

## **Opting for praxis over theory in teaching music and vice-versa – what is it going to be?**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the present paper is to detect and record the opinions of music educators in relation to the use of praxial or aesthetic music pedagogy and the reasons for the one or the other approach. Additionally, it aimed to trace teachers' views on what can be done to follow the one or the other philosophy in schools. The study followed a qualitative research method and for the collection of the data, personal interviews with seven music educators and a focus group discussion with another ten music teachers were conducted. The results of the research revealed that the majority of the teachers opt for the praxial philosophy of music despite the fact that this cannot be followed for many reasons. The teachers believe that the educational authorities can contribute to the praxial approach implementation with important curricula changes and valuable funding to equip schools with musical instruments.

**Key words:** Praxial philosophy in music, aesthetic education, music pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

#### **Definitions of terms**

It could be argued that the philosophy of music but also of music pedagogy is a twofold concept: that of aesthetics and that of a practical approach. There are differences and varied aspects of opinions between them and more particularly regarding the music pedagogical 'practice' that is employed or suggested to be followed in school settings music teaching processes. Starting with the approach of 'Praxial' music pedagogy, the term 'praxial' derives from the Greek word 'praxis' (action) introduced by Aristotle. The term, according to the definition provided by the Cambridge Dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/praxis>), means "the use of a theory or a thing in a practical way". On the contrary, the term aesthetic is derived from the Greek verb 'aesthanome' (feel) and refers to "something or someone beautiful" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/aesthetic>).

#### **Praxial music pedagogy vs music education as aesthetic education**

The basic theses of the Praxial philosophy of music education are that "the nature of music education depends on the nature of music" and that "the importance of music education depends on the values of music in human life" (Elliot, 2007, p. 1). According to Androutsos (2007), the Praxial philosophy of music which emerged in the 1990's, represented by Elliot (1995) and other educators such as Regelski (2005) or Alperson (2010), centralized the difference between teaching music and teaching *for* music with a main focus on 'praxis', i.e the creation of music. Thus, an important concept of Praxial music education is that music is not just about listening to certain pieces of music for example but it is the process, the performance, the act of music with important musical skills integrated such as listening, composing, improvising, arranging, conducting music (Tailor, 2021). In other words, Elliot (2007) argues that one should 'make' music, sing, play a musical instrument, create music, produce music, and not just listen to or talk about music. He also supports the idea that understanding music as an 'act' contributes to the improvement of man and the understanding of music (Elliot & Silverman, 2017).

Contrary to the theoretical view of music, that is, talking about music, such as the history of music, various events in music, or listening to music, the practical view of music emphasizes

its practical side, that is, its performance. This pragmatic view is opposed to Reimer's aesthetic music education which sees music as a 'musical piece' and emphasizes the results of the musical process, and the 'accomplished work of art' (Tailor, 2021) as opposed to the musical performance. Perakaki (2009, p. 84-85) argues that, in his book "A Philosophy of Music Education", Reimer talks about the goal of music education as the individual's ability to enjoy music and as an inner force that provokes emotional reactions. Perakaki mentions that this ability is inherent in everyone and for this reason music should not be the privilege of the few. She explains that the main tool for developing the aesthetics of music is simply listening to or enjoying music. However, as she argues, due to the focus of music aesthetics teaching on mere listening, the concept of the philosophy of music education as an aesthetic education began to be questioned. This was because elements such as composition, performance and improvisation, for instance, were neglected. Thus, according to Perakaki, the emergence of David Elliot and his Praxial philosophy, discussed in his book 'Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education', introduced music as an act, as praxis, and as musical performance, elements which are much more important than just the joy of feeling or listening to music, in other words the aesthetics of music.

Elliot calls his work 'Musical matters' a 'practical (praxial) philosophy' because he believes that understanding the nature and significance of music is not a simple process of understanding some work of music or some other, but it is a procedure that includes actions and results and everything involved in them within a social context (Silverman et al., 2014). In addition, Elliot emphasizes the fact that music should be understood in relation to the concepts and values that emerge from the production of music in specific cultural environments. All of the above, concerning the practical philosophy of music education, have brought significant changes in the evolution of music pedagogical perception, during the last decades, in relation to music education as an aesthetic education (MEAE). What Elliot had in mind and proposed was, in a way, to empower music educators to act according to the educational situation, each time they needed to do so. He talked about the four basic aspects of education "in music, about music, for music and through music that require balance in used educational practices centered on human beings" (Hatzilamprou, 2016, p. 33). According to him, music displays many and important values, including the one that concerns the need for balance between the musical skills of students and the musical performances they are called to implement, but also the skills mentioned above (listening, composition, improvisation, adaptation, direction of music) (Elliot, 2007).

This balance will motivate students to play music, which is a key goal of the practical perspective of music, and will consequently lead to their smooth and gradual understanding of music. This, after all, should be the main purpose of students' music education at school and not simply their education and/or training in order to follow a music profession, for example. In other words, students should be encouraged to be creative and should be given the opportunity to express themselves musically. Elliot also exploited Csikszentmihalyi's theses in his pragmatic view of music education and positions for the 'life experience' (Raptis, 2021), a fact that emphasizes the social dimension of the musical act. Based on this, it is suggested that, during their music education studies, students engage themselves in similar musical experiences as they make music and that this engagement is a basic part of their lessons, thus being offered the opportunity to be creative and cultivate their musical skills (Elliot, & Silverman, 2015).

### **The use of praxial music pedagogy**

The importance of the Praxial philosophy of music is discussed by Daoutidou (2020), who argues that it should be integrated in the music lesson with the teachers focusing on its experiential aspects, thus, allowing students to expand their creative and expressive capabilities. Kteniadaki (2008) however reports that the syllabus of the Music lesson in Secondary Education in Greece, for instance, focuses more on the aesthetic aspect of music and less on its practical use. According to the author the content of the music course syllabus mainly emphasizes the understanding of basic concepts of music and its socio-cultural and historic origins rather than the musical performance. Perakaki (2014) discusses the absence of the praxial philosophy of education or its minimum reference and the lack of authorities' interest to integrate it in the teaching practices of music education in many countries across the globe. What is more, this happens regardless of the benefits the praxial philosophy displays for students and their musical knowledge and musical improvement (Perakaki, 2009).

On the contrary, and according to Westerlund & Vakeva (2007), the praxial philosophy of music is introduced as part of the change of the National Curriculum in Finland and in general, it is a process which matches very well with the ideas and multicultural perspectives of the Finnish music educators. Therefore, it is accepted and practiced as an approach that has inspired the community of music educators of the country and is capable of enhancing students' musical performance and interest in music. A similar interest in the Praxial philosophy of music is placed by Chinese educators who seem to find connections of this with their ancient Confucius values and music history and theories (Jiaxing, 2007). Finally, the same philosophy is also followed by schools in Bavaria, Germany, with students being able to practice music based on the praxial approach in order to enhance their musical skills (Tzouna, 2020).

### **Rationale for the present study**

Today, music education forms part of the majority of curricula programs content in many parts of the world. This is so because music is considered important for many reasons. For instance, a simple exposure to musical elements helps to stimulate the areas of the brain that are responsible for memory function, the processing of auditory information, reading and attention control. Research points out that music makes it possible for students to practice and enhance fine motor skills, linguistic and mathematical accuracy, as well as combinatorial thinking. What is more, through music in education, students and people in general are facilitated to express their inner thoughts and feelings. Teachers and parents have the opportunity to understand young people's problems and help them overcome them. Music helps to create bonds through sound, song, movement and dance. Music can be both recreational, it can contribute substantially to the spiritual development of children, act as a means of emotional expression and interpersonal communication and provides social skills, necessary for their lives as adults.

In an effort to modernize the education of music, Greece began designing and implementing a new music curriculum. An attempt was made to adapt this new curriculum to a more synchronous methodological approach. This is because students of today encounter music in so many areas around them and are involved with it in a variety of ways. Students listen to music, create music, attend private music conservatories, form their own bands, attend music concerts, sing, write songs or music themselves. It is a rather challenging era for music educators and the musical practices they need to convey in the classroom to meet the needs and interests of their students. The question is, to which extent do these practices tend to employ the Praxial philosophy in teaching or the aesthetic perspective of music pedagogy which is based mainly on theoretical knowledge and a general aesthetic appreciation of music? Based on the aforementioned points, we decided to conduct a study in order to investigate the philosophy of music adopted by music educators in public secondary education schools of Greece today, and the reasons that affect their decision for one or the other

practice (praxial or aesthetic philosophy of music pedagogy). What is more we wanted to investigate teachers' opinion on what can be done in order to be able and use either the praxial or the aesthetic philosophy of music in their music teaching processes.

### **Methodological procedure**

#### **Purpose of the study and research questions**

The study aims to investigate which philosophy of music is followed by music educators in Greece today, the reasons behind the choice and teachers' ideas for the implementation of the philosophy of music they prefer, in their music teaching in schools. Therefore, the research questions are as follows: 1. Which philosophy of music (praxial or aesthetic) do music educators employ in public secondary music education in Greece today and why? 2. What suggestions do teachers have to enable them to employ their preferred philosophy of music (praxial or aesthetic) in the school musical practices?

#### **Research method and research tools**

The qualitative methodology was followed for the implementation of the present research. This method was chosen because we were interested in penetrating into the depth of the research issues and investigate them in more detail. The choice of the method was decided as well because qualitative research seeks to discover the meaning research participants give to the issues under research through their behavior, the interpretation they give to the objects of the research and their inner views about the specific issues (Roussos & Tsaousis, 2011). Additionally, the choice of this method was considered more appropriate in order to draw more profound answers, find possible reasons behind the participants' decisions and choices and ultimately have a better understanding and explanation of the issues under investigation (Mason, 2003).

For the purposes of the research, personal semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven music teachers. Furthermore, and for triangulation reasons a focus group with ten teachers was also employed (Cohen & Manion, 2000) in order to collect further and more analytical data as well as for reliability and validity purposes. For the analysis of the data the interviews and focus group discussion were recorded so that all the information we would receive could be utilized later for a profound analysis but also for valuable material not to be forgotten or lost for some reason. Thus, the recording of the conversations enabled, on the one hand, the interviewers to immediately gather all the necessary information for processing, analyzing and evaluating the data, and on the other, to focus on important points which during the conversation might not have been perceived as significant for the study (Diamantakou et al., 2001).

#### **Research sample**

The population we aimed was music educators of public secondary education schools. Our sample was seven music educators (four male and three female) with whom we conducted personal interviews and ten teachers (six male and four female) for the focus group discussion. They all came from public secondary education schools of Thessaloniki in Greece and taught the course of music in Junior High Schools. Among their musical organs expertise were the piano, the guitar, the flute, the violin and bouzouki. However, they did not formally teach any of these musical organs in their schools but used them and played them mainly out of their own will and during school events or to accompany the school choir. They had all graduated from Greek Universities except one female teacher who had attended music classes in a Russian University and had majored in piano playing. Their experience in teaching music ranged between eight to 22 years in public schools.

### **Structure of the interviews and focus group questions**

For the validity of the research tool, the interview and focus group questions were designed based on the literature for the design and stages of interviews (Cohen & Manion, 2000). They were also based on the material collected by pilot personal interviews with two different than the actual participant teachers in the study, who taught the specific subject (music) and a focus group discussion with three teachers who would not participate in the actual research. The aim of the pilot studies was to test the questions in terms of wording and accuracy to allow the researchers gather useful information, and based on the feedback received, to redesign as many items as needed, if any, for clarification purposes. However, the course of the interviews and focus group discussion in terms of content also depended on each respondent and their ability to be communicative and responsive on their part. The key questions of the interviews and focus group conversation revolved around the need for data collection so as to provide us with possible answers to the research questions and were categorized under five main areas: a) praxial philosophy of music teaching, b) aesthetic philosophy of music teaching, c) reasons for choosing praxial philosophy d) reasons for choosing the aesthetic philosophy in teaching, e) suggestions/ideas on how to employ the praxial or aesthetic approach.

### **Addressing ethical issues**

Before the implementation of the main study interviews and focus group, and in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the necessary clarifications and explanations were provided to all interviewees, so that the topics of discussion would be fully understood (Diamantakou et al, 2001). All participants were reassured that the discussions would be anonymous, and that the data would be used only for the purposes of this research. The interviewees were also explained that they could withdraw any time they felt uncomfortable or uneasy. The place and time of the interviews and focus group conversation were arranged based on the participants' decisions. All respondents gave their voluntary consent for their participation in this research. Finally, for ethical reasons, in the discussion of the results section, all participants will be referred to as P1 (participant 1), P2 (participant 2) and so on.

### **Research process**

Upon the teachers' information about the content of the study and their voluntary consent to it, a meeting was held with each participant at the time and date available for a personal interview. The duration of the interviews ranged between 39' to 52'. All personal interviews were held outside the teachers' schools so that we would not impede them from their lessons. The focus group discussion was held in a school library during a Saturday morning and after the principal of the school had given his consent to us to use the space. This was also done in order not to cause any disturbance in the teachers' schools, and given the fact that they were all adults and this was easy to accomplish. The discussion had a duration of 56'.

### **Data analysis method**

For the analysis of the data of the research tools, the basic stages and steps of content analysis were followed (Iosifides, 2003). Thus, and after the implementation of the interviews and the focus group discussion, repetitive listening, transcription and reading of their content followed in order to identify the points that displayed research interest (Iosifides, 2003). In the present research the content analysis was based on words, "which are the smallest units of the analysis. These are keys words, which convey basic concepts and messages" (Athanassiou, 2000). The keywords used in this research were 'praxial', 'philosophy', 'practice', 'teaching', 'music', 'aesthetic', 'theoretical', 'reasons', 'affect', 'influence' that existed in the respondents' answers in conjunction with the objectives of this paper (Athanassiou, 2000). Due to the large volume of the answers the data were organized into

categories on the basis of which the content analysis, under each category, was made (Iosifides, 2003).

### **Results**

The findings in this study will be discussed herein in relation to each of the two research questions.

Research question one:

*Which philosophy of music do music educators employ in public secondary music education in Greece today and why?*

Based on the findings of the personal interviews and the focus group discussion, and according to the participants' responses, it can be said that music educators usually employ the aesthetic philosophy in their music teaching, mainly following the syllabus instructions: *"I usually do what the teacher guide says ... students listen to music samples and we talk about the elements of music..."* P5, *"ever since I started working for the public sector I work with the content of the book ... the syllabus and the theory mostly"* P2, *"Me and the other teachers I think do as told.. by the school advisor... we do not deviate from the course... you know, we help students cultivate their musicality, their auditory skills and so on"* P6, *"the syllabus says we should train learners to acquire knowledge – musical I mean and develop skills of understanding different kinds of music, notation skills etc, this is what we do actually"* P7. The majority of the teachers admitted they opted for the praxial philosophy. However, it was not feasible to implement in schools: *"if you ask me, I would say I would rather have learners 'bang' their drums and pull some strings there [laughing] but we are in school and this is not allowed"* P2, *"of course I would rather employ the praxial approach you mention but this is public schools we are talking about! You know what this means, don't you?!"* T3, *"Once, I dared ask some students bring their guitars in school and the principal got upset with the fuss made, he said we caused a chaos..."* P3, *"I would like to bring my guitar to school and ask the kids to do the same but this is not very easy, I wish we were like in the music schools that have music rooms to play"* P4.

When asked why this is so (not employing the praxial approach in their music teaching) the teachers replied that it simply is not a philosophy of music teaching in the public sector and that the other teachers in a school (teaching other subjects, like math, language, science, etc) are not happy with the noise made in school during lessons: *"My lessons do not include any musical instruments because the walls are made of paper [figure of speech meaning they do not have insulation] but I always use the tape recorder in class. I am a bit concerned with that too but it's far quieter than musical organs"* P1. What is more, some teachers complained that asking some students to bring their musical instruments in school is not considered an easy practice (kids can simply not carry their instruments every day from home, because they use a bus, walk to school or cycle and this may be dangerous): *"I have sometimes suggested that a number of the students brought their musical instruments in class every time we have a lesson but then, some parents came to school and they complained and said I would rather not ask them to do this. I think they were afraid of their kids breaking them [the instruments], damaging them or perhaps falling off the bike with their guitars in their back together with the heavy school bag. I dropped the idea of course immediately"* P7. However, almost each one of the teachers agreed that the music syllabus emphasizes theory over practice – though it does recognize the benefits of the praxial approach: *"as a general principle, dealing with instruments is empirical. Students learn to hold properly and use one or more musical instruments"* (Government gazette, p. 76027). The aforementioned point to a gap between what the syllabus suggests and what is offered in schools in reality.

What is more, since teachers are forced to strictly follow the syllabus, they cannot deviate from the content and the instructions that are given in the syllabus although they try to use alternative ways in the absence of real instruments, a fact that really disturbs them: *"I find it*

*hard to apply my ideas for playing music in school with the material I have to teach. For instance, the syllabus instructs us to allow learners to listen carefully to different sounds of music, respond to them with singing or motion, recognize basic elements of music such as melody, rhythm, structure etc but there is no reference anywhere about how to do this in practice. These are important music elements and what I do is that I usually take students to the lab and we use technology to discern these elements but it's not enough. How can you learn to understand and play music if you do not actually play music?" P3. Additionally, they admitted that the praxial philosophy of music is not a practice in schools, given the fact that the students may not have musical instruments of their own and/or the schools cannot or do not provide any of them for students' practice in school and within the course. This is clearly done only in music schools. Therefore, teachers are obliged to focus on the theoretical aspects of music, in other words on the aesthetic elements of music: "Some years ago, when the school had been granted some funding from the municipality - money back from an Erasmus program actually - I sort of 'pleaded' the principal to buy a few musical instruments and it was accepted. We had then bought three guitars, a trumpet and a tambourine. It was such a joy for me and the kids and we used them in turn, in groups with a cyclic program I had prepared. But now, with the new principal... he is not too happy with using them [the instruments]. He says the kids might break them and it's ... public money... I certainly never agreed with ... [asking us not to mention the name of the principal or the school she worked for obvious reasons]. So, now we hardly ever play music but we can listen to music or study about music, watch videos, discuss about music and such things" P5.*

Some teachers also complained about the fact that when festivities or school events are about to take place, everyone in schools expects the music teachers, the student choirs and the students in general to back up the events musically. However, they hardly ever feel that this [playing music] should or could be part of a real lesson, that in order to learn to play in a festival or support a school theatrical play you can't depend on the kids that attend private conservatories. Because then, it is like the school music course has no meaning or no value and that music should be taught only out of school, in private lessons or private music schools, which of course should not be the case: "When holidays come, all teachers expect from us to do all the job, prepare the kids on how to sing, have kids play music, the principal is anxious whether the choir and the music players can synchronize, especially when the General Director attends the events, whether there is a piano background good enough to support the event emotionally and so on. But what they don't understand is that for the kids to respond positively in all these things they need practice, a lot of practice. Theory does not mean practice, kids need to exercise and the state needs to see that, to be more serious about that. We are lucky we have a few kids that attend music lessons in private and bring their instruments at school when we need them" P6.

Additionally, all teachers commented on the fact that they would prefer to use the praxial philosophy of music. In our question how they would characterize the praxial philosophy in relation to music teaching and learning they said that it is a 'natural approach to music teaching', 'an authentic way to learn music', 'the only means to music learning', 'everyone's preferred way to be involved in music', 'an easier way to approach music', 'the best way to enjoy music learning', 'a logical way to attract learners to music', 'the usual way to be introduced to music and its variations', 'a good way to understand music', 'a real way to experience music' and many more. Finally, almost all teachers argued that, as they see it, it is high unlikely that we met anyone involved in music teaching that might prefer the aesthetic aspect of music as opposed to the praxial one. As they argued "we learn through living, through experiencing, through doing, therefore, why should music teaching or learning be different?" P5, or "Though music is joy and fun, something that satisfies your emotions, it is also a skill you have to practice to learn, you have to touch to understand, you need to work on it to feel it and produce it" P1, and "if you are a musician, you know that you have to express

*your ideas and feelings playing music. If you are a music lover you want to listen to the beat of music, you want to experience the sound. Real music is just a combination of both. Only then you have an utmost fascinating experience of music” P2.*

Research question two:

*What suggestions do teachers have to make to enable them employ their preferred philosophy of music (praxial or aesthetic) in the school musical practices?*

During the conversations with the teachers a big question seemed to overwhelm their mind with more or less the same content, though differently worded: ‘*why only theory, why not practice as well?*’ As the question obviously troubled them, we tried to get deeper into this matter in the hope of having possible answers that would give us a better insight into the research question. Thus, in our question ‘*could you please explain further?*’ the teachers argued that, when it comes to music, public interventions should change dramatically. According to the participants, the government in particular, should begin to realize the importance of ‘*practice makes perfect*’ statement, realize its importance in music teaching and learning and integrate the praxial philosophy in its suggestions. As the teachers explained, it is not enough to ‘*mention change*’ but it is important ‘*not to fear to implement it*’. Some teachers argued that these educational decisions should be part of all the educational stakeholders.

In questioning them what they meant, they explained that, usually the governments do not realize how valuable knowledge and information they could receive from their cooperation with music educators, school teachers of music, the kids themselves, even the principals. According to them, a cooperation between all parties could help syllabi and curricula designers to understand the real needs in schools, where music teaching and learning are concerned, as these [schools] have a clearer view of what works and what does not work well in educational methods and ideas. They also explained that if schools wish to be considered ‘*modern*’ and ‘*up to date*’ they should give opportunities for innovation, interaction and link to real life needs. In relation to music learning ‘*real life needs*’ applies to the fact that, absence or practice (praxis in music) could mean lack of appreciation for music, lack of understanding of music and its social implications, lack of significant messages music brings along to the people across the globe, like, how easy it can help people bond, appreciate other cultures, accept differentiation, and many more such issues. As they argue all these can be perceived easier through ‘*musical praxis*’ as ‘*the feelings of playing music are stronger than words*’.

Furthermore, teachers explained that, besides the educational policy, school principals have their share in educational decisions. As they complained, a considerable number of principals are not very cooperative, they do not facilitate teachers’ work, they even are quite negative in changes and innovation. According to the teachers, when it comes to music teaching, music educators are not allowed to take initiatives that they would like, as this would also mean expenses on behalf of the school and this is not something that pleases school directors. The participants in the study believe that the government should urge principals to be ‘*active listeners*’ when it comes to the school personnel and place their needs above ‘*managerial issues*’. The teachers suggest that, when it comes to schools’ financial difficulties, the municipality could contribute with some funding in order to equip schools with musical instruments for ‘*music practice*’ to take place. Finally, the majority of the teachers also suggested that schools should provide, if possible, a special classroom, for music practice, a classroom that will be used only for music and will be equipped with musical instruments, ICT applications and whatever could improve and enhance music learning.

### **Conclusion**

The present study investigated which philosophy (praxial or aesthetic) of music, educators of music employ in public secondary music education schools in Greece today and the reasons they do so. The study also made an effort to trace teachers’ opinions regarding ways they



suggest that would help them implement their preferred philosophy of music in their school musical practices. The study followed a qualitative approach using interviews and conducting a focus group discussion as the research tools for data collection.

Based on the aims of the research and the research questions of the study, it appears that the majority of the teachers opt for the praxial philosophy of music which they think is important in music teaching, learning and making. These results agree with what Elliot (2007) and Elliot & Silverman (2017) have argued about the importance of the praxial philosophy in music. According to the teachers, despite some of the suggestions included in the music secondary education curriculum about music practice, practicing music in the classroom is not feasible for a number of reasons. Some of them, reported by the teachers, are lack of instruments in schools, lack or principals' consent to the teachers' ideas implementation, lack of understanding on behalf of colleagues, lack of funding and more. They also explain that the importance of music practice is not appreciated by colleagues and principals as it should, although the demands of the school staff from them, as music educators, and their contribution to school events is taken for granted.

The results of this research do not agree with what the literature discusses about the use of the praxial philosophy in music in the schools of many countries across the globe (Westerlund & Vakeva, 2007, Jiaying, 2007, Tzouna, 2020) and agrees with what Kteniadaki (2008) or Perakaki (2014) argue about the absence of the praxial philosophy of music in Greek schools. The teachers believe that the government should learn to appreciate the need of 'praxis' in music and introduce or establish necessary changes that will allow the use of music practice in public schools. What is more, the teachers suggest that municipalities could greatly contribute financially to allow the equipping of music classrooms in public schools for the 'praxis' of music to take place.

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