

The birth of a Denkstil: Transformations of Swedish music teachers' conceptions of quality when assessing students' compositions against new grading criteria

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate and describe how a new music curriculum with defined content and assessment criteria can influence music specialist teachers' style of thinking and conceptions of musical quality regarding lower secondary students' creative music making.

The research questions are:

- *How is composition defined in the teachers' dialogues?*
- *What conceptions of quality are expressed in the teachers' evaluations of the compositions?*
- *To what extent do the teachers' knowledge requirement-based assessments differ from their first, spontaneous appreciation of the pupils' creative music making?*

The findings indicate that creative music making is a poorly delimited concept that can be used both for a musical idea and for a whole performance. In the teachers' initial assessments of the students' compositions, they revealed a common style of thinking based on an artistic insider-understanding of musical qualities. However, when they started discussing the compositions from the standpoint of the new curriculum and its knowledge requirements, this style of thinking was largely abolished. It was replaced by a new style of thinking in which evaluative judgments were carefully avoided in favour of factual descriptions. These findings suggest that explicit criteria can have a strong impact on the conceptions of quality that are developed within a school culture. In the case of music education, this could result in a style of thinking and a teaching that differs dramatically from both lay and professional conceptions of musical quality.

Keywords: assessment criteria, composing, upper secondary school, music education, Denkstil.

Background and aim

Management by objectives and results was introduced in the Swedish national curricula in 1994. The curriculum for compulsory school provided both “goals to strive towards” and “goals to be attained” (Skolverket 1994: 8). The minimum level for a pass in music was for school year nine defined through four sentences, one of which was to participate actively in singing, playing, dance and movement (Regeringen, 1994). No criteria were ever provided for this lowest acceptable level but some years later, criteria were issued for both passed with distinction and passed with great distinction (Skolverket 2000). These criteria stated *what* to do, for example to play and develop musical ideas, but they lacked adverbs denoting *how* to perform these actions. The choice of teaching content was largely left to the teachers to decide together with their students, and the teachers were expected to clarify the national curriculum in local syllabi. Thus, the 1994 curricula left much room for the teachers’ professional judgment regarding both content and grading.

When Sweden’s ranking in international comparisons such as PISA was falling, it became politically important to address the alleged decline of the school system. Given the established belief in the benefits of management by goals and objectives, a government report titled *Clear goals and knowledge requirements* (Regeringen, 2007) proposed more well defined goals as a means to improve the quality of education, promote more just grading and provide a better ground for evaluations and accountability. Thus, in August 2011, a new Swedish national curriculum for the compulsory school was launched: “Lgr11” (Skolverket, 2011a&b). While having largely the same overarching goals as its predecessor, it differed substantially from it in three respects. 1) The number of pass-grades was raised from three to five (E, D, C, B and A) and grading was introduced from year six as compared to year eight. 2) The content to be taught and the criteria for different grades were defined in much more detail than before. 3) Each and every aspect detailed in the *knowledge requirements*, that is the criteria for the grades E, C, and A, had to be reached in order to acquire that grade, giving less room for teachers’ holistic judgement in the grading process. For school years six and nine, these requirements defined a number of aspects through a standardised vocabulary, which was common for all syllabi. As an example, a composition’s form should be assessed based on whether it “has a basically functional form” (E), “after further work has a functioning form”, (C) or “has a functional form” (A) (Skolverket, 2011a: 103).

While professing the centrality of subject specific knowledge and skills, this curriculum restricted the scope of teachers’ judgement. From the perspective of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), this might be a problematic combination, since they regard the

professional judgement as a *sine qua non* for good teaching and learning. Judgments are based on more or less reflected conceptions of quality, and this study focuses on to what extent lower secondary music specialist teachers modify their conceptions of musical quality when using these new knowledge requirements to assess students' compositions. The music syllabus uses the words composition (*komposition*) and creative music making (*musikskapande*) as synonyms, but suggests a distinction between creative music making and playing and singing (*musicerande*) by putting an 'and' between these terms in one heading. In Swedish, as in English, the term 'composition' can be used both for the compositional process and for the ensuing product. Hence, a study of conceptions of quality regarding composing and compositions should include an inquiry into how the concepts creative music making and composition are understood and delineated by the informants.

The aim of this study is to investigate and describe how a new music curriculum with defined content and assessment criteria can influence music specialist teachers' style of thinking and conceptions of musical quality regarding lower secondary students' creative music making.

The research questions are:

- How is composition defined in the teachers' dialogues?
- What conceptions of quality are expressed in the teachers' evaluations of the compositions?
- To what extent do the teachers' knowledge requirement-based assessments differ from their first, spontaneous appreciation of the pupils' creative music making?

Key concept and theoretical perspective

One key concept in this study is *conceptions of quality* (Zandén, 2010: 197). The term *quality* can be used normatively, as in 'his last composition is of a much higher quality than his earlier work' and non-normatively as in 'the sound of a trumpet and of a violin are qualitatively different'. A non-normative use of the concept often seems relatively context independent and thus 'objective' (wood and iron *are* different qualities). The normative use can involve evaluations about *to what extent* context-dependent goals or norms are fulfilled or *how* something is performed. In my dissertation I made a tentative definition of *conceptions of quality* as "regulative expressions for a person's, group's or culture's conceptions of what is good, beautiful, true or necessary within a certain context" (Zandén, 2010: 27, my translation). While lived, enacted conceptions

of quality are expressed through a myriad of more or less deliberate choices, these may or may not be in accord with a person's espoused conceptions of quality. Seen from a dialogical perspective, musical conceptions of quality are constituted and reconstituted when people interact through playing, listening, and talking within situations and traditions. Conceptions of quality are personally held and enacted but to a large extent culturally, that is, inter-subjectively, negotiated, developed, and transmitted through actions and communicative projects. (The term communicative project is coined by Per Linell (1998) and denotes a purposeful situated interaction.)

The design of this study as well as the analysis is inspired by Ludwik Fleck's sociology of science, a theory about the development of research disciplines and scientific knowledge. The difference between objective scientific facts and subjective phenomena is challenged by Fleck in his magnum opus from 1935 *Die Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* (Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact) (Fleck, 1980). Here he concludes that science does not 'dis-cover' hidden objective truths, but constructs facts within thinking collectives. He extends this idea of *Denkkollektiv* to all communicative encounters. Mutual sense making hinges on a common way of thinking and associating, on mutual experiences, and at least partially shared values, that is, on a common style of thinking, a *Denkstil*. According to Fleck, a *Denkstil* is characterised by a certain mood and a "readiness for directed attention" (Fleck, 1980: 188; my translation). This readiness for attention both delimits and facilitates perception, thinking, and action. We partake in a number of thinking collectives, for example a family, a work group, a musical genre that we love, or an instrumental tradition. In each context some things are taken as relevant and others are not, some are desirable and some are not. The *Denkstil* guides our attention and our feel for the important and appropriate. If we are well established within the *Denkkollektiv* this happens pre-reflectively and we *live* the culture rather than obey its rules.

For those who are deeply involved in the same style of thinking, communication is easy and misunderstandings are rare. Fleck uses the term *esoteric* to denote this insider position in contrast to the *exoteric* position of those who only partially or not at all share the *Denkstil*. I have elsewhere (Zandén, 2010, 2014) suggested that Fleck's distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric can be used as analytical tool for differentiating between professional and lay understanding within a subject or a profession. However, an esoteric position can also be an impediment to learning, since esoteric participants tend to regard their understanding as objectively true. A style of thinking directs attention and consequently it also creates blind spots. Fleck uses the term *harmony of illusions* for thinking collectives' tendency to disregard that, which can challenge their style of thinking.

Earlier research

Of relevance to this study is research on music teachers' professional language, on assessment of composing and composition in a school context, and on music teachers' conceptions of quality. There are a few Nordic studies on music teachers' professional language. In a study of eleven instrumental lessons, Tore West and Anna-Lena Rostvall (2003) identified over 7,000 utterances none of which had an expressive function. They characterised the teachers' verbal instructions as "fragmentary and incoherent" (ibid.: 23). Olle Zandén (2010) analysed four groups of upper secondary music specialist teachers' dialogues on pupils' ensemble playing and concluded that the sounding music hardly ever became the topic of dialogue during nearly six hours of collegiate discussions. Zandén suggests that "the scarcity of music-related contextual criteria" (ibid.: 218) may be indicative of a lack of professional cooperation both between music teachers and between teachers and researchers. In a study of 29 upper secondary students' conceptualisation of musical learning and musical knowledge none of them reported having had a dialogue on musical knowledge with their teachers (Nyberg, 2011: 114). From a Norwegian perspective, John Vinge (2014) reports that lower secondary music teachers have found it very difficult to assess, comment on, and describe qualities in their pupils' compositions. Altogether, these studies suggest a lack of a professional *Denkstil* when it comes to talking about musical matters in a school context.

Swedish children's and students' creative music making and composing has been studied in Kindergarten (Sundin, 1963), primary school (Nilsson, 2002; Lagergren, 2012), lower secondary school (Folkestad, 1996; Strandberg, 2007; Falthin, 2011a), and upper secondary school (Falthin, 2011b). Among these, only Tommy Strandberg addresses music teachers' conceptions of quality regarding students' compositions. The *teachers* in Strandberg's (2007) study give a wide definition of creative music making, from appropriating an already existing composition in an expressive performance through rearranging music to making an original composition. Key aspects in assessing both the extent and quality of composing are the degree of independence and freedom, personal expressivity, instrumental proficiency, and to what extent the students' musical expressions are deliberated. The *students*, however, consider creative music making as primarily the composing of own songs, and point out ambition, instrument skills, industry, engagement, and the sounding results on concerts as decisive for their grades.

As part of a British study of school years five to eight students' appraisal of their musical compositions, Liz Mellor (2000) had two groups of music teacher students assess pupils' compositions. Only one of the groups used the curriculum as guide for

their assessment, and it showed that this group “seemed to ‘close their ears’ to the music and used the levels as labels” (ibid.: 262) while the other group displayed fuller descriptions and a richer understanding of the music. Professional music teachers’ assessment of secondary students’ compositions has been studied by John Savage and Martin Fautley (2011) in a combined survey and interview design. They conclude that most of the teachers in the study were using the English GCSE examination board’s criteria and found these both appropriate and relatively easy to apply. However, the study showed discrepancy between the grades that were given by sticking to the criteria and the grades that the teachers considered fair for a composition as a whole. Furthermore, there was evidence of ‘teaching for the test’, as teachers described how they compelled students who had made very imaginative compositions to alter them in order to comply with the GCSE criteria and acquire higher points. While in these two studies, the criteria are set on a national level, in Strandberg’s (2007) Swedish study, the curriculum allowed the teachers to create their own criteria: even if these criteria addressed artistic musical expression, inventiveness and instrumental proficiency when playing the compositions, the teachers never the less considered grading as counterproductive to creative music making.

Pauline Beston (2004) concludes from a review of empirical studies about assessment criteria for compositions, that there seems to be little consensus both on how to define aspects of composing such as style and originality and on the choice of assessment criteria. Her statement that “each composition generates specific groups of criteria” (ibid.: 37) is in line with D. Royce Sadler’s (1989) idea of connoisseurship being the ability to choose contextually relevant criteria from a pool of ‘latent criteria’. Such abilities were evidenced in a study of 154 upper primary and lower secondary students’ appraisals of their own and their classmates’ compositions (Mellor, 2000). The rationales for their assessments showed a more fine-grained and differentiated understanding of the music than could be expected from reading the curriculum. This suggests that these young students were able to verbalise musical conceptions of quality grounded in an advanced musical understanding. Brazilian upper middle-class 11–13-year-old students’ musical understanding has been studied by Keith Swanwick and Cecilia Cavalieri Franca (1999). The students showed higher levels of musical understanding in their compositions than when performing rehearsed piano repertoire. Composing opened up wider spaces for musical decision-making than did performance and audience listening. Given these findings, Swedish teachers’ emphasis on performance in assessing creative music making (Strandberg, 2007) can be problematic. On the other hand, Andrew Fowler (2014:16) concludes from a quantitative study of English lower secondary students’ assessments of their peer’s compositions, that composing and performing are so strongly correlated that they

“may be related aspects of the same musical trait”. This echoes Strandberg’s (2007) findings that there is a ‘symbiotic’ relation between composition and performance.

Method

The data for this study was created as part of a project commissioned by the Swedish National Agency of Education in which an assessment support material on composition and ensemble playing was produced. A total of 22 lower secondary music specialist teachers were contacted and formed four reference groups. The groups were selected for geographical and professional diversity; the participants were experienced music teachers who worked in four cities in the north, west, east, and south of Sweden. They were educated in four different universities so as to accommodate possible differences in style of thinking between the groups. The teachers in each group came from the same town and knew each other at least by name, but they had never before cooperated in mutual assessment of pupils’ work. All of them were experienced in teaching and grading according to a curriculum that acknowledged the right and duty of teachers to use their professional judgment when choosing lesson content, interpreting national criteria and formulating own criteria for grading. However, half a year earlier, the school minister had repeatedly described the upcoming curriculum, and especially its knowledge requirements, as unambiguous and clear. This ‘clarity dogma’ (Zandén, 2014) was primarily motivated with arguments about fair and equal grading, and it is quite probable that this political marketing of the new curriculum influenced the teachers’ approach to the new knowledge requirements.

Each group met during three two hour-long sessions. On the first session they received a thorough introduction to the new curriculum, including the applicable parts of the knowledge requirements. The teachers were informed that the government’s purpose with producing an assessment support material was to further equal and just grading. They were also given a short lecture on some communicative pitfalls. One of the most emphasised points was that misunderstandings are more common than perfect mutual understanding and that it takes more dialogical work than one normally expects to assure a shared understanding. They also made some ‘études’ in which they took verbal judgements of pupils’ music making as starting points for dialogical explorations of the judgments’ evidence base and of their underlying conceptions of quality.

In the two ensuing meetings, the teachers listened to and discussed video-recordings of classroom ensembles and audio-recorded excerpts from students’

compositional processes. The present study focuses only on the latter. The teachers were not given any background information about these young composers except that they did not come from schools with an extended music curriculum, that is, they could be taken as 'normal' students. In order not to make any of the compositions an arbiter for the others, they were presented to the four groups in different order. Each teacher group was moderated by a research assistant who was also a music teacher, and these assistants were instructed to support dialogue within the group by urging the participants to probe into each other's descriptions and judgements. The teachers were first asked to comment quite freely on the compositions and then they started assessing them according to the national knowledge requirements. In order to simplify the task, the teachers were only presented with those aspects from the knowledge requirements that seemed to be most relevant to pupils' performed compositions, namely to what extent

- the pupils use own musical ideas,
- can create music by trying out and re-testing (*pröva och ompröva*) different combinations of musical building blocks, such as rhythm, harmony, timbre, pitch, tempo, periods, meters, verse, and chorus,
- the composition has a functioning form,
- the composition has a characteristic style,
- the composition has a personal musical expression,
- the music interplays with other forms of expression (*uttrycksformer*), such as lyrics.

To facilitate the assessment process, each participating teacher had a printed copy with the above aspects and some excerpts from the music curriculum's aims, for example that the students shall develop their ability to 'create music and communicate own musical thoughts and ideas'.

The discussions were recorded on audio and the teachers all agreed that the recordings could be used as research data given that their identities should not be revealed. Thus, six hours of recorded dialogues on pupils' compositions constitute the data for the present study.

The focus material

All compositions are available at the Swedish National Agency of Education's website (Skolverket, 2016). The compositions were made by students in school year eight and nine, and these had also given informed consent that their compositions be used in this research. Two of the compositions were the result of pupils' joint efforts. The

Grubbs consist of two girls and a boy who sing and accompany themselves on piano and acoustical guitar. Their text is about happy, lazy summer holidays but the melody is sung in a low register that gives the performance a somewhat gloomy atmosphere. Three Krills are three boys who use voice, guitar, and bass guitar. Their text is asking for forgiveness, displaying a boy overwhelmed by despair: "The shades and figures are attacking me". The melody is very monotonous: a low-pitched three-note motive repeated eight times. These repetitions are contrasted in the chorus where the melody onomatopoeically rises an octave on the word "shouting."

The other two compositions have single composers. Soad's composition is a love song begging the lover not to leave her, and the highest note of the melody is on the word *please* in "please don't leave me now." In addition to a version for voice and guitar, she has made a GarageBand version in which she uses electric guitar and adds strings, bass guitar, and percussion. Khaled has made a remix of the music to the Tetris-game. His compositional process is essentially one of timing, choosing, and cut and paste after having imported the Tetris melody and synched GarageBand's tempo settings to the imported music.

All composing processes lasted between three and four weeks, and the focus material consisted of three or four audio takes from consecutive stages of each compositional process. At least one of the takes displayed the whole composition. Thus, the material was well suited to assess the compositions as *products* while the possibilities to assess the *process* were restricted to identifying changes and progress between these snapshots.

Analysis

The teachers' dialogues were recorded on audio and analysed for focus, that is, aspects attended to, and judgments. The analytical process was aided by the software *Transana*, in which the recorded discussions were linked to transcriptions through 'clips' that were categorised in collections and assigned key words. Since the software allows sorting and playback according to both collections and keywords, it is possible to work analytically with the original recorded data rather than with the transcripts.

First, all descriptive and evaluative utterances were tagged with teacher group and composition and coded according to content. Then the discussions were scanned for communicative projects in which participants collaborated in describing or evaluating a specific aspect of the creative music making. This was in line with Fleck's hypothesis that a *Denkstil* is created and transformed through communicative work. These instances of mutual sense making were then compared to other communicative projects and single utterances that addressed the same or similar musical qualities.

In this process, a difference between assessments based on interpretations of the knowledge requirements and assessments based on general musical conceptions of quality emerged, which incited a categorisation of the material in two groups—evaluations with or without the knowledge requirements in focus.

What is creative music making?

Since three of the four compositions in the focus material were performed by their composers, the question was often raised, to what extent the quality of the performance should be included in the assessment of the creative music making. Here teachers held different positions. Soad's second version, in which she used the software GarageBand, was by one of the teacher groups characterised as 'an other song' as compared to the first version, which suggests a blurred line between composition and arrangement. In the following excerpt from group 2, a composition is in effect reduced to an idea. We enter the dialogue when the teachers compare two compositions that, according to the teachers' initial assessments, differ greatly in musical quality. In both compositions, an instrument is added in the bridge:¹

Y5: but then if we consider creating and that they have actually had the
same ideas
then they
I suppose they have reached the same quality

X4: to give something a lift

Y5: yes in that respect they have performed at the same level
in that very respect

Y3: so then we agree that
creative music making is
the intellectual ability to perform something independent of the
ability to do it with the body or

1 In the transcripts, a new line signifies a brief pause, whilst an extra indented new line signifies continuous talk. All transcripts are translated from Swedish. M stands for moderator, Y stands for male, and X for female teacher.

Y5: yes I feel that that is one part of creating
it is
step one

Earlier in the discussions, Y5 has suggested that the performance at least to some extent should be included in the composition, but here he maintains the supremacy of the musical idea. However, Y3 is not wholly convinced, and later, when he comments on the melodic lines in Soad's composition, he seems to treat her "playing with accents" as part of the melody. In fact, he implicitly includes several aspects of a performance in the concept 'song':

Y3: the relations between rhythm, timbre, dynamics, pitch, tempo, periods
and everything

In the following excerpt, X3 first includes choice of key in the composition, then excludes it and finally includes instrumentation:

X3: then the question is
their limitations if somebody else had sung it whose
voice wasn't breaking
and in a higher key
then I think it could have been a much better song
I mean would be considered a better song
although it was the same song

Y4: yes I agree

X3: the performance limits the composition
if there had been a pumping bass instead of an un-tuned guitar in the
verse

This conundrum is not solved in the group, but Y4 suggests that, at least when working with conventional forms, it might be necessary to include the performance as part of the composition. In group 1 the timing between Soad's guitar playing and her singing is appreciated, as is her way to "sneak in on certain tones." That particular line of thought is concluded by the utterance "a really fine song", suggesting that at that moment, the concept *song* denoted the totality of melody, lyrics, chords and performance.

Y1 emphasises that a danger with digital tools such as GarageBand is that the software takes initiatives and gives suggestions while composition is about having own ideas and making own choices. This aspect is also touched upon when Y10 compares Khaled's remix with his own experiences of letting students work with sound module-based software. Some of these students "load in things and there is no structure in how they are doing it" while others use their musical judgment and "get some kind of intro, verse and chorus and a feeling of this is a song." In this kind of composing, a recognisable form is obviously an important feature, and when M1 (the moderator in group 1) uses the expression "from a purely compositional perspective", the ensuing discussion is limited to issues of musical form. However, in both groups 1 and 3, adding sound to a film or a data game is also said to be creative music making.

The first research question is about how composition is defined *in the dialogues*. The teachers were not asked to define the concept. Instead, its meaning was expected to be revealed by its use and through the explicit focus on creative music making. In summary, creative music making seems to be poorly delimited. The extremes are composition as idea versus as performance of own material, but on various occasions creative music making is also defined as structured form, as melody and text, as melody and chord, and as a whole instrumentation.

Conceptions of quality in the teachers' initial assessments of the compositions

In this section, the teachers' more or less spontaneous comments on the compositions will be presented. The conceptions of quality can be deduced both from what the teachers praise and from their criticism. To begin with their positively voiced critique, the composition that is most lauded in all the four teacher groups is Soad's singer-songwriter performance. It is characterised as a "fantastic song" and "so personal." The teachers are "touched" and Soad is said to be "a musical individual." In group 4, one of the teachers characterises Soad's song as "first rate" and the moderator asks:

M4: first rate in what respect?

Y9: the song forms a whole
the text was well timed with the melody

M4: you mean the content and the character of the song are corresponding?

Y10: melody and chord correspond excellently
nothing jars

Y9: and there were some nice leaps in the melody as well

M4: she had an incredibly fine expression
I was touched

X7: she has that little extra

M4: and what is that

X7: I think it's her voice
the way she masters it
no problems with pitching and has her own style her own expression

Y7: personal

X7: yes personal and it doesn't feel strained

Y8: she feels at ease

Following the first holistic "first rate", this communicative project displays five music teachers engaged in collaborative cognition, the purpose of which is to pinpoint 'first class' qualities. The first thing to be commented on is the musical form, followed by correspondences between text, melody, chords, content, and character. The teachers also appreciate Soad's technical mastery that results in an effortless performance. Soad's performance seems to harmonise with the teachers' shared personal musical conceptions of quality, that is, with their musical *Denkstil*.

Group 1 is also enthusiastic and starts, like group 4, with a holistic judgment:

X1: marvellous song
and I think it became a first-rate genre as well

M1: yeah heck

Y2: she has that which can't be put in words

Y1: ingredient X

Y2: yes

in her performance

the personal

the expressivity

and I cant' say whether it is

the husky voice or the timing and all

Y1: a qualified guess is that she believes in what she is doing

you can tell that

that it

that she has an authentic feeling

M1: it is genuine

Here again, composition, musical style, and performance seem to merge when genre, timing, vocal timbre, expressivity, truthfulness, and authenticity are brought to the fore. In group 3, the performance is characterised as “world class”, and group 2 states that the chorus was a good variation of the verse, that is, “it wasn't totally predictable.” This suggests that the quality they appreciate is to do with a balance between predictability and surprise, between unity and tension. The composer's cognitive control seems to be highly valued:

Y4: she is aware of the rhythms in her song

in relation to her accompaniment

she knows exactly what she is doing

X4: and very personal

X3: very personal expression in her voice

/.../

M2: personal in what respect?

X3: that she dares to stretch the melody and
phrasing and
emphasising as you said before

Y3: yes

The way the melodic line is constructed, articulated and phrased is focused. The wording “she dares” might suggest that the appreciated qualities are connected to breaking rules or conventions.

Group 2 appreciates that the musical form creates an emotional climax and presumes that this is the students’ intention:

X3: they think of it as a progression and try to make it more and more
exciting
some kind of climax

X4: so they have found a good form

When group 3 comments on Soad’s GarageBand version they also appreciate the climax that is created by adding drums, bass guitar and strings, and X5 contrasts this to the “monotony” in the singer songwriter version. The artistic expression in the latter is however lost:

Y7: she was very advanced rhythmically in the singing
but now she suffered from the restrained rhythms in GarageBand

X6: yes the drums somehow
took the sting out of it

Y6: but that doesn’t matter because it’s the composition that is most
important

Here both a dynamic and varied musical form and an expressive performance are highlighted. The critical comment that the drums “took the sting out of it” corresponds to a comment from X2 who was “panicking on the bass” in Soad’s second version since it allegedly destroyed a quality she appreciated in the singer songwriter version. X2

claims that the music becomes more rigid with the pumping bass and agrees with Y1 who suggests that the GarageBand version “hauled her into its form” and distances the listeners from “the performing human being.” Y1 also appreciates Soad’s way of accompanying herself on the guitar with a “nice flow” that “hasn’t got that straight dance-band timing” and X4 talks about Soad not being “fettered to the quavers” in her first version. Taken together, these quotes suggest a shared style of thinking that values balance between motoric precision and rhythmic freedom, between predictability and surprise.

Soad’s *GarageBand* version is considered more “mainstream” and therefore less authentic than her acoustical version. This leads us to the negative definitions of musical quality that appear in the dialogues. The lack of tension between chord progression and melody in Three Krills’ composition is deplored. Teacher X8 says that, instead of “harrowing in the notes of the chords, they should create melodies that are more rhythmically and melodically independent.” In the following excerpt, Group 1 is trying to come to terms with a different problem in the boys’ performance:

X1: he sang very
all the time very
plain

Y2: plain?

M1: was the melody

X1: yes level
very level

Y2: you mean monotonous

X1: I didn’t find any expression in the singing

Here a field of tension between monotonous and expressive is created through dialogical work. Later on, Y1 is describing balance between recognition (convention) and surprise as an important musical quality. Balance is also connected to simplicity and coherence: “To take two different things, combine them and then to repeat it, that’s what it’s all about” (Y3).

After having critiqued the lack of formal coherence in a composition, Y1 responds to himself:

Y1: why should I tell her to follow that form (X1: m)
it has no value in it self

He then argues for the composer's right to choose form, which the group agrees on in principle, but continues to discuss ways the composers could have varied the form, thus implicitly stating the importance of variation within a formal framework.

Instrument skills are mostly mentioned as restraints but are not explicitly described as decisive for creative music making. However, when X4 comments on *Khaled's* computer made composition, she starts from the standpoint that the student doesn't show any instrument skills:

X4: at first I don't appreciate it because he doesn't play anything himself

Y5: I think he plays a lot

X4: well yes one has to consider that he uses his gadgets in the right way

Y5: yes
that's what I feel too

In this short communicative project X4 and Y5 seem to agree on seeing the music software as an instrument, and later in the dialogue a well timed cut and paste is taken as proof of great musicality:

X4: it is so incredibly musical to be able to

X3: yes he is creating and

X4: put it in the right place

It might be that these words of praise are in some way connected to the teachers' feeling at a loss when facing a new genre and new technology, but the teachers also voice some severe criticism as to the composition's form and the rationale behind the student's musical choices:

Y4: if he adds a funny sound only because it is striking and because he can
do it
/.../

if he 'I add a funny sound and then it starts'
then it has no value

Y5: no

X3: then it is not deliberated

Given that Khaled's remix is made in a dance genre, the tempo is said to be too high and the odd musical periods are expected to interfere negatively with prospective dancers. Most of the teachers claim that they know very little about the technique and the genre in which Khaled is working, and they initially have very little to say about the musical qualities in his remix.

Summary of the music teachers' composition-related conceptions of quality

In the referred dialogues, the teachers are discussing musical qualities from normative standpoints, and they usually reach consensus, which indicates a common, esoteric artistic *Denkstil* with inter-subjectively shared musical conceptions of quality. These can be summarised in four words: form, expression, awareness, and balance. An overarching conception of quality is that a composition must have a perceivable musical form. Secondly, creative music making should engage emotionally, as evidenced from the often very emotional and nearly unanimously positive reception of Soad's song. M1 contrasts "musical joinery" with "to touch" and identifies this emotional aspect as "the musical dimension." Awareness is about reflection, intent and deliberated choices. Soad is said to "know exactly what she is doing" when her singing moves freely above the steady rhythm of her guitar, Khaled is described as having a "total musical awareness" when it comes to his genre, a musical form that has been assembled by chance has little value and a change in Three Krill's instrumentation is dismissed since the teachers agree that it is not deliberated. Thus, awareness can be seen as an overarching quality, as can the ideal of balance within a field of tension, which is mentioned both within aspects such as musical form, melodies, harmonisation and rhythms, and between these aspects. One obvious example of the latter is the teachers' appreciation of how Soad handles the tension between her steady guitar accompaniment and her rhythmically free singing. The teachers mention balance between recognition vs. surprise, unambiguousness vs. ambiguousness and adherence to rules vs. the breaking of rules.

Conceptions of quality expressed when the knowledge requirements are in focus

The knowledge requirements for year nine specify a score of aspects that shall be assessed in three different qualitative levels. When the teachers start relating the pupils' compositions to these written criteria, their assessments often change radically and compositions that earlier have been described as base are now sometimes judged as exceptionally good. One example is the reassessment of The Grubbs' bridge from "monotonous" to "genial", the genial quality being that it differs from the preceding part – not *how* it differs, but *that*. Y5 suggests that they should avoid evaluations, define what constitutes a composition and then simply check whether the students have done the job, "because otherwise we risk getting caught in whether I like the genre or not." In all groups, the reading of the knowledge requirements result in a shift from making holistic normative judgments to enumerating particulars:

M3: about the building blocks rhythm timbre and dynamics
they have got them all
the meter they have the periods
dynamics

X5: I think they had a slight crescendo at the end of the bridge
so they have made an attempt
/.../ and this little
little ritardando that one could say they are using

X6: that's really good and very thought out

Only the last three words remind of the artistic *Denkstil*. In the rest of the quotation, the teachers' attention is directed towards identifying expected constituents. In group 2, the general expectations on students regarding creative music making are low:

Y5: what is quality in compulsory school composition?
I think we agree that as long as they have produced a song
that is a quality (X: m)
as you've said (X: m)
many and most (Y: m) don't even get that far
so that is certainly a quality

The phrase “that is a quality” suggests a classifying, non-normative use of the term; the class of compositions is distinct from, for example, the class of string instruments, and a composition is a composition whatever its musical and artistic assets. Y5 has created a scenario in which most pupils are unable to accomplish what is expected of them. He then emphasises that teachers must not assess according to their musical preferences:

Y5: we can't assess according to genre because then it depends on which teacher you meet
I mean I prefer certain genres
I rather fancy the genre in the second composition so if I assess according to genre the first song is lousy
but
nevertheless they have achieved qualities and it is those qualities that we shall assess in my opinion

What could have been taken as a professional judgment based on conceptions of quality is here reduced to a matter of personal taste, and the term *qualities* seems again to be used in a descriptive, classificatory rather than in an evaluative sense.

After having read the six knowledge requirements, group 1 discuss what qualitative level shall be expected from the students, and the moderator asks to what extent the “musical dimension” should be assessed. The ensuing dialogue shows a radical change as compared to the esoteric artistic *Denkstil*:

Y2: if it is about grading
then you can't expect something that you yourself hardly can explain what it is (Y: no)
like having 'it' (y: no, no)

X1: something you don't have yourself

Y1: no, and that is impossible to acquire

Y2: so it will rather be like you have good timing check

X1: absolutely

Y2: and one has to take the checklist and go through what you expect
from them
if the pupil has 'it' or if he bellows and never the less creates
something

In this excerpt the three teachers seem to create a romantic abyss between artistic genius and the common person's potential. They profess neither to possess nor to be able to describe esoteric artistic musical capacities. By agreeing on leaving musical expressivity and music as art outside the grading, they renounce their right and competence to use their musical judgment as a basis for teaching and grading. Thus, they seem to expel their esoteric artistic style of thinking from use in the school context. They continue the dialogue by describing Three Krills' composition as a spot on example of criteria fulfilment, since the boys use building blocks such as rhythm, timbre and pitch, which are aspects mentioned in the curriculum. Interestingly, when the teachers heard Three Krills for the first time, the students' music making was mocked as being so bad that it was good. The teachers deplored the lack of coherence between verse and chorus, the lack of character in the melody, and lacking correspondence between text and melody. But now, when the assessments are related to grading according to the new national criteria, the composition is reassessed, and one teacher claims that in comparison with students that cannot identify a note in a chord "I would nevertheless feel that they have done a good job in putting it together." What was earlier criticized as a very weak melody is now lauded as proof of musical thinking:

X7: but on the other hand
I think it is musical
thinking that they hear a note and they can catch that note with their
voice
and that shows that they can find a melody to the chords

The focus is no longer on *how* the students use these parameters, but *if* they do it, and hence no or very little professional judgment is needed to assess the composition. A similar rapid change in *Denkstil* through transformation from normative *how* to non-normative *if* is illustrated when Y5 first claims that Three Krills did not have one single musical idea of their own and then immediately continues:

Y5: but heck only the fact that they combine must mean
that someone had an idea of his own

and
then that is a quality

Again, “quality” is used descriptively rather than normatively, and it is no longer a drawback if things have been combined by chance rather than through deliberate choices. The tendency to debase the expectations in face of the knowledge requirements is very strong. In a comment on Soad’s Garageband version, which earlier in the discussions had elicited several normatively based analytical assessments, Y4 states that “it is fantastic that she feels ‘now I will add strings and now the drum machine.’” In other words: the noteworthy thing is *that* she gets an impulse, not *what* impulse she gets or *how* she uses it.

Khaled’s house remix of the music from the Tetris game is unique in that only one or two of the teachers are familiar with the genre: One of the initiated teachers gives the composer credit

Y5: he has an excellent awareness of the genre
he use all the tricks he knows from the dance genre

The use of “excellent” is clearly normative while using “all the tricks” is more a quantitative matter of what than a qualitative matter of how. Ironically, Y5 then continues to give a precise normative description of how Khaled *fails* to use these tricks according to the genre. At the end of his utterance, however, he turns back to the initial judgment about awareness, and finishes with “so I think that is first rate.” Here something odd is happening. When the teachers were assessing the compositions without focus on the knowledge requirements, Soad was lauded for using the tricks of her trade in the right way, but now Khaled gets credit for using them whatever the musical result. Again: *if* or *that* before *how*.

In the material there are ample evidence of a tendency to find the lowest common denominator when it comes to interpretations of the knowledge requirements. It is stipulated that the pupils shall “try out and reconsider” (*pröva och ompröva*) how combinations of “musical building blocks” can create compositions with functioning form. In the following passage, Y5 reduces his musical judgment to “a matter of taste” and takes “change” as “the right thing” to do in order to fulfil the criteria:

Y5: in the third version she did some
she made some strange things in the bass which
which actually is a quality even if I don’t think it sounded good but
still it is a quality since she challenges

she
she changes it
then it is a matter of taste but
she changes it
she does
the right thing so to speak

Again, the musical effect of the changes is considered a subjective matter and thus irrelevant from the perspective of grading, perhaps also from the perspective of teaching. Even the earlier expressed demand for deliberative choices is now taken less seriously when X6 concludes that

X6: regardless if she has adapted to the computer or made decisions beforehand it is clear that she has tried out and reconsidered her idea

The Grubbs say that they wanted to compose something summer-like and happy, and when the teachers first hear the sombre and slightly depressing performance, it causes some humorous comments about the relation between content and form. When hearing Three Krills for the first time, there are also some initial ironical comments like “they are so bad that it becomes good.” However, when the teachers start assessing the compositions from this new standpoint, their conceptions of quality are quickly transformed: “It has verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, and that is a quality” (Y5).

According to the knowledge requirements, the teachers shall also assess to what extent the students can combine music with other modes of expression. In the teachers’ first comments, there are some cursory reflections on how the expressive meaning of lyrics and music correlate. When the criteria are in focus, the perspective narrows. One teacher mentions that there is an equal number of syllables and notes so that the text fits the melody, and in group 1 it is all about form and nothing about content, meaning or expression:

Y1: they actually managed to make a song,
the text works, it has its’ rhymes just as expected
a school task
check (Y2: yes)
quite OK work nothing to complain about really
except for

as you were mentioning
a bit uninspired

It should be evident from this analysis, that the differences between the teachers' initial assessments and their curriculum-related assessments can be compared to a landslide, from esoteric musical highlands to base counting and box-ticking. While their holistic assessments were based on artistic musical norms that to a large extent were shared within their thinking collective, they have now started to build a *Denkstil* in which an overarching conception of quality seems to be that assessments must be based on non-normative criteria, preferably objective facts that can be identified without need for any professional judgment. Only at one instance in the group discussions did one participant take a critical stance towards this emerging proclivity for 'objectivity'. At the end of the session Y10 reasoned about what would happen if the students were to take the knowledge requirements *ad notam*:

Y10: but if we only pay attention to that which is written in the knowledge requirements it is clear that
if they have seen that it is about working from own ideas
then the more ideas they have the better the goal fulfilment /.../
and it is written to what extent they try and retry combinations of
musical building blocks
then of course they think it is better to use more and retry more /.../
so the way these knowledge requirements are written
in a way forces
if they are reading this
it enforces a way of working that in effect won't end up in a good
composition

Unfortunately, the group neither developed this idea nor used it to reflect on their own process.

If the esoteric, artistic *Denkstil* is taken as a thesis and the myopic descriptive interpretation of the knowledge requirements is an antithesis, it is possible that group 2, in their final comments on Three Krills, created the germ to a synthesis:

X3: they perform it fully aware that it is quite clumsy
this charm
the personal expression

eeh and communication
compared to just a surface

M2: this feels genuine

X4: like they have struggled

Y5: this might be sore good but then I don't know
then we are back to subjective opinions and fancies
and you have to leave that behind when assessing

M2: three boys making music with much heart

In this communicative project the teachers restore the qualities *expression* and *awareness* from the artistic *Denkstil* and sever them from traditional musical aspects. This is one of the very few instances when the process is getting more attention and credit than the product, and the process is seen from within the students. The performance is genuine and charming because the boys recognize their own incompetence, because they have struggled and because they do it with much heart. The subjectivity that the teachers have avoided in their own assessments has here become the quality that they assess in the Krill's performance.

Final discussion

Contrary to West & Rostvall's (2003) and Zandén's (2010) findings, these music teachers' initial dialogues reveal strong and articulated conceptions of musical quality, indicative of a common artistic *Denkstil*. Strandberg's (2007) findings about valuable qualities in composition are corroborated, with the exception that instrumental skills seem to have been more important for his respondents than for the four groups in the present study. Mellor (2000) and Savage and Fautley (2011) could detect a tendency that externally given criteria didn't fully comply with teachers' holistic assessments of the composition's quality. In the present study, the budding criteria driven *Denkstil* differs fundamentally from the teachers' artistic style of thinking, firstly, because it tries to do away with professional judgment, and secondly, because it focuses on quantitative rather than qualitative aspects; aspects that can be measured rather

than assessed. The government bill from 1992 that introduced the first goals and results based curriculum may unwittingly have epitomized the underlying problem:

In a school governed by goals and results, the precision in the knowledge goals to be reached by the pupils is crucial. There shall be no doubt what is meant. It shall not be possible to make different interpretations of the knowledge goals. (Regeringen, 1993, my translation)

Since it is probably impossible to construct non-trivial learning goals that are unequivocal, this statement can be taken as a strong case *against* goal-based education.

The 2011 curriculum was presented as clear and unambiguous by the government, so when the teachers were asked to assess according to the knowledge requirements, they might have expected this to be a simple and objective task. When this was not the case, they found themselves on virgin soil and had to elaborate and negotiate a new *Denkstil*, a new 'mood' from which to separate relevant from irrelevant, desirable from undesirable. In this process, some conceptions of musical quality had to be abandoned and some had to be created. The findings in this study suggest that these new styles of thinking, in their nascent stadium, had a strong tendency to relegate musical, artistic aspects to the blind spots and to focus on descriptive, 'objective' aspects that can be identified and documented without resorting to an allegedly subjective musical judgment. Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012) claim, however, that professional judgment is a key ingredient in professional knowledge. I have warned that explicit standards and criteria can trivialize music education and suggested that music teachers must develop a professional collegiate discourse in which musical matters can be addressed in a musically meaningful way (Zandén, 2010). The findings in the present study suggest that detailed national criteria in combination with a focus on just and equal grading might impede such a development.

According to the pioneers in goal setting theory, Edwin Locke and Gary Latham (2002), goals must be clear and unambiguous in order to motivate and enhance performance and in order to be assessable. However, in the case of artistic work, clear and unambiguous goals might be counter productive, given that unpredictability and surprise is at the heart of artistic learning (cf. Eisner 2007). Given the findings in the present study, the warnings from Ordóñez et al. (2009: 7) that goal setting has unintended side effects such as degrading performance by "narrowing focus to neglect important but nonspecific goals" seem pertinent. They claim "goals cause the most harm in complex, natural settings when outcomes are interdependent" (ibid.: 13). In creative music making there is a complex interdependence between parts and whole. In the present study, the most prominent side effect of the externally specified goals

was that the four teacher groups independently developed a verbatim, additive approach to the curriculum, in which they deliberately abstained from using their esoteric insider-position to make professional interpretations of the knowledge requirements.

At the beginning of the millennium, Andy Hargreaves claimed that "schools and teachers have been squeezed into the tunnel vision of test scores, achievement targets, and league tables of accountability" and may turn into "the drones and clones of policy makers' anæmic ambitions" (Hargreaves, 2003: xvii). This study shows that it takes surprisingly little to create a context that brings new styles of thinking and new conceptions of quality into being. The interpretation of imposed and detailed written goals and criteria seems to be a nontrivial matter, since attempts to apply such criteria objectively can have a levelling effect on grading, teaching and learning. Such criteria, in this study in the form of knowledge requirements, provide a context that allows for the creation of new styles of thinking with conceptions of quality that can differ fundamentally from established qualitative norms within a field of knowledge. Thus, the rigour provided by set criteria might result in artistic as well as academic rigor mortis; impoverished and counterintuitive assessment cultures that disregard deeper subject specific qualities and understanding. Ultimately it could transform music into an 'anaesthetic' school subject that lacks connections both to professional and lay conceptions of musical quality and musical meaningfulness.

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