

# Liberty and Creativity in Music Education Teacher's Graduation: Reality or Utopia? A Portuguese Case Study

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In Portugal, the curricular guidelines for Basic Music Education presuppose the development of pedagogical experiences that enhance the liberty and creativity of the students, who should be able to improvise and compose musical pieces through the combination of several musical elements, manipulating gradually more complex techniques and technologies (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, we believe that few Music Education teachers feel confident and capable to promote such pedagogical experiences, perhaps because they are highly challenging, since they involve student's cognitive, physical-motor, and creative abilities (Heble & Laver, 2016). This communication aims to address some issues about the meaning and importance that future Music Education teachers (finalist students of a Master's in Basic Music Education Teaching) attribute to improvisation, composition and, inherently, to liberty and creativity in musical teaching-learning processes. At the same time, we intend to find out if musical liberty and creativity in Music was present in their graduation and if they intend to work it in future Music Education contexts. Based on the intrinsic case study method (Stake, 2007), this study covers finalists of the Basic Music Education Teaching master's degree of a Portuguese Superior School of Education ( $n = 7$ ). The data collection took place through the application of an individual questionnaire and a focus group interview. The results obtained indicate that, in accordance with the established by the Ministry of Music Education (2018), the future Music Education teachers attribute high value and relevance to musical improvisation and composition and, therefore, to liberty and creativity in Music Education, denoting that these same aspects could (and should) be much more present in their graduation.

**Keywords:** liberty, creativity, pedagogical practices, music education teacher training

## Liberty and Creativity Concept in Music Education

### What Does "Liberty" in Music Education Mean?

First, we need to look through the concept of "liberty" through a philosophical prism to understand the meaning of the word, and second, it is necessary to look at the word and understand what it specifically means in and for Music Education's school context.

Philosophically, "liberty" is related to the independence of the human being, but also with is autonomy, auto determination, spontaneity, and intentionality. According with the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, the word "liberty" means the "*freedom to live as you choose without too many limits from government of authority*"; "*the state of not being a prisoner or a slave*"; "*the legal right and freedom to do something*"; or "*an act or a statement that may offend or annoy somebody, especially because it is done without permission or does not show respect*"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/liberty\\_1?q=liberty](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/liberty_1?q=liberty).

In other words, we can see that “liberty” means the freedom of choosing.

But how is liberty related to Music Education in schools and why is it so important? If we just want to keep it simple in a first step, we can assume that liberty in Music Education is, so to speak, the right for the students to choose what they want to listen, play and sing (e.g., the repertoire or musical genre), what they want to learn (e.g., theoretical or practical), and which musical instrument they want to learn to play, or even just manipulated and explore. From a practical perspective, those words mean—in some sense—the end of the teachers as someone who says and gives the instructions (e.g., what they need to learn, listening or play) to the beginning of a teacher who gives to students’ liberty enough to choose what they want to learn and how they want to perform and play their own music. About that, Jorgensen (2020, p. 9) says:

What does freedom mean for music teachers? First, a music teacher who loves liberty seeks to set her students free from the tyrannies of anti-intellectualism and authoritarianism, patriarchy and ethnocentrism, hatred and bigotry, traditionalism, and discipleship. These destroy personal agency and creativity and stultify and diminish student’s expectations of themselves and their power to enact change. Youth is a time of ideals that awaken desires to change the world.

### **What Does “Creativity” in Music Education Mean?**

Creativity is naturally related to liberty and to freedom. In his study, *“Freedom as a trigger for musical creativity”*, Nazario (2022) has found empirical evidence that shows that “freedom can enable creative development” (p. 201). Thus, we can see that with “liberty” and “freedom” children can, in a much easier way, develop their own creative sense. They can go beyond the standards established and try out new forms and new ways of expressing themselves artistically and musically. Wasn’t that way how Beethoven breaking with the norms of Classicism and rode directly into this new musical form of expressing feelings called Romanticism? Wasn’t that also how the Second Vienna school, with Schoenberg and his disciples, appears with the atonal music? Throughout history, in particularly music history, all the great composers had the needs to break with the rules established in their time and enhance for freedom to emancipate themselves and unleash all their creativity. With this attitude new musical structures were born, new musical genres and styles show up, new musical instruments began to emerge, and new sounds and soundscapes also appeared. So, we can assume that giving the students the liberty to express himself creatively is a complete benefit for their musical learning, since “practices of free improvisation embrace these conditions and allow students artistic freedom” (Nazario, 2022, p. 197).

But, if “liberty” in Music Education, in some sense, is easy to understand, “creativity” is way more complex and a way vaguer concept (Odena, 2001, p. 59). Being creative means being able to produce new ideas for the same solutions, produce new products and innovate; creativity by itself means nothing. It is easy to give liberty to students, but are they creative? Could be possible, for children, not to be creative? In his new book, called *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, the well-known American musical producer Rick Rubin seems to have the answer to that question. According to Rubin (2023, p. 1) “creativity is not a rare ability. It is not difficult to access. Creativity is a fundamental aspect of being human”. So, the most important message is that creativity has a place in everyone’s life, and everyone can make that place larger.

### **Aims of the Study**

Looking at those concepts through the musical prism, we can define liberty and creativity as improvisation and composition. In fact, without liberty or freedom of choice that can promote and develop creative musical

activities there's no improvisation nor composition. Thus, in this study, liberty and creativity was understood as the musical concept of improvisation and composition.

The Portuguese Curricular Guidelines for Music Education presuppose the development of some pedagogical experiences that enhance the liberty and creativity of the young students, who should be able to "improvise and compose musical pieces through the combination of several musical elements, manipulating gradually more complex techniques and technologies" (Ministério da Educação, 2018, p. 7). But do future Music Education teachers feel confident enough to address their student's musical liberty and creativity? Since those pedagogical practices involve student's cognitive, physical-motor, and creative abilities (Heble & Laver, 2016), and concepts as musical creativity as "usually granted after one has acquired certain musical skills and the knowledge required by academic curricula" (Nazario, 2022, p. 192), we believe, according to specific literature and our own experience perspectives, that the futures Music Education teachers (Finalist master's degree students in Music Education) don't feel confident and capable enough to promote and apply such musical experiences in a general Music Education school context.

## Methodology

For this study the methodology applied was based on the intrinsic case study method (Stake, 2007) and the data were collected from finalist students of the master's degree in music education teaching from the Higher School of Education of IPB ( $n = 7$ ). The data collection took place through two instruments: (i) the application of an individual questionnaire (used google form) and (ii) a focus group interview, using the dual moderator method (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Nyumba et al., 2018). All students answered all the questions as a debate and the focus group lasted approximately 30 min and were transcribed for analysis.

## Results

### Selected Results From the Questionnaire

**Question Number 1.** "As a future music education teacher, what is your perception about the relevance of improvisation/composition and, consequently, liberty/creativity in music education teaching/learning processes?"

I think it's very important because it's through these concepts that students most explore and appreciate music and music making. (Student 1)

I consider improvisation to be very important for the student's development so that they can bring out the full potential, creativity and inspiration of each individual, and at the same time get to know styles, other types of repertoires, etc. (Student 3)

I think this freedom is extremely important and completely indispensable. (Student 4)

Improvisation/composition as well as freedom/creativity are fundamental for cognitive development, learning in a freer and more positive way, cultivating a better taste for music. (Student 6)

As a future music teacher, I think improvisation/composition are important concepts to work on in class, especially when they allow students to explore their creativity with the freedom to do so, but I think these are activities that are little explored. (Student 7)

**Question Number 2.** "To what extent do you think that the Ministry of Education's guiding documents for Music Education (2nd Cycle of Basic Education), address issues related to improvisation/composition and, consequently, liberty/creativity in Music Education?"

I believe that Portuguese curricula devalue the importance of these concepts in Music Education, as the curriculum focuses more on students learning the content (which is important) than experiencing it. (Student 1)

The guiding documents address all these issues and want them to be put into practice in the classroom, but as it is up to the discretion of the teacher in each classroom, unfortunately this freedom/creativity doesn't always reach the students. (Student 2)

Unfortunately, there's a big deficit when it comes to improvisation and even less when it comes to freedom/creativity. The syllabus is very much based on theory and there's little room for practice, and my idea of music education is mainly to experience music from various genres and instil in children a love and pleasure for music, whereas if we base it on the syllabus, it's all based on theory and that's what makes students generally despise music. (Student 3)

As for the Ministry of Education's guiding documents, they don't give students the freedom to use their creativity. It's not an up-to-date programme because we're constantly evolving. (Student 6)

The Ministry's documents do address these terms, but I don't think they are given due importance, in other words, all the essential learning should be given the same importance, and on paper perhaps they are, but in practice the freedom to improvise and compose, and often the students' own creativity, is very much neglected. (Student 7)

**Question Number 3.** “During your studies, did you feel there was space and/or opportunities to work on and value aspects related to improvisation/composition and, therefore, liberty/creativity? When and in what circumstances?”

I feel that there are few curricular units that focus on and explore these concepts. In my academic career, the only course we could work on was during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that we had this important subject in online classes'. (Student 1)

In almost all the subjects, these questions were allowed. I think that in a higher education course in an artistic area it was the minimum requirement, to give students the freedom to bring out the best of their characteristics. I think it could still be much more developed, but each teacher has their own way of approaching the content, so I don't think there's a right way to teach. (Student 2)

Sometimes. There are subjects where we work on improvisation and creativity, for example in Ensemble Music, we create arrangements of various songs where we can have parts of improvisation and creativity. In harmonisation, too, we've had various creative phases. (Student 3)

There was no room for freedom in my academic career. At the conservatoire it was only music chosen by the teachers and in the philharmonic band it was a whole year of *solfège* to finally play for the first time on the chosen musical instrument. (Student 6)

In my experience as a student of regulatory education, I confess that there were very few times, almost none, when I had the opportunity to be creative and have the freedom to improvise or compose. In sixth grade, on two or three occasions, I was able to improvise on the xylophone. Apart from that, only at university was I able to do anything. (Student 7)

**Question Number 4.** “According to your current pedagogical reality (internship context), do you think that improvisation/composition, and therefore the students' musical liberty/creativity, is addressed/worked on?”

I think so, because as a teacher of tomorrow, I try to work on these concepts with the students, as they show interest in interactive and proactive activities, managing to keep their attention for a longer period of time. (Student 1)

I don't think this issue is addressed as much during my internship because the cooperating teachers approach the content in other ways and give guidance in a slightly different way. However, I think the teachers do an excellent job, they have a lot of experience and are very good professionals. (Student 2)

Yes, at various times during the lesson I challenge the students' creativity to create body rhythms, such as improvisation on the flute such as improvisation on the flute. (Student 3)

Yes, it is... In each song they study, they have the freedom to explore the music and come up with their own ideas. (Student 4)

In my opinion, improvisation hasn't been tackled much since I started my internship. During practical lessons, students are given songs to play on the recorder and they simply try to play what is written on it, there is no attempt to do something different, this with melodic instruments, while when we talk about rhythmic instruments it is different, there is more experimentation on the part of the students, making them improvise more and better. (Student 5)

**Question Number 5.** “In your future career, do you intend to work on improvisation/composition and consequently the musical liberty/creativity of your students? In what way and why?”

As a teacher, I think there should be room for everything, including these issues mentioned in the question. There are many musical games that can also help you understand the content and it's a question of constantly discovering new things to teach. The work of a teacher is a constant discovery, and every teacher needs to value their profession and keep themselves constantly trained. (Student 2)

Yes, definitely. In my opinion and considering the age and school year in which we will be teaching, I think it's much more important to have this creativity/freedom and exploration of it, rather than following the plan rigidly, because I think it will be uninteresting for the students. (Student 4)

In the future I hope to work more on improvisation with students, helping them to express their creativity in the best possible way. For me, there is a great tool nowadays that helps us teachers a lot and gives us a wide variety of choices to get students to express their creativity using improvisation, which is the new technology. (Student 5)

Of course, I intend to approach the work in this way, from the students choosing the repertoire to work on (freedom), to them improvising the music themselves, because it's always a plus to do what they like. (Student 6)

In the future, given the opportunity, I hope to work on these concepts in such a way as to give the students the ability to express themselves creatively, because, in my opinion, this is something that will change them favourably for the rest of their lives. (Student 7)

### **Selected Results From the Focus Group**

The results from the focus group reinforce the student's point of view concerning the importance of such musical concepts as improvisation and composition, liberty and creativity in Music Education. Through their perspectives, improvisation seems to be the most difficult aspect to address to students, because—like they said—there's no “*concrete definition about improvisation and it's not easy to explain to a child what improvisation really means*”. Indeed, as Burnard (2000) says, teachers will meet with some difficulties when they try to apply in their musical and pedagogical practices a methodology oriented through the relationship on improvisation and composition. When students reflected on what those musical concepts mean and represents to them “they will become better equipped and more likely to envisage what they could [improvisation and composition] come to mean within and beyond the classroom” (Burnard, 2000, p. 22).

In general, all the participants presented some difficulties in applying those concepts in their internship because their internship assistant teacher seem not so “*open about giving students freedom and liberty for choosing the repertoire and the musical instruments they want to play or learn*”. Otherwise, all of them also attribute great importance of giving some liberty to the students from being creative and play, through improvisation or already trying to compose some musical piece. From this perspective, everyone assumes they want to be teachers who are more open to these issues, including them in their future professional teaching life.

Finally, and very relevantly, they also indicated continuous training very important in teacher's life in order to be open and bring to class new teaching and learning processes, including the new technologies and the student's ideas, bearing in mind that the oldest teachers “*may have some difficulties in approaching new technologies in their practices who could help them in a way they give some liberty to students to be creative and make some music by themselves, with the help of smartphone applications or any device*”.

### **Conclusions**

Returning to the idea that the futures Music Education teachers (Finalist master's degree students in Music Education) don't feel confident and capable enough to promote and apply such musical experiences in a general Music Education school context, the answers from the students are quite interesting and revealing, if it allows, to

a very superficial degree, to understand their vision, beliefs and opinions about concepts like liberty and creativity in Music Education. All students consider that such musical concepts as improvisation and composition could (and should) be much more presented in their graduation and master courses. They also attribute a high value and great importance (and relevance too) to improvisation and composition in Music Education. For them, the curriculum guidelines seem not clear enough, particularly about the place and role of improvisation (liberty) and composition (creativity). Essentially about the way that teachers can promote and improve such musical concepts in their classroom's activities with children.

For Music Education teacher's educators, this kind of studies helps to identifies the difficulties and open the discussion in a way to understand how the students saw themselves as future Music Education teachers. In these, it's important try to give more attention and listening more the students, trying to understand their difficulties about working such musical concepts as improvisation and composition in a classroom context with full of different children's personalities, in a world constantly changing.

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