Change of Perspective as a Starting Point for Social Transformation?
Relevance and Design of Music-Related Activities with Delinquent Youth

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Introduction

In order to unfold its full social-transformative potential, music education and music mediation must relate to society in all its diversity, not only to those from music-supportive backgrounds. Therefore, music educators and music mediators should strive to initiate music-related activities welcoming people with different biographical, social, and cultural backgrounds, whose paths would otherwise possibly not cross. Why is this important?

Even if music is omnipresent, and almost everyone has some kind of musical experience and the constant opportunity to consume and enjoy music (Wickel 2018, 7), the challenge of reaching all young people through the classical path of music education in schools still remains far from being solved. Thus, even though schools are considered to be the places where theoretically all children can be reached, in the subject of music this might best be achieved by qualified music teachers in most upper secondary schools [Gymnasien], although to a large extent not in all other school forms, including primary schools and especially those in rural areas. The unsolved challenge of reaching particularly socially disadvantaged young people by music education (programmes) emerges from many studies carried out in the German-speaking countries (see e.g. Burkhard et al. 2024/2023, 1; Lehmann-Wermser and Krupp 2017; Theurer et al. 2020, 27). This deficiency leads to the question of how far formal music education in schools and music mediation as "a broad artistic and educational practice that fosters diverse relationships between people and musics" (Petri-Preis and Voit 2025) can be understood as inclusive and welcoming also for socially disadvantaged students, whose needs might appear unfamiliar to educators and facilitators coming from rather privileged backgrounds. In other

words: to what extent are music educators and music mediators aware of the challenges and needs socially disadvantaged students have to face in their daily lives? Many of them experience school as a place of permanent failure and have no stability in support of their individual paths, since they are torn between the educational institutions such as school and youth welfare. In consequence, they are much more at risk of being "decoupled" (Mögling, Tillmann, and Reißig 2015), for example in terms of school, training, and leisure activities, or facing the risk of slipping into delinquency.

Of course, music educators and music mediators cannot replace the educational support that is normally the responsibility of the students' families. But what they can do, is to build up an awareness of the challenges these young people have to face in their socially disadvantaged upbringing and take that into consideration in their own teaching strategies and attitude. Here, the internationally grown concept of "community music" offers a rich lens through which music practice in society can be understood and shaped in a more inclusive and value-based way. With regard to reaching especially marginalized and at-risk youth, the broad expertise and work of Phil Mullen provides a rich foundation for facilitating music-related activities in the context of youth work (Mullen 2022).

In order to better understand the challenging circumstances and context that at-risk youth find themselves in, it is helpful to get a closer look at *all* the pillars of the educational system that these young people can be confronted with: besides school, child and youth welfare, child and youth psychiatry, this may also include the pillar of juvenile justice (see Walkenhorst 2015) that comes into play when delinquent behaviour is reported. What most people do not know within this context is that juvenile imprisonment is only "a sanction of last resort, if educational or disciplinary measures appear to be inappropriate (see §§ 5 and 17 (2) JJA[1])" (Dünkel 2016). Thus, the priority is for first educational and then disciplinary measures to be imposed, instead of youth imprisonment. Disciplinary measures of the juvenile court include a formal warning, community service, a fine, and short-term-detention for one or two weekends, or up to four weeks in a facility for short-term juvenile detention (ibid.). Of all activities that take place during the time of short-term juvenile detention, the implementation of music activities largely depends on the individual strengths and interests of the staff. According to my observations in Schleswig-Holstein, most staff would rather not integrate music into their educational concept because they relate more to conducting sports and other leisure activities. This is concerning, since cultural activities – and especially ones involving music – can make a

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1   Juvenile Justice Act (JJA) = Jugendgerichtsgesetz (JGG).

particularly important contribution to the acquisition of skills that promote the process of democracy education and thus resocialisation. In this respect, music can act as a medium or door opener and open up a safe space and learning field in which everybody can try to express themselves, but also learn how to create something together, to listen, and to give feedback to each other. Thus, people in detention can experience themselves in a positive way as self-efficient and self-determined (Ziegenmeyer and Mühlinghaus 2021, 21) and learn how to engage with others (e.g. Hartogh and Wickel 2019, 458). Finally, the young people also get ideas for what to do in their leisure time (Ziegenmeyer and Mühlinghaus 2021, 21). Thus, the fact that the measure of short-term juvenile detention primarily serves an educational purpose (§13 JGG) highlights the potential value of exploring how the integration of music-related pedagogical activities into the structure of this measure can have positive effects on many delinquent young people.

This paper discusses the social-transformative potential that music-related activities between students with different backgrounds can develop in such contexts of short-term juvenile detention. Within the framework of a university-based learning setting at the intersection of music education and music mediation, students from the University of Luebeck (Germany) plan and facilitate a music-week with the young people detained in a facility for short-term juvenile detention in Moltsfelde (Germany). The example of this specific learning design, which is part of the music education and music mediation programme at the University of Luebeck (Germany)[2], provides insights into the framework and specifics of the learning context and target group. Moreover, it gives insights into how such experiences leave traces on the participating university students. My observations in recent years (2021–2024) show that musical activities facilitated by students of music education and/or music mediation with young people in detention can stimulate valuable changes in the students' perspectives and, along with this, critical questioning and correction of their own convictions and patterns of action. The reason the potential is being referred to only from the perspective of the students (and not yet from that of the young people in detention) is due to the vulnerability of the context and the detained young people, and the wish to build up a maximum degree of trust with the facility for short-term juvenile detention and its staff. I wanted to get

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2   The course can be credited within the curriculum of the studies of Bachelor of Arts and Master of Education, both as a compulsory or elective course. Furthermore, it is also open to students from the Bachelor and Master of Music programme.

to know the students' needs first and get an idea of how, to what extent and by which means the process of collecting data would be appropriate.

The Context: Short-term Juvenile Detention as a Space for Cultural Learning

The disciplinary and educational measure of short-term juvenile detention is a response to juvenile misbehaviour in the form of a short-term deprivation of liberty for up to four weeks. As a means of punishment, it is to be distinguished from a juvenile sentence as a genuine criminal penalty, and can be imposed if a juvenile sentence is not deemed necessary, but warnings and conditions alone are not sufficient to punish the offence; thus, it is meant as a last warning and intended to make clear to the young student that they must take responsibility for their own delinquent behaviour (§ 13 JGG). Following an educational mission, this specific measure of short-term juvenile detention aims to enable the detained young people to leading "a socially responsible life without committing offences in the future" (§ 2 JStVollzG).

Educational courses are therefore provided for the detainees, in order to train them in behaviours that can, for example, prevent offences, or help them overcome problems. As cultural education is crucial for acquiring competences for resocialisation (such as participation in society and expressing oneself), it should also be integrated into the educational design of juvenile detention, and young offenders should thus be "encouraged in the development of their abilities and skills in such a way that they are enabled to lead an independent and socially responsible life with respect for the rights of others" (§ 3 JStVollzG). Sports and music activities as an aspect of cultural education are of particular importance here because they help to introduce rhythm and structure into everyday life. Nevertheless, the potential of musical activities seems as yet to have been barely utilised in the context of short-term juvenile detention.

The Learning Setting: Change of Perspective – Music Mediation in the Context of Short-term Juvenile Detention

The learning design was developed and set in motion in 2021 by the author of this article, in cooperation with the director of the facility for short-term juvenile detention Moltsfelde, which is the only one in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein and thus the place where all forms of short-term juvenile

detention, for both male and female offenders takes place.[3] The course is part of the curriculum of the study programme in music education at the University of Music Luebeck. Even though it mainly addresses future music teachers and educators, it is open to all music students at the university.

The learning design consists of three parts: first, a preparatory course, second, the music week at the facility for short-term juvenile detention Moltsfelde, and third, a follow-up evaluation and (post-)reflection. Within the first part, the students get to know the context. Therefore, an excursion to the place (within the first two to three weeks of the semester) gives them the possibility to meet the staff and get a better picture of the context and idea of short-term detention and how it is organised in Moltsfelde. During the preparation of the music week, the participating students are introduced to central approaches and methods of community music, the overall ideas of social work and strategies on how to deal with young people with challenging behaviour (Mullen 2022). They then develop their own concept and plan the music week for and with specific focus on the possible interests and needs of the detained young people. Here, it is crucial that they start their planning with their main overall goals (e.g. empowerment and self-efficacy) in mind, and then decide on ways and methods they can use in order to achieve them. The heart of the course is the facilitation of a one-week music project for a group of young people who are detained at the Moltsfelde facility for short-term juvenile detention. During the week, the teaching team is on-site every day, takes part in the project and supports the students as mentors between the individual phases. A very valuable perspective emerges from the learning effects on all parties involved in the project (the students, the staff from both institutions and the detained youth), in the form of an evaluation and (post-)reflection at the end of the learning course.

Since then, four successful courses have taken place, each with music students (groups of around three to five) and detained youth (groups of around three to seven). At the start of the fourth cycle (winter semester 2024–25), the course became part of the larger project *Auftakt*, which seeks to develop a research-based strategy on how to integrate music into the framework of short-term juvenile detention and thus into the cultural infrastructure of the state of Schleswig-Holstein. It is accompanied by the researcher Julia Peters.

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3   See https://www.schleswig-holstein.de/DE/justiz/gerichte-und-justizbehoe rden/JAA/jaa_node.html (accessed April 7, 2025).

Theoretical Background

During all the cycles that I have initiated and accompanied so far[4], I could observe one main thread: the participating students emphasised the high value of this specific learning-experience for themselves, as part of their studies, and that was not only visible in their high engagement in the project, but also in the fact that the experiences seemed to be very present even for a longer time afterwards.

In an article by Jeananne Nichols and Brian M. Sullivan (2016), who facilitated a similar university-based learning-format, I found hints regarding the transformative potential of experiences in such contexts. Within the format of critical service-learning[5] as a fruitful way to enable encounters between university students and people from different communities (Nichols and Sullivan 2016, 156), Nichols and Sullivan sought to foster students' social awareness. One characteristic that I found interesting in their research is the correlation in the dissonances between participants' prior frames of reference and the reality they encounter in the learning setting of a short-term juvenile detention centre (ibid., 158). Thus, according to Richard Kiely, "the intensity and duration of the dissonance is positively correlated with the transformative potential of the service-learning experience" (ibid., 158). Following this train of thought, I browsed the literature of transformative learning and found that Jack Mezirow's theory seemed to provide a theoretical lens and heuristic framework for analysing the transformative potential in this specific learning setting.[6]

What is the transformative learning theory?

The theory of transformative learning was developed by Mezirow within the context of adult learning and constantly further developed. Mezirow's theory is based on the concept of meaningful perspectives which are influenced and shaped by different factors (e.g. social and cultural norms, individual socialisation). As frames of reference, they structure our individual reality and selectively shape and guide our perception, cognition, feelings, etc. (Mezirow 2012, 82). According to Mezirow, "a frame of reference is composed of two dimensions: a habit of mind and resulting points of view" (ibid., 83). Whereas a habit of mind as

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4   I also initiated a similar format in previous learning settings, such as a juvenile prison in Wuppertal (see Ziegenmeyer 2020; 2019).

5   In critical service-learning projects, participants not only learn and develop through active participation in service-learning experiences, but also seek to understand the systemic social issues that make their service necessary.

6   First observations are documented in Ziegenmeyer 2023.

a set of assumptions "acts as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience" (ibid.), a point of view "comprises clusters of meaning schemes [...] that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality" (ibid., 84). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning aims to raise awareness for individual perspectives on meaning and make them accessible to fundamental changes (Mezirow 1991, 34–46).

According to Mezirow, transformations often happen in a certain sequence, as shown in the following steps (that can of course vary):

> 1. A disorienting dilemma; 2. self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame; 3. a critical assessment of assumptions; 4. recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; 5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; 6. planning a course of action; 7. acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; 8. provisional trying of new roles; 9. building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; 10. a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow 2012, 86)

These steps can be further summarised in the overarching phases of deconstruction, reconstruction, and integration (see also Schild, Leng, and Hammer 2019, 34; see furthermore Ziegenmeyer 2023): The first phase of deconstruction – containing the confrontation with dilemmas – forms like a trigger for processes of transformative learning. This is followed by the phase of reconstruction, in which individual experiences are shared with others and critically reflected upon together, and new perspectives are developed and tried out. In the third phase, that of integration, the new perspectives on meaning are integrated into one's own life, thereby constructively resolving the initial dilemma (Schild, Leng, and Hammer 2019, 34).

The Moltsfelde facility for short-term juvenile detention provides a protected learning environment in which music education and music mediation students can experience and reflect on their pedagogical and musical actions. The encounter with a group of young people in detention creates room for dialogue and reflection on perspectives, assumptions, and beliefs.

Methodology

The model of transformative learning by Mezirow forms the theoretical lens and heuristic framework in which significant moments with potential for transfor-

mative learning experienced by the students are analysed.[7] The data is drawn from two main sources: firstly, from my own observations as initiator, coordinator, and mentor of this project (Ziegenmeyer 2023) during the music week, as well as from reflective and informal talks with the participating students within all four cycles of this course. Besides the organisation of the main overarching ideas and framework of the course-setting, including the communication with the cooperating partners, I give feedback and accompany the project. Secondly, from reflections in the form of voice messages from former participants that I gathered in March 2024, after the individual courses, thus covering a longer time period (between six months and two years). The former participants were asked the following two questions: When you look back on the course and the music week, what did you take away from it, and to what extent does this experience influence your learning and actions today? The voice messages were fully transcribed. Direct quotes were translated by me into English using additional support from translation software such as DeepL. The voice messages were important as a way to get an idea about how sustainable the experience of the course is and if any traces remain when students reflect on the project retrospectively. Out of 11 students that I contacted via email, I received 9 reflections.[8] The data was first coded in themes that occur as main threads in the post-reflections. In the data analysis, I followed the model and process of qualitative content analysis developed by Mayring (2015, 70) with an inductive approach, deriving the categories from the material (ibid., 85). In a second step, the overarching characteristics of Mezirow's transformative theory deconstruction, reconstruction, and integration (see Schild, Leng, and Hammer 2019, 34) were used as a heuristic lens in order to analyse and interpret the data.

In the following section, I will present key experiences appearing in the data of students' reflections which show characteristics of transformative potential according to the transformative learning theory and which can be assigned to the different phases of the theory of transformative learning.

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7   See also previous findings from this setting documented in Ziegenmeyer 2023.
8   So far, 16 students have participated in this specific learning-design. Each team included 3 to 5 students from the university and 3 to 7 young people in short-term detention.

Findings and Discussion

Deconstruction

How does the experienced reality contradict or question existing assumptions, patterns of action and thoughts? This question is key to the first phase of deconstructive learning and can be seen in the students' reflections concerning their experiences. In all previous rounds, the participating music students emphasised that the encounter with the detained young people made them aware of their own privileged status and the value of their sheltered upbringing in a supportive environment from an early age:

> I've definitely learned to appreciate how I grew up myself, how sheltered I grew up, how much support I received from my family on the one hand, but also from friends when I was young, and how important that is in order not to fall into the hole that you might fall into before you're taken back into juvenile detention. (Participant 1)

This increased awareness finally led to a rethinking of existing preconceptions regarding delinquent people and towards a wider view of them and their life circumstances. Thus, during the musical interaction, it was almost impossible not to get an idea of the stories the young people bring. That is why the students value the special moments that helped them to understand the individual backgrounds of the group members and which they sometimes describe as intimate.

Nevertheless, students observed many things that surprised them and that they thought would have been different: unlike their assumption that it might be difficult to deal with the young people in detention, they were surprised at how easy it was to socialise with them and to exchange thoughts, values, and emotions. The directness and openness with which the young people revealed their stories caused consternation and showed a different side of growing up, since it was in great contrast to the (usually) rather supportive and nurturing environment in which the participating music students grew up.

Interestingly, many students describe the quality of the learning experience as a connective one, where they felt this cohesive quality of music for the first time in practice: "But here, in the facility for short-term juvenile detention, I really saw for the first time that music can really bring different people together and it worked." (Participant 2) An aspect that the students did not expect was how much the detainees value their family and especially their mothers (e.g. when writing their thoughts down for the song lyrics, but also in informal talks). Considering the fact that very often these young people do not come from very supportive backgrounds, this was surprising for the students to see:

> And this one aspect, that they all come from very broken families, but in the rap they all said how important family is and that family is above everything, and that the mother is a person they miss very much. And I thought that was so special, because at first you might think that they hate their family or don't get on well with their family. But family always comes before anything else. (Participant 2)

Furthermore, the students emphasised that the high value which music had in the lives of the young detained people took many more forms than they would have thought. Some students explained this as being because there had been a strong focus on making music in their own musical socialisation (e.g. learning to play an instrument or to sing) which had led them to easily overlook the variety of forms that music can take in everyone's life, e.g. listening to music, secretly singing along, writing lyrics for oneself.

Reconstruction

The specific characteristics of the phase of reconstruction – the sharing and critical reflection of individual experiences with others and finally the exploration and trying out of new roles, relationships, and action perspectives – can be seen in the following key experiences reported by former students of the course. Reflections in this phase mostly deal with the interaction with the group and its dynamics. Students emphasise that in this specific setting they were really able to see for the first time how music crosses the boundary between different groups. They described the power of music as a door opener that enabled conversations about emotions, feelings, vulnerability, and difficulties in life, and also left room for new ways of exploring this together:

> I found it fascinating how much the confrontation with music enabled conversations about emotions, about feelings, about vulnerability and difficulties in life. I had the feeling that it opened a door that would not have been there otherwise. (Participant 3)

Due to very thorough conceptual planning that started with the overall aims and then from there derived the individual paths, ways, approaches, and methods, the students could easily focus on their teaching and on the group later on and step back from their planning. One student described this feeling as follows: "Planning has helped me to feel better about not working with a plan." (Participant 4) Finally, a new perspective on a more open and flexible approach to their own planning with regard to the target group can be recognised: the insight that intensive planning helps one to be more flexible afterwards and that it is perfectly fine to deviate from the plan if the group provides impulses that

work better. In facilitating the course, the students experienced themselves in new roles they had not yet tried out in that dimension within conventional school and teaching contexts. With regard to this specific setting, the students emphasised the value of communication at eye level instead of suggestions for improvement and assistance. This did not mean that they gave up their leadership, but rather made room for the ideas of the participants. The idea of learning from each other contributed to creating an appreciative atmosphere in which it was possible for all participants to open up. Furthermore, the music students noticed very quickly that the participants had more expertise in the areas of hip hop and rap music and switched into the role of learners:

> Although we came from the music academy, and also brought something with us and gave input, at the same time it was also very much about the music of the young people, about hip hop and rap music, and they were much more experts than we were, and we were able to learn from each other, and that contributed greatly to a very appreciative atmosphere. (Participant 3)

Integration

It is not easy to evaluate the dimension of how the students integrated the new perspectives in their lives. Nevertheless, the post-reflections show that they were able to build up competences and self-confidence in exploring new roles and relationships and also mention changes in their attitude towards people. One common thread in all the students' reflections (both short-term and long-term) is that this course was experienced as a very valuable and meaningful experience and described as a highlight within their studies. Furthermore, the students expressed that this experience of leaving their own bubble and comfort zone helped them gain the confidence to do "something similar or the same" (Participant 4), i.e. to facilitate a similar project with a similar target group. Some students are even thinking of facilitating music activities in a prison in the future, e.g. leading a choir. Furthermore, the experience of direct encounters with the young people in short-term detention, with whom they would otherwise have no contact, is described as a grounding and enriching experience. Alongside this, students mentioned an increase of openness towards people, as the following quote by a student shows:

> Something has already changed in my actions, and I think that since I've had this experience, I no longer treat other people so harshly. In other words, I'm no longer so quick to judge people, or I give people more chances, forgive people much more, don't put people under so much pressure when

> things don't work out, and simply accept more that things might not work
> out. (Participant 4)

One main thread that emerged from the data could be conceptualised as a new
perspective: exploring a strengths-based approach and learning at eye-level
in mutual appreciation as pedagogical method in the music week. It became
clear that focusing on the detained young people themselves and their music
in an appreciative way is crucial for the success of the project. The powerful
experience that resulted in a successful building up of trust in all courses led
the students to wish to integrate this approach into their teaching.

Another key aspect was an increased understanding of the young inmates'
social background, giving the students a better feeling and understanding of
how to deal with young people who might appear challenging at school.

Finally, a certain sense of responsibility and professionalisation can be seen
in the reflections. As has already become clear in the phase of deconstruction,
with an increased consciousness of their own privileged status and thus their
power, a sense of responsibility can be seen emerging in the data:

> And yes, I feel even more responsible now, as someone who, in social com-
> parison, has been given a lot of privileges by life, at least privileges [...] that
> I want to use the luck I had in my life for the benefit of the community and
> give others something of it, because I have a certain power to do something
> like that. (Participant 5)

Thus, some of the students feel a certain obligation to give something back
to society and to create more musical meetings with people who have limited
access to programmes or activities of music-making.

Outlook

This paper discusses the social-transformative potential that music education
and music mediation can develop in an extracurricular learning setting such as
a facility for short-term juvenile detention between different groups who might
not normally meet. In addition to my own observations, post-reflections on the
project by the university students served as data and were analysed through the
heuristic lens of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. During the music
week in the facility for short-term juvenile detention, students are confronted
with a social reality with which they normally have no connection in the context
of their usually rather straightforward educational biography. During the week,
they gain a more differentiated view of juvenile offenders and use music to its

full potential as a connector, creating a safe space for aesthetic experiences and thus experiencing self-efficacy. Their own lives' reality (such as the perception of their own privileged status and support by many people) is now seen differently by the students and leads to an increased awareness of the effects which social injustice may have on young people growing up.

The depth of the statements made by the students in the post-reflections, along with their ongoing involvement, which I repeatedly encounter in personal conversations where students still ask me about the continuation of the project, give rise to the assumption that these experiences have some kind of transformative potential that needs to be further studied. Moreover, this should justify more musical encounters with people in detention or other marginalised groups in society, as one of the students remarked:

> So, I was actually very inspired and pleased to simply have this encounter, and I asked myself why I don't do this more often, why our society is so divided and compartmentalised and separated with institutions where disabled people, well, are shut off from society, arrested young people and so on, although it clearly makes sense with the prison and so on. (Participant 5)

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