Little Publics Stimulating Systems Reflexivity on Gender Equality in Music Education in Nepal

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Abstract

This article explores how the idea of public pedagogy could stimulate systems reflexivity on complex issues in schools. More specifically, it focuses on the issue of gender equality in the context of music education in Nepal, where women's intersecting identities, such as age, (dis)ability, economic status, and race, lead them to experience variable degrees of discrimination. To support students contributing to the debate on gender equality, we used the idea of public pedagogy to design an intervention in the form of a two-day series of workshops. We drew on Gert Biesta's (2012) theorisation of public pedagogy and Hickey-Moody's (2014; 2016) idea of "little publics" to create an arts-based (Leavy, 2015) research intervention. This article describes and critically reflects on the resulting two-day series of workshops and their activities, which related to viewing, art-making, and dialogue. It then considers three aspects that influenced the emergence of little publics and the ways these publics contributed to stimulating systems reflexivity: the composition of the group, the shifting educative agent, and the process of art-making. Overall, the article demonstrates how public pedagogy as an idea can support the design of research that aims to enhance social change through participatory and reflexive action.

Keywords

Gender equality, little publics, music, music education, public pedagogy, school, systems reflexivity

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Introduction

This article explores how the idea of public pedagogy (e.g. Biesta, 2012; Sandlin et al., 2010) could stimulate systems reflexivity (Lazurko et al., 2025; Moore et al., 2018; Westerlund et al., 2021) on complex issues in schools. It focuses on one of "humankind's greatest challenges" (UNESCO, 2023 p. 2) – gender equality – in the context of music education in Nepal, where women's[1] intersecting identities, such as age, (dis)ability, economic status, and race, lead them to "experience variable degrees of discrimination" (Gupta et al., 2021, p. 147). This discrimination manifests as inequalities in all forms of music practices, from daily rituals and festivals to all corners of the music industry (e.g. Treacy, 2020b). State and non-state actors have taken measures to counter gender-based discrimination, however, patriarchal customs as well as social and cultural values and norms continue to "limit women's participation in society" (Gupta et al., 2021, p. 149). Consequently, both the empowerment of girls and women and the education of boys and men have been suggested for deconstructing such beliefs (Gupta et al., 2021). Indeed, local policies (e.g. Government of Nepal, 2019) have positioned schools as places to counter discrimination and achieve gender equality, for example, by enhancing the "linkage between communities and schools" (p. 60). Despite such efforts, research has found that private schools in Nepal continue to reinforce caste, ethnic, and gender divisions (Thebe Limbu, 2021). Moreover, despite the government's calls "to critically examine harmful social values and traditions to deconstruct the underlying problems related to gender and social exclusion" (Government of Nepal, 2019, p. 60), in our ongoing research, we found it challenging to foster reflection, discussion, and debate with teachers and students on gender equality in music in their schools and communities. This may be due to an education system that remains highly teacher-centred, with both limited opportunities for teacher education, which may lead teachers to follow traditional approaches, and for student agency and participatory learning (Bhattarai & Basnet, 2022), which discourages students from expressing critical opinions and discussing sensitive and personal issues (Adhikari et al., 2025).

In considering how we as researchers could support students in Nepal in contributing to the debate on gender equality, we turned to the idea of public pedagogy to design an intervention. Scholarship on public pedagogy usually focuses on "learning and education happening *outside* of formal schooling systems" (Sandlin, 2010, p. 2, emphasis added) or "spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist *outside* of the walls of the institution of schools" (p. 1, emphasis added). In these cases, it is used to emphasise "that schools are not the sole sites of teaching, learning, or curricula, and that perhaps they are not even the most influential" (p. 2). Few instances of applying the idea of public pedagogy in formal educational institutions can be found. Ayers and colleagues (2010), for example, reflect on a student-led poetry subculture that extended beyond the school's walls and into the broader youth community, engaging students with social issues, solidarity, and hope, and creating "transformative moments of performance" (p. 392). In another example, Laes and colleagues (2025) used public pedagogy to investigate "the intersections between education, democracy, and citizenship within higher music education" performance study programs (p. 162). In designing our intervention, we chose to draw on Gert Biesta's (2012) theorisation of public pedagogy as an interruption, as well as Anna Hickey-Moody's (2014, 2016) idea of "little publics", inspired by her emphasis on youth having "voice in the public realm" and

[1] While gender is often referred to in binary terms, we understand it to be socially and culturally constructed, to extend beyond a binary framework, and, following decolonial feminists, "not as a fixed category, but as a spectrum of lived experiences influenced by patriarchy, colonialism, and global capitalism" (Udenigwe et al., 2026, p. 4).

not merely being "subjugated to the opinions and positions of adults" (Hickey-Moody, 2016, p. 61).

This article reports a collaborative research process in which we critically reflect on the resulting research intervention's design and implementation. We engaged in "a dialogic, collaborative process of meaning making" (Paulus et al., 2015, p. 240), using Prem's (the first author's) researcher diary, as well as the materials prepared for and created during the intervention. We considered these against our knowledge of the complex context of Nepal as well as our earlier and ongoing experiences and findings from conducting research there. Our analysis served as a process of continuous and iterative dialogue and debate in which we needed to make our thinking "explicit in a way that is difficult to replicate as a single researcher" (Paulus et al., 2015, p. 236). This dialogue blended together with our writing, as these became inseparable parts of our meaning-making (p. 239). In particular, the author's differing positionalities deepened the collaborative dialogue. Prem, who identifies as a man from Nepal, was an insider to the local school context, however, recognised his blind spots related to gender equality at the outset of the project. Danielle, the second author, who identifies as female from Canada, was an outsider to the local context, however, had conducted earlier research in Nepal during which the challenges girls and women encounter when aspiring to be and become musicians were already recognised (Treacy, 2020a). We have worked together in the field of music education research in Nepal since 2016. In this study, Prem is the primary researcher who carried out the intervention, and Danielle took a supportive role, engaging in ongoing dialogue throughout the design and implementation. The article is guided by the question:

> *How can the idea of public pedagogy be applied to stimulate systems reflexivity on the issue of gender equality in music education in Nepal?*

Gender in the musical landscapes of Nepal

Inequalities in music in Nepal manifest in heritage practices and modern musics as limitations on women's and girls' participation and public performance. The country's music heritage sites are political with gendered power dynamics being sustained through narratives of "preservation and the promotion of ancestral values and indigeneity" (Palanchoke et al., 2026, p. 142). Performers of music and dance are almost exclusively male (Wegner, 2023), and women continue to be restricted from playing, and even touching, musical instruments (Moisala, 2013). They may also be prohibited from public singing and dancing (Stirr, 2010). Even in cases when women are permitted to take part in music making, such participation is limited after marriage (Widdess et al., 2001). Contemporary musics, such as rock and pop, are equally male-dominated. Few women participate in pop and rock as singers, and even fewer participate as instrumentalists in any genre (Henderson, 2002). This low participation has been attributed to some genres' associations with drugs or promiscuous sex (Brown & Regmi, 2018). For example, women performing *dohori* (a type of responsorial song) in restaurants have been said to walk "a fine line between class categories of artists admired for their talent and skill, and low-class entertainers or prostitutes" (Stirr, 2010, p. 276). Research on music education in Nepal has therefore highlighted activist practices aimed at increasing women's and girls' access and participation (e.g. Westerlund & Partti, 2018).

Little publics as a theoretical-methodological frame

In designing our research intervention, we envisioned workshops in schools that could be a potential site of public pedagogy; where education and politics intersect "beyond pedagogy as a cognitive and rational process of transmission" (Sandlin et al., 2017, p. 827). Biesta's (2012)

theorisation thus supported us in considering how the workshop activities could function educationally and politically. In planning the workshops, we asked how public pedagogy could appear "as an enactment of a … public quality of human togetherness and thus for the possibility of actors and events to *become public*" (p. 693). The workshops therefore aimed to facilitate a particular mode of interaction that could potentially create a public space that would enable "actions that might be characterised as 'political'" (p. 686), requiring collective "deliberation and judgement about what is to be done" (p. 689). Consequently, the planned workshops did not have *instruction* as the main pedagogical mode, which Biesta argues is "basically orientated towards the erasure of plurality and difference" (p. 691) through telling people "what to think, how to act and, perhaps most importantly, what to be" (p. 691). The workshops were also not concerned with *learning* as the main pedagogical mode, which tends "to turn social and political problems into learning problems", thus making them "the responsibility of individuals rather than … the concern of the collective" (p. 693). Instead, the workshops were designed to be an interruption.

The idea of little publics (Hickey-Moody, 2014, 2016) supported focussing on the civic engagement of youth and their involvement in the arts. Hickey-Moody (2014) uses the term little publics to "articulate the expression of youth voice in the many political tones it can have" where "little" refers to both "the involvement of youth" and "the small size of the public formed" (p. 117). Importantly, in relation to the focus of this research on gender equality, Hickey-Moody (2014) critiques the idea of social inclusion in public and popular pedagogy, which she argues "re-creates a concept of a privileged group" (p. 123). For her, little publics

> opens out and activates the politics that the term *social inclusion* signifies… in a way that shifts focus from including youth in a dominant paradigm to having the possibility of youth creating their own dialogic space, which might speak back to a dominant paradigm or might acquiesce. (p. 123)

In aiming to design an intervention in which little publics might emerge, we also considered how they might stimulate systems reflexivity through the possibility of supporting collective deliberation in a dialogic space in which students could be guided to reflect on the dominant paradigms. By system reflexivity we refer to "the capacity to see the complexity and mobilize the agency in a system, while deeply engaging with diversity across multiple scales" (Lazurko et al., 2025, p. 2). In music education systems reflexivity has similarly been described as the capacity to critically examine, question, and reimagine the taken-for-granted structures, norms, and interactions that shape educational practices and broader social systems (Westerlund et al., 2021). System(s) reflexivity is thus understood not as "a fixed capacity" but as "an ongoing process of inquiry" that may be stimulated through the use of tools, models, and frameworks as heuristics (Moore et al., 2018, n.p.). Which of these tools may "give a reflexive jolt to a given aspect of complex systems is not predictable", thus, constant experimenting is necessary in order to "illuminate specific institutional dynamics within the shared consciousness of the people within a social-ecological system at any given time" (Moore et al., 2018, n.p.).

The research intervention

By combining the three theoretical ideas introduced above, we aimed to design the research intervention as an interruption that shifts students' attention from individual reflection toward collective and relational processes, opening space for questioning existing power relations and imagining alternative ways of *being* and *doing* together through public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012). Based on our focus on music education and Hickey-Moody's (2014, 1016) emphasis on the arts, we used an arts-based approach (Leavy, 2015) for this intervention. This choice was further

supported by earlier research in Nepal that found that engaging youths in collaborative art-making could foster open discussion on gender sensitive topics such as menstruation, gender discrimination, violence, and child marriage, and bring these issues into public discourse (Timalsina et al., 2025). The intervention was planned to take place as a two-day series of six workshops at a private school in Pokhara[2] (see Table 1). The workshop activities related to viewing, art-making, and dialogue, and aimed to be equally pedagogical and a site for data generation. The workshops were carried out by a Team led by the first author, Prem, and involving two other Nepali facilitators, one female and one male.

Table 1. Two-day workshop design

Day 1	Day 2
I. Photo Elicitation and Collage-making (90 minutes)	IV. Video Elicitation and Collage-making (120 minutes)
II. Musical Storytelling (60 minutes)	V. Focus Group Discussion 2 (45 minutes)
III. Focus Group Discussion 1 (75 minutes)	VI. Community music in school (120 minutes)

Viewing

Viewing was planned to be incorporated into the series of workshops through photo elicitation (Leavy, 2015), video elicitation (Leavy, 2015), and musical performances. These visual stimuli were meant not to explicitly teach something, but as an interruption; to provoke interpretation and dialogue amongst students that could generate "multiple meanings" in relation to the materials (Leavy, 2015, p. 26), thereby facilitating critical engagement with narratives of gender roles and inclusion in music and music education. A collection of photographs depicting male and female musicians performing and teaching in diverse settings were sourced from online magazines, news outlets, and blogs, and were selected to represent well-known performers and instrumentalists, cultural heritage, community music, classroom practices, musical instruments, and performances. Eight 30-60 seconds long animated videos were made using the free version of www.renderforest.com with scripts created by analysing data from an earlier group interview with two Nepali schoolgirls (ages 14–15). Two musical performances were planned to provide female role models, who were seen to be "educative agents" (Charman & Dixon, 2021, p. 3). For the first performance, Prem wrote a musical story for which he composed new music, and this story was performed by the Team. The story was created based on the previously mentioned data analysis focussing on the theme of inclusion and exclusion in music due to stereotypes and norms in the community and school. For the second performance, a group of six local female musicians were invited to perform music from their cultural heritage.

[2] A private school was selected, since music education in Nepal continues to be mainly taught in private schools, music institutes, and by private individuals, but rarely in government schools (Treacy, 2020b).

Art-making

Art-making was planned as the collaborative and participatory creation of works or texts that represent a form of "knowing and meaning making" (Leavy, 2015, p. 253). Such art-making provided students with the opportunity to participate in what Hickey-Moody (2016) describes as a little public, which functions as a "legitimate site of cultural inquiry and a source of knowledge about the lives and opinions of young people" (p. 64). Two collage making (Leavy, 2015) activities were planned based on the visual stimuli described in the previous section. The first involved students assembling photographs they selected from the collection used in the photo elicitation activity – by selecting, cutting, and glueing them onto a cardboard surface – to represent their ideas or experiences visually. Emojis were also provided for this activity with different expressions if the students found them helpful for extending and elaborating their reflections in their collages. The second collage involved students responding to the animated videos using sticky notes, on which they could write or draw, and quotations from the above-mentioned data analysis. Both art-making activities also involved a presentation of the collage to the full group at the end of each workshop so that students could express their thinking to an 'audience', thus inviting wider public engagement. In addition, the teacher or principal was asked if the collages could be displayed in the music classroom following the workshops, so that other students could also potentially become an 'audience' curious about the collages and their topic. In these ways the participating students were understood as "a group of young people [who] author a text that calls an audience to attention" (Hickey-Moody, 2016, p. 117), and the workshops and music classroom understood as a "site of performance or display" to make an intervention by distributing and localising public pedagogy that draws the attention of other students and teachers (p. 62).

Dialogue

Dialogue was planned to be included in every session, through allocating time for questions and comments arising from the specific activities. More formally, focus group discussions (Hennink, 2014) were planned as two independent sessions to generate data for the research project. Dialogue was centred as it is a "necessary precondition for challenging harmful stereotypes" (Leavy, 2015, p. 26), including those related to gender in school music education, and to connect students to the topic at "emotional and visceral levels" (p. 26). Moreover, moments of dialogue can move participants' personal experiences and concerns into the public sphere, where they can become a "concern of the collective" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693). In this sense, drawing on Biesta's (2012) notion of "the public quality of human togetherness" (p. 693), dialogue was used to create a space in which students' experiences and reflections on gender could be shared and negotiated. The focus group discussions were designed with a specific emphasis on gender-related issues arising from the workshop activities. One focus group was planned with a girls-only group to create a space for sharing and discussing their specific experiences, while another was planned as mixed-gender to enable cross-gender dialogue to highlight different perspectives and enable collective reflection on the issues raised during the workshops.

Can little publics stimulate systems reflexivity?

Critically reflecting on how the workshop design described above realised in practice, we here consider three aspects that influenced the emergence of little publics and the ways these publics contributed to stimulating systems reflexivity: the composition of the group, the shifting educative agent, and the process of art-making.

The composition of the group

The composition of the group in terms of size and gender in each session made different forms of human togetherness possible. For most sessions, the group size was not within the Team's control. The school principal recommended Class Seven to participate in the two-day series of workshops, since they had regular music lessons as part of their weekly schedule. As a result, 41 Class Seven students, 21 girls and 20 boys, participated in Sessions I, II, IV and VI (see Table 1). In Session VI, when the local female musicians performed, the school principal, three Class Seven teachers, including one music teacher, and six students from Class Nine also participated. For the focus group discussions (Session III & V), the principal selected five girls and five boys, however, following the first two workshops, five additional girls approached the Team to request to participate. Therefore, the same ten girls participated in Sessions III and V, and five boys joined them for Session V.

Different forms of public emerged in each session depending on group size and gender composition, which we see as "elements that render[ed] possible the actualisation of participation in the public realm" (Charman & Dixon, 2021, p. 17). Discussion between the students was more active when they worked together in the smaller groups than in the full-group, and it was clear that the small group discussions made it more possible for the students to later contribute to the full-group discussion. Encouraging cross-gender discussion, however, was more challenging than the Team had previously observed. Intentionally, the Team therefore allowed students to form their own groups, rather than imposing mix-gendered groups, to ensure that students would feel more comfortable. It was therefore not surprising that when the students arrived in the space and sat down at the tables that had been set up, they naturally formed single-gendered groups. Having two focus group discussions, each with the same group of ten girls, and one also having five boys, had been intended as an intervention to attempt to facilitate more cross-gender dialogue.

Still, Prem reflected in his researcher diary, "The result was very surprising. The girls who were talking so loudly just yesterday, today when we brought them together [with the boys], couldn't talk at all" (25 July 2025). It thus appeared that "The boys do not like to talk with girls and the girls also do not talk with boys" (25 July 2025). In the mixed gender group, the boys and girls were hesitant to speak, and two of the boys did not speak at all. These observations could be attributed to a lack of ability for boys and girls to speak freely when together, because Nepal's school culture is influenced by a patriarchal social system (Dahal et al., 2023) and the schools do not provide space for dialogue or discussion on various issues, nor for listening to the voices of students (Adhikari et al., 2025). The workshops thus revealed how these "particular spaces are determined, controlled and policed" rather than "open to a plurality of being and doing" (Biesta, 2012, p. 694). We acknowledge, however, that because the workshops had been planned to focus mostly on girls' challenges, the boys may not have felt connected to the topic or been able to identify their own role in promoting gender equality. Indeed, "collective interest may sometimes go against one's immediate self-interest, engagement with and commitment to the public domain" (Biesta, 2012, p. 686). This awareness emphasized for us that "the boys and the teachers need to be included in this kind of workshop" (Researcher Diary, 25 July 2025). In these ways, while group discussion aimed to stimulate systems reflexivity, the composition of the group itself was shaped by the very taken-for-granted structures, norms, and interactions that the research seeks to reimagine.

The shifting educative agent

The educational or educative agent can be seen to have shifted throughout the workshops. An educational agent, as presented by Biesta (2012), is "neither an instructor nor a facilitator but

rather someone who *interrupts*" (p. 693, emphasis original). Similarly, Charman and Dixon (2021) describe the educative agent as emerging when "the learner and the teacher collapse in the public" (p. 31). For them,

> the learner is the 'one' that learns. This may be any person – a student, a member of the public, an audience member. It may be that the teacher learns.… The teacher may not be human. It may be the knowledge itself or the land/place/objects which teaches. (p. 31)

As the workshops began, the Team, as designers and leaders of the sessions, could be seen to be educative agents. Of particular significance, two members of this Team were Nepali males initiating discussions on gender equality. This in itself could be seen as an intervention. The selected photographs and animated videos used for elicitation were also intentionally selected and created to be educative agents in themselves. Moreover, the musical performances and performers were equally educative agents, and the inclusion of local female musicians became far more significant than initially planned. This significance was due to the recognition of these women as *musicians* [संगीतकर्मीहरू] with authority to speak in public (Charman & Dixon, 2021), rather than as mere music *practitioners* [अभ्यासकर्ताहरू]. Such recognition allowed students to imagine new possibilities, seeing that their friends, sisters, or mothers within their own communities could also be seen as musicians.

In addition to the educative agents students were presented with through the workshop design, the students themselves also became educative agents. In the small and large group discussions as well as the collage presentations, students were invited to speak publicly and to share and co-construct new knowledge. The student collages also became educative agents, not only during the presentations but also as the posters were left in the school following the workshops so that they could be displayed, thus potentially expanding their influence to the wider school community. The posters promoted gender equality with statements such as:

- "The teacher should treat all students equally, no matter if they are a girl or a boy."
- "Some girls like music so we should get permission to choose."
- "All genders should be able to work together."
- "All genders should do team work."
- "Yes we should have to break this trend and give girls the chance to play instruments and boys to dance."
- "Music and dance are for everyone. No matter if you are a boy or girl. Boys are free to dance as they like. Girls should also be allowed to do music."

Becoming educative agents, the students were able to display their emerging systems reflexivity publicly, while potentially widening engagement with systems reflexivity to a larger audience, through both their speaking and their art.

The process of art-making

Art-making was intentionally used as an interruption with the understanding that "art practices in and out of school can be considered a form of public pedagogy" (Hickey-Moody, 2016, 64). As Hickey-Moody (2016) argues, art practices can affect "modes of community attachment that can influence public sentiment and can provide frameworks for policy and legislation" (p. 64). As the workshops took place in school and as part of a research project, the students' collective art-making

was shaped through adult direction, including the focus on the topic of gender equality, the questions and instructions given to the students, and through the materials Prem selected, compiled, and created from which to elicit the art. Moreover, as mentioned above, the groups in which this art-making took place were single-gender groups formed by the students themselves as they sat down at the tables. Still, little publics can be argued to have emerged, because the group activity itself necessitated the students to both "express their voices through arts practice" (p. 65) and create "their own dialogic space which might speak back to a dominant paradigm, or might acquiesce" (p. 68).

The process of reflecting on the stimuli provided for the collective art-making, assembling the collages, and then presenting them to an audience, could be seen as a form of action, as students articulated their perspectives collectively and publicly. The student-made collages brought together "affect, emotion, desire, and political vision" (Hickey-Moody, 2016, p. 60), for example with statements such as "girls and boys should be able to choose whatever they like" (Student Collage, 2025) as well as the statements listed above. Photos of both local female musicians and successful female professional musicians were selected for the collages, and accompanied by student-written statements, such as "It is my culture and I like these instruments", and "She is the first girl who plays *dhimay baja* [a large double headed barrel shaped drum]" (Student Collages, 2025). These statements could be seen to highlight potential female role models within the community and music industry. Interestingly, of the two photo elicitation collages made by a group of boys, one only included photos of males, which could have raised thought-provoking follow-up discussions. The video elicitation enabled students to discuss gendered assumptions about musical ability and success, with the resulting collages including statements, such as "Even though boys and girls are different everyone can learn and perform many kinds of work" (Student Collage, 2025). Together, these collages could be seen to underscore "young people's arts practice as a mode of civic participation" (Hickey-Moody, 2016, p. 58). Although the statements made on the collages remained at the normative level, rather than examining the *hows* and *whys*, through the process of collective art-making, the students entered into dialogue that deepened their awareness of gender equality both inside and outside of schools. This dialogue enabled systems reflexivity, especially as the students were required to make decisions about what to represent in their future-oriented collages.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how public pedagogy as an idea can support the design of research that aims to enhance social change through participatory and reflexive action. As we had found it challenging to foster reflection, discussion, and debate on gender equality with teachers and students, the idea of public pedagogy supported an innovative research design. To respond to big global challenges, such as achieving gender equality, engaging people in debate around complex issues is important not only during research, but also in the public realm more broadly. In this project, it has been particularly valuable to find ways to include students and young people – the little public – in such debate and find ways for their voices to be heard publicly. To do this, the design included six workshops with activities related to viewing, art-making, and dialogue. By critically reflecting on this design, we considered how the composition of the group, the shifting educative agent, and the process of art-making became influential aspects for the emergence of little publics and stimulating systems reflexivity. An ongoing challenge is the question of how to foster a "public quality of human togetherness" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693) also in mixed-gender discussions. While this challenge is rooted in the Nepali school culture and society as a whole, and

thus not amendable in a two-day series of workshops, engaging in dialogue about gender equality in mixed-gender groups could better support future action towards change, by sharing perspectives, generating mutual understanding, and imagining future possibilities for potential interventions and even transformation. Still, the degree of systems reflexivity that was stimulated in these workshops, suggests that applying the idea of public pedagogy in the research design was a worthwhile intervention.

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