Students’ perspectives in a collaborative composition project at a Spanish secondary school

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Although music was established as a compulsory subject in Spain by the 1990 constructivist reform, the 2002 counter-reform restricted it to lists of concepts, in a renewed encyclopaedist model for secondary schools that ignored authentic musical procedures, such as performing or composing. Contemporary adolescents, accustomed to the transmission of information through multimedia technologies, rejected this model, as well as common teaching strategies based on memorising verbal data about music and on guided listening. Since adolescents’ refusal to learn, as in other subjects, might end in school dropout, this study sought to understand the significance a group of students attributed to learning when they were challenged with an aesthetic problem whose open solutions they had to find collaboratively, and to understand the characteristics of the collaboration.

Music in Spanish secondary schools

In 1970, music education was included in the Spanish National Curriculum, but only as a course on music history for secondary schools. Though the situation changed with the 1990 constructivist reform, when music started to be compulsory in primary (years 1–6) and in secondary (years 7–9), with Orff-instruments provided by the Ministry of Education for the newly designated music classrooms in all schools, most secondary music teachers continued to be reluctant to include active engagement in music as a central part of their teaching strategies.

The 2002 curriculum reform, which mentioned neither composition nor creativity, went back to emphasising only the acquisition of declarative knowledge, and left the decision of making music in the classroom to the teacher (in Spain there are no music inspectors). Within this context of a non-supportive curriculum, a teacher-centred pedagogical tradition, and schools faced with the postmodern challenges of multiculturalism as well as adolescents’ learning disaffection, there is an urgent need to investigate to what extent collaborative learning procedures might improve education. Provided that it is the pupils themselves who make the effort required to learn, we ought to hear their voices to know whether the teachers’ efforts for improvement...
are successful or not. This study attempts to hear the pupils’ voices in order to understand the significance they attributed to learning when working collaboratively within a composition project, and to understand the characteristics of the collaboration.

The participating students were dealing for the first time with composition tasks. Unlike the music education tradition in the UK, composing was not even mentioned in the Spanish curriculum in 2002. It had been included as a learning procedure in 1990, probably due to the influence of the translation of Murray Schafer’s ideas into Spanish (Schafer, 1965), rather than the influence of the creative movement that started in the 1960s (Cox, 2004), with proposals such as Paynter and Aston (1970), and which resulted in its full incorporation into the National Curriculum in England. Although included in Spain, it does not seem to have been used in school music education (at least, it has not been documented), and it was finally omitted in the 2002 reform.

Contrary to the increasing interest in school composition worldwide, evidenced by publications in English such as research reports (Burnard, 2000), proceedings from thematic seminars (Sundin et al., 1998), books for teacher training (Wiggins, 2001), or reviews of creativity research in music (Hickey, 2002), to name a few, there is almost no study published in Spanish (for a review, see Rusinek, 2007). My previous investigations focused on the intuitive knowledge, demonstrated when composing, by a group of 13–14-year-old students, as a way of arguing against the ignorance generally attributed to adolescents in Spanish secondary schools (Rusinek, 2004a); and to present an intersubjective analysis of the creative processes of secondary students composing collaboratively (Rusinek, 2004b).

A composition project

For the study, I chose a teacher-researcher strategy of inquiry (Stenhouse, 1985; Roberts, 1994), using a qualitative methodology in a real educational setting, in order to ensure that the implications for practise derived from its findings could be relevant for other teachers and transferable to their particular contexts. The methods used to collect the data were: participant observation of the classes, non-participant observation of the groups’ rehearsals and of the groups’ activities in other subjects, non-structured interviews with 30 students, sound recordings of the pieces, video recordings of rehearsals and concerts, and analysis of the students’ informal preliminary and final scores. The data were transcribed, coded and triangulated through the use of multiple methods (e.g., non-participant observation and video recording of a particular event, with specific interview questions afterwards also transcribed and returned to the interviewed student for review). Permission to video-record and interview students was obtained from the school council (where parents, teachers, students and local authorities are represented), students were informed about the research project and the restricted use of the data, and anonymity was preserved.
A total of 100 students, between 14 and 16 years old, participated in the project, which took place in 2002. The students were in their third year of a public secondary school near Madrid where I was working as a music teacher. As is common in Spanish public schools, more than half of these students had learning difficulties: 26 were staying down (among these, only 10 within a special program), 12 had passed in spite of having failed between three and ten subjects out of ten (because national regulations do not allow them to stay down twice in the same school year), one had special educational needs, and 14 were immigrants (Moroccans and Bulgarians with very limited Spanish language competence, and South Americans).

Each class was divided into three groups of eight that worked for two weekly sessions of 50 minutes over a six-week period. They worked autonomously in different rooms: the music room and, when available, other classrooms, the library, the computer room or even corridors. Although the principal did not like the idea of the students being without a teacher’s supervision part of the time (Spanish education is strongly teacher-centred and a few students in the school were fond of sabotage activities, such as burning toilets when not supervised), in the end she accepted the idea, and eventually admitted that there were benefits to the project in promoting learning autonomy and self-control.

The task consisted of composing a piece of music of at least two minutes’ duration to be played in a local auditorium, using the available instruments: xylophones, metallophones, glockenspiels, small percussion instruments, recorders, and guitars or piano in certain groups. The imposed duration obliged the students to apply all their procedural knowledge in order to develop their ideas into a coherent musical structure. The students’ experience with creative tasks was limited, but during the previous month they had improvised with different scales (pentatonic, diatonic, chromatic), and modes (Major, Dorian, Phrygian, Mixolydian), and even composed individually short melodies to be performed with their recorders.

As a researcher, I tried not to intervene in the groups’ social and creative dynamics; as a teacher, I intervened slightly if they got stuck because of a lack of musical skills (such as writing rhythms). Besides being graded in the same way as any other learning activity, the piece had to be presented in a local theatre for an internal competition, with a professional composer, a music teacher and an older student on the assessment panel. Five of the 12 groups were to be awarded with an exchange trip (thanks to a grant for 40 students from the Ministry of Education) with a secondary school in Valencia (400 kilometres away), where they would play their compositions again in a joint concert (Martı́nez & Rusinek, 2003).

I will analyse the types of collaboration observed in the study according to the different levels of academic achievement.

Disaffected learners and learning boycott

Among the students with low academic achievement, some could fulfil the task and some could not, and, among the latter, sometimes the failure was caused by a boycott
of the activities by school objectors. This was the case in Estefanía’s group, where she was the only one among her companions to assume responsibility for the task. The following vignette is the transcription of part of a videotaped session:

**Vignette 1**

“Come on!” says Estefanía, trying to organise the rehearsal. Aleksandar, a Bulgarian immigrant, improvises a tune on a glockenspiel, singing the tones he plays. “Beautiful!” he congratulates himself, and then starts playing “Happy Birthday.”

Osama, a Moroccan immigrant, hits a drum until he remembers that the camcorder is there on a tripod:

“Is this recording? What is this doing here? It is recording!”

“Press ‘play’” somebody suggests while he tries unsuccessfully to find the right button to stop it.

“Damn it! Now we’ve done it!” he reflects, while the others start to rehearse. Instead of joining, he starts making noise with everything he finds: a bass drum, a hi-hat, a hand drum...

“Shut up, Osama!” Estefanía shouts. But he keeps playing, and then turns to the piano. Carla, another student, approaches him and asks him to leave it. He seems to see sense, but the only thing he does is return to the drum.

“Could you play softer? Pick up a smaller drum...” Estefanía tries to negotiate, and as the negotiation works she suggests a rhythm to him.

Meanwhile, Yahid is playing a pattern in compound metre although the melody is in simple metre. After a short impasse they start to play again, and they stop when they notice the mistake. Zaid, another Moroccan immigrant, and Aleksandar, instead of stopping, go on playing louder and quicker.

“Stop it!” Estefanía shouts, very annoyed, but she only gets Aleksandar to leave the drum and continue beating the piano until the bell rings.

Estefanía’s situation is not unusual in Spanish secondary schools. Many students with learning difficulties, who are obliged by law to attend school against their will until they are 16 years old, decide not to pay attention to the teachers’ instructions. They display a passive objection (just not bringing even a pencil or a notebook and not doing anything the whole school day) or an active objection (interfering with the teaching and learning through disruptive behaviour in order to become negative leaders, and sometimes bullying). But despite the boycott of some companions and the carelessness of others, Estefanía continued working until the day of the concert, when her group played as uncoordinatedly as they had rehearsed. That day I could see her crying with rage, but fortunately some of the ‘winners’ in the competition did not want to travel, so in the end there was a place for her in the exchange trip. She could bypass the boycott, but not all the adolescents in her situation seem to be able to do it, and other groups with similar profiles did not even present a final piece in the concert.
Vignette 2

Almudena, one of the ten students in the special program for students with learning difficulties, tells me how the situation in her group is: “We have problems. Some have neither worked nor come to rehearse”.

Elisa, a very insecure member of her group, tells me the day before the concert: “I will not go!”

Although they watch the concert, they do not go up to the stage to play. In the following music lesson they are accused by the rest of the class of having fled.

“It is not that we have fled” answers Almudena “but that people said ‘what should we participate for if we don’t know anything?’ For my part I would have participated, but the others didn’t know their parts and stood aside”.

Disaffected learners and extrinsic motivation

The results were different in another group whose seven members, also disaffected learners, somehow managed to fulfil the task. The extrinsic motivation in this group was evident from the beginning when they called themselves ‘Go to Manises’ (the city where they wanted to go with the exchange trip) in English, not due to fluency in this language but because of their techno subculture. Their case is interesting because of the great number of obstacles they had to overcome before solving the cognitive challenge that composing in a group implies, related to their lack of learning autonomy, their self-esteem problems (‘we are the worst’), and an insufficient development of their rhythmic skills. Six of the seven members were in a special program for older students with severe learning difficulties (they were still in third year of secondary being 16 years old), and one stayed down at the end of that year for failing eight out of ten subjects.

They worked with enthusiasm for the duration of the project, including many breaks, moved mostly by extrinsic motivation. No one had done the individual composition tasks during the previous month, so it was harder for them to get organised. The following vignette is taken from my observations:

Vignette 3

In the first sessions they choose non-tuned percussion instruments and play them very loud, probably trying to imitate the techno aesthetics they are used to. But they do it without coordination, and when someone tries another type of creative exploration he is immediately censored by his companions:

“That song is shit!” Mariano says about a melody Jose is trying to improvise on his recorder. But Mariano, who in the first sessions created an interesting ostinato, also censors himself and although there are many ideas they do not seem able to organize them, register them and agree on a definite product.

“We are not getting shit! We have nothing!” Mariano bursts after three weeks, with his characteristic vocabulary, also typical among his peers.

“Because we do nothing but argue!” Jose shouts.

“What ideas do we have? Mohamed’s drum, your xylophone and mine” Mariano synthesizes, using the names of the instruments to name the musical ideas.
“This is my song” Ernesto suggests, out of context, and starts playing his melody although nobody pays attention to him.

At a certain point of the project they realize that their musical problems are similar to their group problems: they usually talk at the same time without hearing themselves, and they usually play at the same time their improvisations without taking turns to be heard. So they decide to take turns in a rondo form, with Mariano’s ostinato as chorus and a rhythm Mohamed plays on the bongos as accompaniment for the whole piece. This last idea turned out to be a problem because most of them were not able to coordinate a steady pulse with others, but at least they had a shared structure, so they tried hard during the following sessions.

“You have to study the tones, brother!” Mohamed scolds David when he starts kidding. They work more seriously, and they pass from optimism to pessimism and from pessimism to optimism:

“We are not going to win …” Oscar says a week before the competition.

“But we will try!” Mohamed encourages him.

Seriousness is kept even when Mariano, who has become the composition leader, is absent. In those days he starts to stay away systematically.

“If Mariano is not here this doesn’t advance. Everybody plays a different thing” Oscar tells me. But Jose takes charge of the coordination and starts to conduct the rehearsal:

“Let’s see, Roberto: start playing!”

I go out to observe the other two groups and when I come back despondency has spread. They are all angry: “Stop playing the fool! What we have to do is well done” Jose shouts.

“What happens is that we will not be able to coordinate what we are playing with the end” Pedro tries to explain. “Let’s suppress the end, and that’s it” Ernesto suggests, but as usual nobody pays attention to him. They go on arguing and shouting loudly. They are all very angry.

“What we cannot do is to start kidding when there is a week left. What we cannot do is to do the fool” Jose repeats as corollary of that session.

Pessimism increases in the last days because Mariano culminates his self-censorship announcing that he will not participate in the concert (a month later he will drop out definitely) and because they realize that their rhythmic problems makes it difficult to play together. Oscar tells me, after hearing another group play their piece in the last rehearsal previous to the concert: “How about withdrawing?”

But they decide to participate, anyway, because they have convinced Mariano to come to school to help them, and because suddenly they have found a solution for their lack of rhythmic coordination. Mohamed does not play in the episodes, but starts the choruses, fading in his pattern from a pianissimo to which Mariano adds his ostinato on the bass xylophone. Everything is prepared so everybody can do alone his rhythmic irregularities in an ABACADACA rondo structure. They have also agreed to do an accelerando in the final chorus, above whose three last sounds the other members of the group clap. Although they do not manage to coordinate the claps, it is perhaps this effect plus cheering up the audience (that responds clapping with them) that convinces the panel (of which I am not a member) to classify “Go to Manises” among the five winners.

Any social situation allows multiple readings, and this group’s needs one more. Perhaps because of his adolescent need to identify with an external model in order to attract attention, Jose had, since the previous year, started to boast of fascist ideas and had ended up quarrelling daily with other students and fighting violently with one of them. Some months before the composition project, he had been warned because of his discipline problems, and had been sent out repeatedly.
Vignette 4

As he starts to harass immigrant students within his class I ask Mohamed how he is dealing with the problem.

“Well, I ignore him . . . when I am in a good mood. When I am in a bad mood . . . But as he is the only one in the class, you don’t feel so bad”.

The day before the concert, Pedro comes to see me, very worried:

“We have a serious problem: Jose has been sent off”.

I am told that he has hit a 12-year-old Arab student, Mohamed, and that disciplinary proceedings have started to expel him from the school. Mohamed is a quiet student, but he does not always keep his quietness and at the beginning of the school year he had already fought with Jose to protect younger Arab students that were being bullied. Nevertheless, in the end the principal accepts my request that Jose should participate in the concert despite having been sent off, because the composition project is an activity within the subject planning. But as his group is unexpectedly amongst the winners a new problem arises, and, I have to have another meeting with the principal and other teachers to evaluate if he might be allowed to participate in the exchange trip. The school rules do not allow a student who has been warned or sent off to participate in special activities, but his teachers and I want to give him another opportunity because we have seen him work together with Mohamed and we believe his ideas and behaviour might change after this experience. In an interview, I ask him about how they managed to collaborate:

“If we have to work together in a team we need to get on well. And if it is an activity that is going to be graded . . .” Jose explains.

“And that is above . . .?” I ask him.

“Yes, above my way of thinking”.

“Your way of thinking?” I insist.

“It’s that I really don’t like to be . . . with that people . . . but I tried to do it in case we go on well . . .”

The principal authorizes his participation in the trip, although not all the teachers feel it is a right decision because although the opportunity is given to the student his family blames the school for “not treating him well”. Finally, Jose travels to Valencia but Mohamed does not. Apparently, he knew since the beginning of the project that he would not: “It is because of the food, because I don’t eat the meat usually eaten in Spain. My father doesn’t want it”.

I offer him to arrange a special diet, but he does not agree.

Jose, despite our efforts, becomes each time more violent. When he receives another sending off note his companions see him kicking the corridor walls. He finds it difficult to control his impulsiveness and he ends up hitting even his closest friends, as he does with Oscar upon returning to the school after a fourth sending off: he hits him and pushes him down the stairs. His spiral of violence increases, and I hear of new quarrels during the town’s festival, in May, when classes stop, many people get drunk and a bullfight square is placed a hundred metres from the school. One day, at the end of the school year, I find him sitting on the floor, in a corridor. His teacher was transmitting him a complaint he had received, and he asked permission to go out of the classroom to control his fury.

“I’m fed up” he tells me.

“Of what?” I ask him.

“Of everything. They’re always sending me off, and blaming me for everything”.
Could we be optimistic about the power of education, and specifically about the power of collaborative procedures to facilitate thinking and behaviour changes in our students in the long term? Although this particular student finally dropped out and we cannot anticipate if those changes will take place, we need to persevere with the inquiry. Mohamed, on the other hand, is fully integrated and will probably be the first in his family to study at university.

**Authenticity of the musical situation**

In any case, in order to improve learning we need to deepen our understanding of the meanings attributed to the learning procedures by the learners themselves: ‘Some people say we have copied our composition from Mago de Oz’, Valentín, whose group has been classified, tells me after the concert. Mago de Oz is a Spanish rock band. ‘We are told that when we walk in the corridors!’ says Sara, very sad.

I knew that was not true because I had witnessed their creative process from the beginning. The accusation was probably due to a similarity of their Dorian melody in 3/4 metre with some of the modal songs of that pop band, often inspired by Celtic music. But the generalised discussions about a possible plagiarism during the weeks after the concert confirm something else: the musical situations the students experienced were authentic, in the sense given by Brown et al. (1989) when they propose a cognitive apprenticeship more similar to the learning within the crafts than to the out of context traditional school learning. These discussions indicate that the students’ cognition was fully situated not only as composers and performers, but also as critics in a way no verbal explanations (such as the concepts listed in the official curriculum) could replace.

**Evaluation of collaborative learning**

The students preferred collaborative learning, and compared it with the ordinary individual learning, based on teacher-centred lessons:

Because you are with your friends and you do the melody you want. You do it yourself. And it is your melody. Then, it’s much better. I don’t know... I like it more. You are there in the classroom without a teacher, and you do the things you want.

Nuria was interested in the possibility of adapting the learning pace to individual needs:

Well, I didn’t see it very different to how we do it with you. But perhaps among us, if we couldn’t do one thing we tried more to get it. But here, as we are all together, you can’t be worried about a thing that doesn’t work. There, we tried once and again. As there are so many people here, you don’t notice that a specific person can’t do it.

Nerea pointed an advantage for individual responsibility, and for better learning:
“More calm”.
“What do you mean by ‘more calm’”? I ask.
“Because often when there are a lot of people they start to talk. You have to ask them to shut up and you waste a lot of time. It’s better this way: each one studies his part and then we are all together”.

Clara was conscious of the cognitive effort required by the composition task:

“This way we develop more, I think”.
“What?” I ask her.
“The music, the concept about music. If you give us the songs already done it’s easier. This way we had to think more, see how it sounded, how it fitted with the guitar . . . It was a good idea”.

Although used to always being directed in the resolution of problems, some finally assume autonomous learning:

“Very good, but a bit messier”.
“Why?” I ask.
“Because as it was the students that did it, we didn’t know. And we got all mixed up. But in the end, I think it worked out well”.

It is interesting that the pupils themselves become conscious of the limit between their actual and their proximal development zones (Vygotski, 1979), and of the need of a mediator to advance in the latter:

Well, it’s all right, but sometimes you think “if the teacher were here, he could give us a helping hand in this”. For example, to perform my melody, which I couldn’t, you had to help me.

A student that had difficulties in solving certain rhythmic and synchronization problems within his group’s piece, thought in a similar way:

“Better with teacher”.
“Why?” I ask him.
“In other words: everybody with his idea, but with a teacher, because he controls us. There, everybody was doing what they felt like doing. With a teacher we are more controlled. You follow the ideas you have, but more controlled, I think. And with a teacher that helps us to arrange our ideas and put them together”.

Effective collaboration and intrinsic motivation

Some of the groups developed effective collaboration dynamics. This was the case with a group whose members also had high academic achievement:

“We learned a lot. We had never done something like this, of composing your song . . . with accompaniment and all”.
“Why do you say ‘we learned a lot’? What did you learn?” I ask one of them
“I don’t know, perhaps to communicate and to pose several ideas and choose one without anybody being offended”.

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This student had a precise metacognitive knowledge (Flavell, 1985) of her own learning, and an awareness of having developed a special group interaction. Another member concurred:

“It worked very well because each of us brought her idea, and we chose what we liked of each. Then we arranged them. Each of us contributed with what she wanted, and she said it.” “You know . . .” — a third student adds—“We did what we liked”.

Their group dynamics were consistent with highly intrinsic motivation.

Discussion

Contrasting types of collaboration were observed in the groups that successfully completed the task and in the groups that were unsuccessful. Among the students with low academic achievement who could not finish the composition, the video tapes document a constant boycott of the learning by some school objectors and the vain efforts of the students who wanted to fulfil the task to negotiate with this kind of active disaffected learner, and their crying in the concert indicates the great frustration they experienced, a situation which seems to be frequent nowadays within Spanish comprehensive secondary schools. In the case of students with standard academic achievement who did not fulfil the task, it was the group’s delay in getting involved (probably caused by a lack of habit in working collaboratively to deal with open end problems) that prevented its completion.

Unexpectedly, a group of students with very low academic achievement, self-esteem problems, and a lack of basic musical skills, such as being able to keep a steady pulse, convinced the competition panel to place them among the five winning groups. Although the motivation was obviously extrinsic, it generated a collaboration that would probably not have arisen otherwise. They argued and shouted during a whole month without being able to organise any musical idea, despising their suggestions and despising themselves. But eventually they managed to structure their piece as a rondo thanks to a Moroccan student who took responsibility for playing an Arab style rhythm on a drum for the chorus, fading it in and out to mask their synchronisation difficulties. Interestingly, a xenophobic and highly aggressive member of that group admitted in an interview that although he did not like his Moroccan schoolmate, in order to work together to fulfil the task, he had decided to put away his ‘way of thinking’. His ‘way’ was characterised by hating immigrants, hitting people (even close friends) and insulting teachers, but he worked well within the project. In the end, a high level of co-operation was achieved in spite of prejudices and personal enmities, and the students’ self-esteem improved considerably.

The significance attributed to the project was evident not only when the students rehearsed in the music room even during the breaks, but also when a discussion about the tunes authorship and the possibility of plagiarisms continued for months. Some preferred the project procedures to traditional classroom teaching because of a certain sensation of freedom and because of the possibility of adapting the
learning speed to each student’s needs. Others missed the teacher’s assistance, but realised that this absence had obliged them to work autonomously. One group seems to have appreciated the project because of a parallel with television models, which could be observed when they were holding hands in a circle (as watched in a Spanish version of ‘Popstars’ where young people competed to become pop singers) while waiting for the panel’s decision. Finally, those students with standard or high academic achievement who composed efficiently and performed their pieces well were, at the same time, aware of the features of their learning process: the contribution of different musical ideas by the group members, acceptance or rejection of some of those ideas without taking it as personal offence (an issue which is particularly critical in Spain, where intellectual dissensions expressed in public are often taken as personal dissensions), shared responsibility for the final product, and intrinsic motivation.

Implications for practice

Since the full incorporation of music into secondary education in Spain, the gap between the official curriculum and pupils’ real learning possibilities seems to have increased because of the renewal of an antique declarative approach that fits more with medieval scholastics than with the social problems encountered by teachers in contemporary schools. Those problems derive from the absence of certain behaviour patterns and principles traditionally transmitted by families; from the lack of interest of teacher-centred strategies for adolescents accustomed to television, computers and videogames; from the loss of the symbolic value of school in a society that stimulates quick success with minimum effort; and from a distrust in education as a means of socioeconomic improvement. Although Spanish society has changed vertiginously in the last decade, neither the official curriculum nor schools are willing to face the changes because they are anchored in a bureaucratic idea of education and in a school organisation based, as Hargreaves (1994) suggests, on nineteenth century assembly line industrial models, where teachers transmit standardised content to lots of students, grouped by fixed ages in fixed spaces and timetables, according to standardised procedures.

Most Spanish secondary teachers, on the other hand, are not used to student-centred pedagogies, and, therefore, are afraid of projects which involve giving freedom to explore without constantly controlling what students are doing. But adolescents have changed, as the society where they grow up, and many of them defy teachers and educational settings through passive school objection (refusing to participate in the learning activities) or through active school objection (interfering in the teaching or bullying). Thus, there is a need to experiment with innovative educational approaches. This study analyses the perspectives of a group of students experiencing innovative learning procedures more adapted to the challenges of postmodern society, where problems are open ended and creative collaboration is required to solve them. The study shows that composing
collaboratively is possible in a Spanish public secondary school, even when there
are not enough instruments or available spaces, and that the problems that need
special attention perhaps have to do more with the groups’ interactions than with
the levels of academic achievement or musical ability. It also shows that
adolescents appreciate procedures that fit with their socially inclined priorities,
and that a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is evident. Lastly, it
shows that a collaborative composition project might not only develop abilities and
knowledge within an authentic musical situation, but also improve the students’
self-esteem through autonomous problem-solving and provide democratic coex-
istence experiences through creative co-operation tasks.

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