarded as persons of integrity within their field, (2) Reflect in more detail on how virtues are relevant for the specific research context, (3) Consider, together with others, what it means to exercise virtues in the research project.

Virtuous action as defined by Swanton (2010) demands efforts to hit the target (i.e., what the virtue aims for) as closely as possible in the circumstances. Paraphrasing Aristotle,⁶ Swanton (2010, 164) writes:

6 “[T]o feel [a given emotion] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean*

[T]o fully meet the target of a virtue V and thereby the mean in relation to V involves acting (in respect of V) in the right circumstances, in the right manner, at the right time, to the right extent, for the right reasons, with respect to the right people, deploying the right instruments.

We note that this definition stops short of mentioning ‘right action’. The language of virtue ethics describes actions and their ‘rightness’ in terms of virtue rather than the other way around (Smith 2014, 16). When a researcher chooses a suitable time to send out a survey, for example, a deontologist might say that this is the right thing to do. A consequentialist might point out that it is likely to improve the response rate and therefore increase the reliability of the study, making its findings more applicable. A virtue ethicist would perhaps say that it is wise, considerate, and respectful. This example also shows how the three approaches can complete each other.

The purpose of this article, as stated in the beginning, is to examine what resources a virtue ethics approach might offer researchers in music education. In our case, we reflect on this potential from a theoretical point of view, ahead of our project. The work we are doing is prospective and exploratory, and in that sense, incomplete. As the project starts, we will encounter situations and dilemmas that can not be anticipated at this point. Yet, part of the ability to handle dilemmas as they arise depends on previous reflective work. As in any preparatory stage of a study, we need to make the effort to think about the particularities of the research context and the ethical issues that may prove salient.

More specifically, then, we ask: *What potential does virtue ethics have to inform research on music teaching in primary schools at the outset of a project?*

Adapting the steps suggested by Banks (2018) to our ethical inquiry, we will first strive to identify salient ethical features that need to be considered in the research

Ethics. 1106b21–23).

context and the particular circumstances of the study. Building on the idea that virtues develop within communities that share certain distinctive aims and commitments (MacIntyre ([1981] 2007; Annas 2011), we will discuss what communities music education researchers belong to. We will then compile a selective list of virtues and examine what those virtues mean in the context of our study. Swanton's definition of virtuous action encourages us to think closely about the circumstances, methods, timing, scope, participants and stakeholders of the research project. Finally, we will answer the questions above by evaluating the applicability, adequacy, usefulness, and limitations of a virtue ethics approach for our research.

Salient ethical features of the research context

Investigating teachers' practices can be a sensitive issue. In Finland, teachers have extensive autonomy in the classroom, that is, freedom from control by others of their professional actions (Niemi 2013). The Finnish national core curriculum for basic education sets general guidelines for teaching and learning (see further Vitikka, Krogfors, and Hurmerinta 2012), but teachers are trusted to follow the guidelines and are free to determine how they realise teaching, learning, and assessment. Teachers are not evaluated through any external or formal measures, and quality assurance is largely in the hands of school principals (Sahlberg 2011, see also Juntunen 2017). Therefore, teachers may feel that a study on how the curriculum is realised in fact represents a more or less open critical evaluation of their work and professionalism. Given the specific, well-known challenges present in music education in primary schools, there is a risk that this dynamic is exacerbated. Researchers can be perceived as arriving from a position of power, representing prestigious institutions of higher music education as well as the community of specialist teachers. Experiencing the research as external inspection may feel particularly unfair in situations where teachers have limited possibilities to influence the formal and informal frame factors

for their work, such as the resources allocated to music or the attitude towards music in the school.

Previous studies on teacher practices suggest that there can be a discrepancy between what teachers say they do and what they actually do; the tendency is to paint a somewhat glossy or embellished picture of their classroom realities (e.g., Bolander, Laksov, Nikkola, and Lonka 2008; Torrado and Pozo 2008). However, researchers are bound by ethical commitment to allow participants to make choices about what they will reveal, in what way, and to what extent. There may be circumstances in the participants' personal, professional or political life that are known only to them and that may entail risks if information should fall into the wrong hands (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 122). In addition, if teachers seem to idealise or exaggerate certain aspects of their situation, this can in itself be considered a valuable insight from the research (ibid., 110–11).

With these considerations on the research context in mind, and framing our discussion first with support from the principle of nonmaleficence (do no harm), we note that ethical issues of relevance for the study are connected with our responsibilities as researchers towards the persons who are involved in the research. Given the setup of our study, these persons initially include the teachers who are responsible for music education in primary schools. They also include principals, researchers, policymakers, and any readers who may wish to use our report as background for their understanding of music education in primary schools. In a long-term perspective and even though this study focuses on teachers, our responsibility is towards the primary school children whose music education we hope to support.

Possible harm that can be done to teachers during research includes damage to their dignity, reputation, career, and their relationships to students, parents,

colleagues, and employers. It seems unlikely that students can benefit from a study that has in some way discouraged or humiliated their teachers. Mapping out the context of the studied phenomenon (in this case, music education in Finnish primary schools) the way we have done so far will help us gain a more nuanced understanding of what influences the variation in teachers' ability to realise the curriculum. This preparatory work may also reduce the risk of relating to the teachers in our study in unhelpful ways – or, choosing from the (nonexhaustive) list of vices offered by Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2016): in uncooperative, harsh, tactless, arrogant, cold, brutal, presumptuous, hypocritical or short-sighted ways.

That said, as researchers, we also have a responsibility to be trustworthy. Beyond nonmalevolence, we expect knowledge and insights from the study to contribute to improvements that benefit teachers and students alike. Kelly (1989) suggests that researchers have to weigh the harm that might occur if they did not intervene against the consequences of depriving people of opportunities or information from which they might benefit if the research was conducted. At first glance, this might seem like the only argument we need. However, to the extent that it builds on the view that the ends justify the means, the suggestion is incompatible with virtue ethics. Instead, a virtue ethicist might encourage researchers to strive for more than a mere ranking of priorities: on deeper reflection, we may find that a perceived conflict is in fact just apparent and that the virtues do not make opposing demands (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2016). Preservice teachers in a substantial number of Finnish and international studies have told researchers that they worry about teaching music and that part of the problem is related to insufficient preparation. If this is indeed the case, music education researchers and primary school teachers might as well share their worries and take an honest, courageous, collaborative look at the overall situation. Especially if some of the problems can be solved, researchers would not hit the target of virtues such as respectfulness or kindness by pretending that there are no

worries at all. For teachers who experience music education as challenging, it can be a relief that researchers listen, care, and are willing to join forces in finding solutions.

Moreover, we do not expect to find only problems, nor will we design the study to search just for challenges. On the contrary, we aim to identify potential in classroom teachers' music education practices and to highlight specific strengths cultivated by particular teachers or schools. In sum, the virtues of nonmalevolence and benevolence guide us to strive for a research process that is intended to make things better, not worse. The main ethical features we need to focus on when studying music teaching in primary schools are: (1) keeping in mind that the main aim of the study is to generate knowledge that has the potential to improve music education in primary schools, (2) relating respectfully to teachers, and (3) analysing and reporting on both strengths and weaknesses with a trustworthy and constructive disposition. In our study, most of the contact and dialogue with teachers will take place through an electronic survey. This does not make ethical deliberation and reflexivity any less important. The ways in which we address respondents, word survey questions, make room for free-form responses and nuance, interpret data, report and disseminate our results and follow up on the study will reflect our ethical stance and consideration for long-term sustainability.

Specific virtues and the music education researcher

Learning to be virtuous and exercising virtue, Annas (2011, 55–58) points out, takes place within communities, from families to professional groups and communities of persons (across time and place) who share our values. The virtues people commit to are learned in “multitudes of embedded contexts which can stand in various relations, from overlapping to conflicting” (ibid., 21). What, then, are these contexts and communities in our case?

As music education researchers who are currently studying how music is taught in primary schools in Finland, we belong to at least three communities of major significance for our work. We are researchers and scholars who have a responsibility to be knowledgeable about the subject of our study, including previous and current research and issues of debate, and about principles for the conduct of reliable, trustworthy and ethical research. More specifically, we are Finnish researchers, and as such bound by ethical standards established by the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity, and expected to contribute to the good of Finnish society at large. Insofar as we are music educators who have experience of teaching music in primary schools even though we are not generalists, we are also members of the same community as the teachers who participate in the study. We risk to harm the relationships with our colleagues in each of those communities at our peril, and at the peril of possible advances through future collaborative research. Finally, we are fellow human beings who share central psychological needs with the persons affected by our research; notably the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2017), and who strive along with them for a worthwhile and fulfilling life as each of us understands it.

Having identified some salient ethical features of the study and the communities to which we think we are accountable, we now ask: how are virtues relevant to this research project and in relation to the persons who may be affected by our study? As remarked above, there have been different attempts to compile both general lists of virtues and lists that have particular significance for researchers. Our own selection is bound to be incomplete and imperfect, given the richness, variety and conflicts in historic and current interpretations of virtue ethics, and given the limitations of space in this article. The aim here is not to be exhaustive, but to probe the potential of the approach for thinking about our study and to give some examples of what exercising virtue might look like in this particular case. We have chosen to consider the four

cardinal virtues: practical wisdom (phronesis), courage, temperance, and justice, and three virtues often associated with research: benevolence, respectfulness, and trustworthiness.

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is the ability to make excellent, reflected, deliberate choices about how to act in particular situations such that it contributes to the living of a good human life. The aim of our study is to examine the variation in how the national core curriculum for music is realised in primary schools, based on self-reports by teachers, with the long-term aim of applying this knowledge to support and improve preservice and inservice teacher education. These aims rest, in turn, on our overarching preassumption that music education is an important human good; an understanding which is not shared by everyone, as demonstrated by the wavering status and financial situation of music as a subject in publicly funded schools worldwide. We have no place here to analyse the variety of arguments presented in music education advocacy (see Bowman 2005; Bresler 2002; Reimer 2005). However, we note two things. In Finland, music education has been given (and, so far, retained) the status of a public good through its inclusion in the national core curriculum for compulsory education. At the same time, previous studies suggest that music education as it is practiced in Finnish schools does not always seem to contribute to the good life of students in the intended way because students' experiences are negative and discouraging (Anttila 2010). To exercise phronesis as researchers will mean, among other things, that our deeper motivation is to understand how music education and human flourishing can be connected, and that we need to keep this in mind as we examine how the national core curriculum for music is realised.

Courage will be connected to thorough and persistent research work, a willingness to recognise and report results that may be surprising, inconvenient, or troubling in some way, and caution about overconfidence about our own research

methods, interpretations, and relations to participants. It can also be connected with a disposition to envisage and acknowledge new ideas and pathways for music education. To the extent that we hope to advance courage as a virtue beyond our own dispositions, we might also attempt to ‘encourage’ teachers who may have been ‘discouraged’ with regard to music or music education. One way to do this might be to collaborate with teachers in transforming some of the findings of the study to concrete suggestions that feel possible to realise in practice.

Temperance as a virtue ideal may be helpful in delimiting the study and in setting realistic expectations for what we can accomplish. Given our own passion for music education and our conviction of its value, we may be tempted to react with indignation at perceived shortcomings; in those situations, it can be wise to remember why the study is conducted and to think about how our attitudes may impede or support development. Temperance can also be exercised in relation to participants; for instance, taking care not to burden them excessively. In our case, it requires a clear, well-designed survey which is appropriate for the purpose of the study and yet parsimonious enough so that it can be completed in a reasonable amount of time. Swanton (2003) mentions that acting virtuously involves acting at the right time; choosing a good moment for the study requires temperance of our eagerness to have our questions answered or to complete the research very quickly. As music education colleagues, we know what times of the school year are usually too busy for teachers to participate in research alongside their other commitments, and we can take that into account.

Justice in this context will mean that we aim for a fair, thick account of our findings, acknowledging situations in their complexity and analysing them with awareness of the frame factors that influence primary school teachers’ chances of realising the national music curriculum to its full potential. A sufficiently detailed understanding will probably require follow-up studies that include interviews,

observations, and attention to students' experiences. Justice can be understood as reciprocity: as argued by Lankshear and Knobel (2004, 85), "researchers have an ethical and professional responsibility to those who participate in the research to produce a study that is worthy of their time, goodwill, inconvenience and trust." Being aware of how social injustices may be operating in the research context can help us to see that some municipalities, schools and teachers might be better equipped with time and resources to participate in the study, and to take into account that this may skew the research outcomes. Our own position as highly educated music teachers and academic researchers can create hierarchical dynamics that are unhelpful for the researcher-teacher relationship. In addition to constantly sharpening our awareness of those issues, we can also helpfully draw on the idea that researchers and teachers can exert power together in order to generate positive outcomes for students (Brooks, te Riele, and Maguire 2014, 21). Even though respondents in the final sample have limited opportunities to participate in the design of the study, we have the possibility to discuss the survey with teachers and to conduct a pilot survey in order for them to assess its relevance for music education in their schools.

Benevolence represents the researchers' intention to be helpful for students, teachers, principals and other school administrators, policymakers, other persons who may be affected by our study, and other scholars who are working on similar problems. The virtue of benevolence is usually mentioned together with nonmalevolence, which corresponds to the requirement to avoid harm, one of the oldest ethical principles and one of three major guidelines for ethical research established by the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (2009). Our overall aim to generate knowledge that can eventually improve primary school music education needs to be seen in a longer perspective where sustainability is essential. Collaborative development work in music education requires long-term good relationships between researchers, teachers, and schools. It is customary in Finland to

apply for permission to conduct research in municipal schools via local municipal education departments, who represent the field of policy making, or at their instructions directly via the school. Part of our intention to contribute to wise decision making will be to consistently follow up with the departments and schools and provide them with concluding reports that are straightforward, readable, and worded such that possible recommendations are stated clearly and constructively.

Respectfulness is embedded in the two other major national guidelines: “Respect the autonomy of research subjects” and “Protect privacy and data.” As colleagues, we can show respect by making sure there is no coercion to participate, by avoiding overintrusive questions, by acknowledging challenges in music education as something we share, and by showing that we value the participants as professionals. A collegial, collaborative, nonjudgemental stance can permeate every contact with teachers as well as the tone in spoken interaction and written texts, from the invitation to participate in the project to the final report and dissemination of findings. Respectfulness can also involve a willingness to let go of preconceived ideas about problems in music education in primary schools, shaped by our own experience and studies we have read. Instead, we can adopt an attitude of openness which allows for appreciation of all forms of good work that we will find. Simultaneously, as researchers, we are bound by a commitment to respect other scholars, being conscientious and systematic in our work and adhering to the standards of our epistemic community.

Trustworthiness is one of the hallmarks of excellence in research and researchers, and it can be understood as part of a cluster of virtues that includes honesty, openness, and sincerity. Being trustworthy as a researcher entails a range of responsibilities. Some of them are obvious: not falsifying data and not pushing conclusions without sufficient grounding. Others are connected with being knowledgeable as a researcher: able to work with epistemological clarity and

methodological proficiency. Importantly, as Riessman (2002, 258) argues, trustworthiness “moves the [validation] process into the social world.” Any teacher, principal, policymaker or fellow researcher who wishes to draw on our study for informed decision making or deeper understanding about music education in primary schools should be able to trust what we have to say in and about our study. Committing to trustworthiness is therefore a collegial act of respect as well as a requirement for researchers as members of professional and larger communities. Finally, trust is not created as a matter of contractual procedure. We engage with the persons who are affected by our research in their and our full humanness. When we promise, for example, that we will protect privacy and data, our word must be what the virtue concept signifies: worthy of trust.

Conclusions

In the previous sections, we have been examining resources from virtue ethics while considering the ethical issues that we consider salient for our study. We will now return to the question that has been at the basis of the inquiry in this article and summarise our conclusions. Along with the potential we have found in the approach, we will also discuss what we consider to be some of its limitations.

What potential does virtue ethics have to inform research on music teaching in primary schools at the outset of a project?

Virtue ethics builds on the view that humans are – at least potentially – rational beings who can employ critical reflection, reason and feeling to acquire understandings that can guide action. This does not happen automatically but takes time, experience, and practice. In human sciences such as education, virtue ethics

seems remarkably helpful for thinking through how personal interactions during research may influence the quality of a study and its outcomes, and how researchers' characteristic modes of being towards others may change the prospect of sustainable follow-up and application of the results of the study. We find, with Annas (2011, 37), that especially when situations involve some difficulty, taking the time to work on our understanding of specific virtues may help us to "think productively" about what it means, for example, to be respectful and trustworthy. Even without adhering to ancient cardinal virtues, it is possible to regard general advice on research ethics through the lens of virtue, and notice how this might stimulate and change our thinking on how we need to conduct the study. Virtue ethics leaves space for sensitivity to the particularities of situations. In music education, where schools and classrooms can differ considerably from each other both in terms of the resources available and in terms of the attitude to the subject, it seems especially important for researchers to develop rich, wise, and flexible modes of responsiveness and understanding.

At least in its more idealistic forms, music education builds on the explicit commitment to human flourishing, which is also at the heart of virtue ethics. This is our deeper reason for engaging in research on the state of music education in primary schools. Music can be considered part of what makes us distinctly human. Similarly, being "deeply, unremittingly human" is both what allows us to conduct reflective and meaningful research, and what makes us fallible: subject to bias, idiosyncrasy, and error (Yanow 2014, 114). A virtue ethics approach may support our awareness of the need to keep a check on our most hubristic tendencies as researchers and music educators. Focusing on who we want to be as researchers and on what grounds raises the stakes for our activities. Beyond thinking of what is permissible and/or obligatory, we move towards thinking about what we take to be admirable and worth striving for in the larger perspective of a well-lived life. In the virtue tradition,

such a life is not lived only for ourselves, but within the multitude of our relationships and commitments.

Developing virtue as a researcher requires considerable work (Banks 2018, 25). As music education professionals, we should know. It also takes time and practice to become a virtuoso, and the word of course shares with ‘virtuous’ the same Latin root: *virtus*, referring not to morals, but to excellence, strength, and skill (Chappell 2013, 151). Becoming a virtuous (or virtuoso) researcher, then, is not about looking for something or someone telling us what to do, nor – especially – doing as we are told (Annas 2011, 34), but to become increasingly excellent at being researchers (colleagues, and fellow human beings) and to aspire towards making that excellence as constant and reliable as possible. The contrast could not be more sharp between a humble commitment to this lifelong learning process, and the attitude reflected in the semidesperate “just tell me how to get through the REC”⁷ (Emmerich 2018, 10). The research process itself provides ample opportunity for learning and improving; for example, through subsequent collaborative projects or the use of pilot study.

There are undeniable challenges in music education in primary schools, and trying to deny or embellish the situation or simply refraining from research intervention is not likely to improve teaching and learning. What virtue ethics might have to offer as we strive for a relational, mature, sustainable approach to music education research is not only a theoretical framework for thinking about how to conduct a study ethically, but also a reorientation in what we mean by ethical guidance. “Virtue ethics,” Russell (2013, 18) argues, “offers us action guidance less by giving us rules to follow than by telling us how to become people who can do what rules never can.”

7 Research Ethics Committee.

Limitations of a virtue ethics approach

Finally, we will consider what we take to be some of the limitations of a virtue ethics approach to research in music education. As remarked by Kwiatkowski (2018, 54), it is probably overly optimistic to assume that individual researchers can live up to virtue aspirations and codes “that only angels could possibly fulfill.” Relying on a single, fallible human being for ethical conduct and perfect integrity is to ignore the wider system in which the research is conducted. Ideally, committees and colleagues support the researcher in making wise decisions, but sometimes it is precisely strong peer pressure and competition that can tempt individual researchers to make dubious decisions. In addition, as Kwiatkowski points out, imagine the complexities, power issues and political perils involved in having a research ethics committee assess an individual researcher’s moral character. It can also be very challenging to exercise perfect virtue (let alone be an ethical whistleblower) in an academic environment where resources are lacking and time pressure is the norm, while the demand to produce prestigious publications is high (ibid., 47–52, 58). This observation is not meant to be used as an excuse; rather, as a reminder that human beings do not always have the strength to retain their integrity and follow their ideals. Our point is that while individual dispositions to be accountable and responsible are crucial, virtue is more reliably supported in communities larger than one person.

Some constraints, then, are predetermined and subjected to review. They are not up to the inexperienced, pressured, or hubristic ‘virtuous researcher’ to sort out. It would be a mistake to disregard the painstakingly acquired wisdom embodied in rules of thumb and heuristic checklists, generated through years of trial and error in research communities. That said, no predetermined research procedures or manuals can of course guarantee ethical action in practice. Rule following such as anonymising data and using consent forms does not eliminate all risks of doing harm;

for example, demoralising primary school teachers with regard to their capability to contribute to meaningful music education in their classrooms. But neither does mere thinking about virtue. Acquiring thorough knowledge about the virtues is no guarantee that anyone will become a virtuous person or researcher in practice. Repellent consequences of mere theoretical expertise might be to adopt a smug, hypocritical self-assurance without practical commitment, or to engage in what contemporary social media have aptly identified as ‘virtue signalling’: empty demonstrations of virtue commitment that hide self-aggrandising purposes.

The terminology of virtue ethics may be challenging to music education researchers, starting with the notion of virtue itself, given the possible associations to bigotry and puritan moralism. Moreover, it has been argued (e.g. Prinz 2009) that virtue notions are historically and emotionally contingent and interculturally applicable only to a certain extent, if at all. Indeed, if local virtues are based on local values, the words ‘fair’ or ‘wise’ are no less complicated to use than ‘right’ or ‘good’. This charge is serious and opens for the possibility of discussing rival conceptions about what constitutes goodness and a well-lived life. But it also warrants a *critical virtue ethics* as suggested by Schmidt (2014); a “post-naïve account of virtue” (Schmidt 2014, 44) where attempts at universalism are renounced in the interest of openness, self-questioning, and access to a rich imagery, flowing from various traditions of virtue ethics.

Discussion and suggestions for further study

For music education researchers who are thoroughly acquainted with criteria for research integrity in the human sciences, a virtue ethics approach may seem surprisingly familiar. Some virtue concepts, such as trustworthiness, are already present in guidelines for research ethics and we are accustomed to reflecting on their

meaning in the studies we conduct. Thinking of those concepts explicitly as virtues and connecting them to a virtue tradition is perhaps more rare. Doing so can support and deepen our understanding of why we are making certain choices rather than others, and help us to become increasingly conscious and skilled in the ethical decision-making process. Developing a solid theoretical framework to support our actions is important whether our thinking builds on virtue ethics, deontology, consequentialism, ethics of care, or any other approach.

It will come as no surprise to experienced scholars that while rules of thumb are a good start, conducting research will usually require wisdom, a number of case-by-case decisions, and sensitivity to context. What it means to be just, benevolent, or respectful as a music education researcher will unfold in part as specific studies unfold. The large number of case examples and real or hypothetical dilemmas that is characteristically included in literature on virtue ethics (as well as other ethical approaches) demonstrates the need to be not just well-versed in ethical theory, but also open and imaginative. In this article, we have examined aspects of virtue ethics in research from a theoretical, a priori perspective. This may rightly be seen as putting the cart before the horse. Still, any research proposal needs assessment of its ethical framework as part of the preparations for the study and often as required by research ethics committees. One necessary way forward is to work with case studies of real-world practical dilemmas in music education research projects; the salient issues that were involved, how the researchers attempted to untangle them, and what might be said about the deliberations and outcomes. In this way, it is possible to ‘crowdsource’ a rich repertoire of examples of virtuous action in practice.

Perhaps most importantly, there is much more work to do given that the study we are preparing for focuses mainly on teachers and their self-reports. We have encountered ethical complexity already here, but the number of issues to be considered will increase exponentially in any study where young students are directly

involved. It may indeed even be seen as unethical (in virtue terms: unfair, imprudent, or lacking in benevolence) to study music education in primary schools without consulting children and paying attention to how they experience and explore their worlds and their musical learning in school. It is a logical and necessary next step to follow up with research where students are in focus, and also to include field work where teachers' self-reports can be compared with classroom observations.

In closing, we return to the advice by Annas (2011) to understand virtue as developed through learning. Rather than striving to reach a plateau of routine, we might accept that similarly to musicians, researchers will gradually become more skilled, comfortable, and acquainted with typical difficulties, having broad experience of the 'repertoire' of issues that require ethical consideration. But for each new musical or scholarly challenge, new piece or research question, dilemma that could not be anticipated, and unknown venue or context, there are skills to find, strengthen or (re)mobilise, and our full, sensitive presence is always required. 'Perfect' is not likely to be possible, but the core assumption of virtue ethics is that it builds on constant learning, aiming, and aspiring.

Virtue ethics offers standards and sources of inspiration for becoming increasingly careful, critical, and attentive. Its radical suggestion is that we move beyond compliance with standards and develop instead a deep commitment to practical wisdom, connected to the persons we hope to become and the lives we want to live. For music education researchers, that suggestion may seem daunting, overdemanding, and perhaps too personal. But in the light of our theoretical exploration and many current worries in music education, including how music is taught and learnt in primary schools, we argue that there is profound value in efforts to engage deeply in research as a process of scholarly and personal learning. While the approach may be limited in some respects, as we have discussed, virtue ethics provides substantial and extensive support for such strong efforts.

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