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De bisschop, A. and Gibson, Jo Participatory Music Practitioners' Skills, Experience and Pathways for Learning: Perspectives from Belgium and the UK. International Journal of Music Education.
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Abstract

Participatory music practices -understood here as practices that inherently connect musical and social aims- are growing globally through diverse activity, research and scholarship. Practitioners, as facilitators of such initiatives, are often pivotal to their success and sustainability. This study foregrounds practitioner perspectives to consider what skills and experience they deem necessary for effective practice and ways in which they prepare(d) for practice. It was developed as part of an international research project titled [*Blinded for Review*] and draws on survey responses and in-depth interviews conducted in Belgium and the United Kingdom. We analysed the data via an inductive approach, using practitioner narratives as a guiding perspective. Across geographical and project differences, practitioners reported similar necessary skills and experience, which we distinguished within three domains: musical, pedagogical and social. Practitioners honed their skills and experience through a variety of preparations; with experiential and peer-learning frequently mentioned. Such on-the-job learning, particularly when working with marginalised communities, raises ethical considerations about how best to prepare and support early-stage practitioners in navigating diverse practice contexts. We suggest that peer-guided experiential learning, cultivating self-directed study and critical reflection, offers an important pathway for practitioners to hone musical, pedagogical and social skills necessary for effective practice.

Participatory Music Practitioners' Skills, Experience and Pathways for Learning: Perspectives from Belgium and the UK.

Participatory music practice is a growing global field of practice, scholarship and research (Sloboda et al, 2020; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018). However, the field is very diverse (Veblen, 2007) and many terms are used to describe similar practices. Common to these musical practices is the intention to achieve aesthetically valued outcomes whilst simultaneously facilitating "some significant personal or group effect beyond the achievement of a musically satisfying activity" (Sloboda et al., 2020, p. 116). In other words, they are music practices that inherently connect musical and social aims (Matarasso, 2019) and are uniquely 'situated' within specific contexts (Camlin, 2015; Camlin & Zeserson, 2018). Recognising a diversity of practices and terminology, we use the term 'participatory music practices' for this contribution because it emphasises the participatory character of the work and is familiar in Belgium and the UK. Participatory practices are categorised by musicians working together with individuals and communities through musical processes that foreground dialogue (Camlin, 2015), negotiation (Higgins, 2024) and co-creation (Gibson, 2020). Given that these practices have explicit social goals, the meaning of 'participatory' includes both music making and political dimensions linked to notions of citizenship (Baker, 2021: 301). Thus, participants can have "meaningful influence over decisions that affect themselves, their communities of practice, and ultimately the culture itself" (Brough, 2014, as cited in Baker, 2021: 162).

Participatory music practitioners' role and training needs

The role and perspective of musicians that lead participatory music practices is gaining more research attention (Van Zijl & De bisschop, 2024; Sloboda et al, 2020; Vougioukalou et al, 2019:Schiavio et al., 2019; Camlin & Zeserson, 2018). For brevity, we refer to these musicians as 'practitioners' throughout the article. The practitioner's role is often pivotal to the

sustainability of these initiatives and studies report the influence of their approaches on achieving social effects (Varvarigou et al., 2021; Vougioukalou et al., 2019; Schiavio et al., 2019;). Practitioners in such projects are not merely instructors; they embody a range of skills and competencies that enable them to engage diverse groups in meaningful musical experiences (Yerichuk & Tai, 2023; Camlin & Zeserson, 2018). Their effectiveness hinges on their ability to foster inclusive environments where participants feel valued and empowered to express themselves musically. This is crucial in settings involving vulnerable groups or individuals, where facilitators must navigate complex dynamics to ensure that every participant can engage in the musical dialogue (Creech et al., 2020). Research also highlights that participatory music activities are inherently context-dependent, requiring facilitators to adapt their strategies based on the unique needs and characteristics of the communities they serve (Camlin & Zeserson, 2018). This adaptability is essential for creating music activities that resonate with participants and promote well-being (Yi & Kim, 2023) and on a broader scale, lead to 'social impact' (Bartleet, 2023). Hence, several authors note the importance of training practitioners to lead these activities, (Creech et al., 2020; Camlin & Zeserson, 2018; Willingham & Carruthers, 2018).

Developments in Higher Music Education (HME) also lead our attention towards the training needs of practitioners in participatory music practices. In HME relatively new discourses and corresponding (teaching) practices are entering the playing field, such as "the artistic citizen" (Elliott et al., 2016), "the musician as maker in society" (Gaunt et al., 2021), "the civic professional" (Laes et al., 2021) or "the embedded artist" (Martel & Wickert, 2020). Whilst these terms differ, they indicate a similar direction, namely that many HME institutions are questioning and trying to expand their role in society. Similarly, they invite attention to how HMEs can ensure -by changing curricula and teaching practices or collaborating with neighbourhood organisations- students have knowledges, attitudes and skills to improve social

outcomes in their local and global communities (Elliott et al., 2016; Grant, 2019). From this perspective, there has been a steady increase in interest in participatory music practice programs at HME institutions across Europe (Grant, 2019; Willingham & Carruthers, 2018; Gande & Kruse-Weber, 2017). However, what students are actually supposed to learn from participatory music undergraduate and postgraduate programs remains understudied.

Previous explorations of the skills and competencies practitioners require in participatory music settings include learning from the encounters of orchestral musicians with community music practices. In a research report involving the experiences of 15 musicians, skills developed in these practices were categorized as 'personal', 'interpersonal', 'musical', 'cognitive' and 'teaching' (Ascenso, 2016). Some of these skills were also highlighted in a study by Camlin (2022), which investigated the way a mixed group of undergraduate students and experienced practitioners make sense of their encounters with participatory music practices. Alongside 'professional attributes', Camlin's work discusses the importance of 'psychological attributes' related to mindset and reflexivity, risk taking and adaptability, and musical communication. Moreover, this study also shows that 'situational factors', such as an awareness of setting and environment and how to deal with power and hierarchy in facilitator-participant relationships, is of equal importance to professional attributes. In sum, we must think not only in terms of 'skills', but also in terms of attitudes, values, and complex expertise practitioners develop over time. Although these insights are important, both studies involved small numbers of practitioners, and highlight that practitioner skills and experience development remains an area that warrants further exploration.

Study aim and research questions

This study was developed as part of [*Blinded for Review*], an international research project conducted between 2020-2023, which aimed to deepen understanding of participatory music practice through the perspectives of practitioners active in it. This approach was

significant because practitioner perspectives are not often examined. Focusing on practitioner perspectives, this article seeks to contribute to the domain of practitioner education through a better understanding of the skills and experience practitioners think are needed to be an effective practitioner and the pathways for learning they experienced themselves. Two methodological characteristics of the broader research project are relevant for this contribution: (1) a large-scale study, combining survey and interviews addressing practitioners in two locations across a variety of practice; (2) an integrated analysis of both the skills and experience practitioners identify as essential and the pathways for learning practitioners experienced and envision for themselves. Two research questions were central to the analysis: (1) What skills and experience do participatory music practitioners think are needed to be effective in the field?, and (2) How do practitioners prepare for participatory music practice? We describe below the overall setup of the broader research project as well as the data collection and analysis for this study.

Study outline and methodology

Overall setup of the research

The research project [*Blinded for Review*] included four phases (Figure 1) set-up identically in each location (Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the United Kingdom), except for minor adaptations to country-specific terminology or topics of interest. The various phases received full ethical approval from [*Blinded for Review*].

Figure 1

Overview of Research Phases [*Blinded for Review*]

[insert Figure 1]

Data collection and analysis

This article presents insights from [project acronym *blinded for review*], combining data from Belgium (BE) and the United Kingdom (UK). We draw on these data and contexts since we are involved in participatory music practice in these countries.

Phase B commenced with an open call to an online survey available in Dutch & French (BE) and English (UK). There were 47 survey respondents from Belgium and 98 from the UK. Survey respondents in the UK and Belgium used different terms to describe themselves. The most frequently used self-identifying labels were *musician* (BE), *musical coach* (BE), *animateur sociocultural* (BE), *community musician* (UK), *music therapist* (UK), *performer* (UK) and *musician working in schools* (UK). The majority of the respondents had more than 5 years' experience leading participatory music activities (59% UK, 70% BE) and many of them were active as both practitioner in the music activity and organiser of the whole project (37% UK, 52% BE). The survey included a range of topic areas (figure 1). This article includes analysis of the results from two survey questions:

(1) *Did you undertake any specific preparation or training for your work in this field?* (closed question, answer yes/no) + follow-up question: *Please briefly describe this preparation / training (*free text field)
(2) *How well equipped/trained do you feel to do this kind of socially engaged work? (closed question, answer barely equipped/ partly equipped/ mostly equipped/ totally equipped)* + follow-up comment option (free text field).

Following the survey, Phase C consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviewees for this phase were selected from the survey sample; this selection was from respondents that opted in to a follow-up interview, alongside criteria of geographical spread and types of working experience to create a diverse, representative sample. This resulted in 45 in-depth interviews (21 BE in French and Dutch, 24 UK in English). Interviewees practiced in contexts such as asylum centers, prisons, hospitals, schools, community bands, inclusive choirs, projects in impoverished neighborhoods and programs for disadvantaged youth. In terms of musical training, most interviewees completed higher music

education (11 BE, 21 UK), some studied in part time music education or via school music lessons (8 BE, 1 UK), others were self-taught (2 BE, 2 UK). The interview guideline was developed from the survey responses and research aims. Alongside survey responses, this analysis includes answers to following interview questions:

(1) Can you tell something about your musical background and training? Do you also have a social training or specific experience that is significant to your practice? (background & training)

(2) *Can you give an example of a socially engaged music practice you are leading? What is important to you in leading the activity?* (content & process of the work)

(3) What skills or experience are important in your work and why? Can you give an example of a moment in your practice when this was important? (content & process of the work)

(4) How do you evaluate your practice? When do you consider a project or activity being successful? (internal monitoring & evaluation)

Data analysis was led by an inductive approach using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012) and Glaser & Strauss' constant comparative method (1999). The analysis was led by *practitioner narratives*. This means we stayed as close as possible to the words practitioners used themselves while building up levels of abstraction from codes to themes and relations between themes. As this analysis combines data from two locations in three languages, we briefly describe the different steps leading to our results: (1) open or initial coding of survey and interview data completed in each location separately in the original languages; (2) the relevant data fragments identified in step 1 were professionally translated to English (for the Belgian data); (3) coding schemes of the two datasets (BE, UK) were compared by the two researchers to find common themes or categories, this step includes axial coding; (4) finally, potential themes were reviewed (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and selective coding was applied for the 2 datasets. Theme names mainly derived from the wording of practitioners; either Belgian or UK interviewees. For the whole analysis, the two researchers worked closely together, critically examining each other's coding work.

Results

Skills and experience needed to be an effective participatory music practitioner

We distinguished three domains of skills and experience that are, according to practitioners, essential for effective participatory music practice: musical, pedagogical and social. Figure 2 represents the three domains and relating themes.

Figure 2

Domains of Skills and Experience

[insert Figure 2]

Musical skills and experience

In the domain of musical skills and experience, an important aspect is that practitioners should be *versatile musicians*: having a broad range of musical skills is important and many of the practitioners indicated that they play multiple instruments. This allows them to work with people of varying music experience, across a range of instruments and to guide music making processes at different stages:

> "I am very good on the piano. I can improvise, I can write things down very quickly, I can take notes and sort of script stuff. I can help people if somebody sings me something; I can immediately memorise it and play it back, I could harmonise it, I can change it, I can arrange it for some other instrument, I can teach it to the bass player or to the flute player or whatever" (UK.07.I).

Furthermore, a diverse range of musical skills is valued as more important than technical excellence on one instrument:

> "So I bring my guitar with me, I sometimes sing other songs, I bring my violin with me, I play the piano a bit. (...) I believe this diversification is much more important than technical excellence in one instrument" (BE.21.I).

Musical performance and accompaniment skills are an important part of supporting others in their music-making. This involves technical skill and a lot of experience in playing with other people in ways that enhance and support their music making:

> "I had done loads of accompanying. So I think my skills were always around following other people and playing with other people. And I loved that part of it, being able to support people to play" (UK.16.I).

Practitioners described that a range of musical expertise is useful to guide heterogeneous groups in collective music making. They emphasised *playing by ear*, *improvising and musical flexibility* as important parts of their musical skills and experience; "Improvising, easily dealing with … we're going to do something different this time. I think that's very important" (BE.03.I).

> "That's the great advantage of working by ear. That it's something that's in your head and I can use it whenever I want to, when you feel it [is right]" (BE.09.I).

Many described the core of the musical process as an *experimental and creative approach* whereby exploration, play and freedom to try things out are seen as pathways to music making:

> "We explore it, we tap things, we shake things, we strum things, and then we get messy with it and we create sound chaos. And this is all about helping people to become playful, helping people to realise that in the beginning we can be sound making rather than music making. And that is the pathway into music making" (UK.02.I).

Music making in this regard is seen as a way of connecting by *communicating with music*. It is important to "tell stories with the music", one practitioner explains, "especially for instrumentalists, for whom there is generally no story in what they do" (BE.18.I). Music is understood here as having a narrative quality; beyond playing the right notes it is important to be able to use music as "a language" (BE.11.I).

Pedagogical skills and experience

In terms of pedagogical skills and experience it is important that practitioners are able to *support creativity and agency*, which can lead to feelings of competence among participants. Here creativity refers to 'little-c' (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) or 'personal creativity' (Brown et al., 2018) emphasising everyday acts of novelty and artistic expression that are meaningful within participants' lives. As discussed in the introduction, agency can be understood as a political dimension of the work whereby participants can meaningfully influence decisions 'that affect themselves, their communities of practice, and ultimately the culture itself" (Brough, 2014, as cited in Baker, 2021: 162). In this sense, practitioners mention the

importance of leaving the initiative to the group, creating the circumstances so that anyone can be the driving force behind decisions. This co-creation process goes hand in hand with an approach that focuses on small achievements and positive feedback:

> "This is about creating competence, quick wins, using technology to enable that kid to feel that they've achieved something that's culturally responsive to their interests really, really quickly" (UK.05.I).

Pedagogically too, practitioners must be flexible. This means being *familiar with exercises and techniques to balance structure and flexibility*. Many practitioners emphasize the importance of good preparation, "especially knowing a lot of exercises; having a lot of resources to be able to come back to things" (BE.18 I). But at the same time "the plan falls apart every time" (BE.18.I), so the capacity to adjust quickly to the moment and the group dynamic is equally important:

> "You're never really guaranteed what it's going to be like, whenever it arrives. We need to have this fluidity that can be like, here's a plan, here's how we meet together. But also, oh, my goodness, today everyone's exhausted and we need to throw out the plan and start again. You need to do that on your toes, on the ground, in the room (...)" (UK.09.I).

Flexibility is necessary because in participatory music practices, practitioners constantly balance individual and group possibilities and limitations. This is done with care: take small steps, don't force people, be patient. *More play, less say* is often the best way to move forward:

> "We show them it from a distance. We do it that way, but without saying we're doing it that way. Talk as little as possible [about] the activity" (BE.21.I).

Trust-building is also an important aspect here: as one practitioner says, "There are often trust issues" (UK.05.I). So "You have to be really careful with them [group members], because you can break them" (BE.20.I).

> "What I do [in] socially artistic projects is to try to get a feel for what they [group members] can cope with naturally and offer something just a bit new. Something that lifts them up a bit, but no more than that" (BE.04.I).

Group and music facilitation skills and experience are essential to effective practice. This includes group leadership: for example, "experience of people management and how to deal

with characters and how to say things and when to say things" (BE.06.I), and a responsive approach: "It is my role as a leader to actually use whatever comes and make it into something interesting for the project" (UK.21.I). Finally, it is important to understand this work as *reflective practice*. "I think reflection is so vitally important after every single session that we deliver", says one practitioner (UK.02.I). They go on to explain that reflection can happen both on action and in action:

> "Within the sessions there's micro reflections happening. So it's like, something might happen, a micro reflection kicks into action, and then you're like, oh, I need to slightly change the direction of where this activity was going" (UK.02.I).

Reflection can also be undertaken with participants to consider everyone's experience. Collective reflection was described by one practitioner as "part of the culture of what we're doing" (UK.05.I).

Social skills and experience

Social skills and experience are vital in participatory music practices. Many practitioners mention the necessity to be able to *relate to and to communicate with participants*. This includes basic skills and attitudes such as giving attention to people, being able to listen, being able to communicate in diverse ways and taking people seriously. Practitioners talked of "develop[ing] a spider sense" (UK.12.I) and "listening with your eyes as well" (UK.24.I), which points to nuanced and sensitive aspects of this domain.

> "… the focus is listening, so you're always listening, but you're listening with your eyes as well. You're really focussing on, what is this kid trying to tell me? And we've managed to find ourselves in situations where we knew more than maybe the lawyer or the social worker. We had a kind of insight that they missed" (UK.05.I).

A *deep awareness of context* is necessary for this relational task: "I think every session depends on the people you're working with, the children in my case, and then the context in which you are" (UK.24.I). Knowing the context is the anchor to practitioner musical, social and pedagogical skills:

> "You need to know a little bit about the field (…) A social context really in terms of the opportunity (..). If it is a fairly poor place, but rich in the cultural sense. Or if it is a place that has no financial problems but is culturally quite poor (…). it's clear, you won't hire someone who doesn't have a clue, for example, to work with disabled children. You have to know the context" (BE.20.I).

The working process requires *flexibility, fluidity and empathy* from the practitioner. This involves openness to people's ideas and willingness to adapt. One practitioner formulated it as "the flexibility to move constantly towards social goals through the musical technique**.** I don't know whether there is a more important one" (BE.19.I). Another stated: "And I think there's an openness, there's just like an openness to people's ideas" (UK.19.I). This takes place in the moment:

> "So there's a kind of flexibility on the spot that is needed. Preparation, flexibility in the delivery of a workshop, and an empathy with the participants that requires you to understand they might be terrified, and they might not want to do it, or they might have come to do it because their parents want them to do it" (UK.01.I).

Related to empathy is a positive social attitude towards people: *non-judgement and seeing good in people*: "it's seeing the positive side in people, seeing people not simply as an offender for something they've done" (UK.08.I). Often those participating in the practice are marginalised, stigmatised and have been confronted with negative feedback. Practitioners maintain this downward spiral can be reversed by believing in people, seeing the positives and giving praise.

> "So they get some praise from their parents or their community or their friends they wouldn't normally get. Then they get a bit more praise and then you got an upward spiral instead of a downward spiral. With a good practitioner you get that a lot" (UK.12.I).

This general disposition is closely linked to *notions of equality*: "… to be socially engaged, everybody is equal and it's about people expressing themselves in the most powerful way and giving power to people by their self-expression and creativity" (UK.13.I). Interestingly, practitioners also emphasize they can work with all people but they don't see this as a specific social skill; some even distance themselves from this idea. It is "the musical narrative," says one practitioner, that allows one to "make a kind of social connective tissue" (BE.15.I). This

disposition or attitude brings the social back to the musical, and so we end up where we started our account: in the musical domain.

Ways in which practitioners prepare for participatory music practice

In both Belgium and the UK, many practitioners undertook specific preparation or training for their participatory practice, as Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1

Practitioner Responses to the Survey Question - Did you undertake any specific preparation or training for your work in this field?

	Yes	No	Blank	Total
Belgian respondents	25	22	0	47
UK respondents	66	30	2	98

Practitioners listed different types of preparation, and most listed more than one. Figure 3 shows the types of preparation and training reported; the font size reflects the frequency of mentions.

Figure 3

Types of Preparation

[insert Figure 3]

Short courses and programmes were most frequently mentioned (40% BE, 26% UK) and include a range of training, workshops and classes. For example, "Training in singing for lung health" (UK.19.S), "Music production and studio techniques 'Level 1''' (BE.55.S), and "Courses in youth voice and safeguarding" (UK.80.S). Many of the short courses and programmes listed were specific to music practices or to health and/or social needs. As one practitioner explained, their preparation included "several training sessions related to each of the projects we participated in" (UK.63.S). Projects with different people in different places

can require different expertise, so some respondents had received training in a variety of areas. One practitioner, for example, had trained in "Group facilitation skills, Non-competitive group building games, Crisis intervention/suicide prevention, Gender-based communication skills training, Neuro-Linguistic Programming training, and Life Coaching" (UK.29.S). In some cases, organisations provided the training. Other types of formal preparation were mentioned less frequently. They included undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in participatory music practice (4% BE, 21% UK), music (16% BE, 3% UK) or other disciplines (16% BE, 6% UK).

Alongside formal preparation, practitioners prepared via *other activities*. For example "talking to others [and] playing with a wide variety of musicians from different worlds" (UK.32.S), "on the job training [through] gigs, gigs, gigs" (UK.29.S), "a love of music" (BE.63.S), "travel [...] to learn more about music in other cultures" (UK.09.S), being part of a "musical peer review group" (BE.77.S), "self-preparation from books and online material" (UK.37.S), "living in socially and financially deprived communities [to] raise my awareness" (UK.15.S), and drawing on lived experience - both familial and personal - "I have children of my own on the spectrum, [...] Schools would often pair me with children living with autism" (UK.95.S).

Several practitioners emphasised *peer learning* as a significant part of their preparation (32% BE, 24% UK), for example: "discussions with other musicians involved in this type of activity" (BE.76.S), and "Shadowing workshop leaders and community musicians" (UK.80.S). "Peer-learning with other musicians" (UK.89.S) was discussed when starting practice; "[I had an] observation period with the founder of the association, then her support in my first activities" (BE.59.S). It was also discussed for ongoing practice: "I also make sure to always keep attending workshops to learn from other peoples' approaches and keep developing my skills as a practitioner" (UK.04.S).

Learning by doing was described as an important part of cultivating practice (36% BE, 20% UK). It was considered important by both those that undertook formal learning; "The instrumental facilitator course provided me with a 15-week placement in a school, where I learned the fundamentals of pedagogy and group teaching" (UK.27.S) and those that didn't; "I started with social artistic work at [named participatory music organization] with the [named] project and that was immediately my training" (BE.80.S). As one practitioner explained, "There can't be enough practice" (UK.06.I). For some, this is because practice is considered as the 'real' learning:

> "The main thing is doing it actually, strangely. People need to learn through experience. You know, you can train, you can train, you can train. [...] But until you start actually going into those situations, you won't know" (UK.17.I).

A slightly different connotation is that you 'learn by doing' because the learning in these contexts never stops since competences build over time: "I'm learning all the time. I'm always learning; you don't stop learning" (BE.12.I). Learning all the time might be assumed as an inherent part of the work since it is situated and emergent. As this practitioner explains, "… you will never be fully equipped and it's all about finding the right questions and remaining as awake to your context as much as possible. There's always learning to be done" (UK.09.S).

Whilst many practitioners undertook specific preparation or training for their participatory practice and listed a variety of ways of doing this, relatively few felt totally equipped (19% BE, 33% UK). While this may relate to practitioner beliefs that preparation never really ends, it may also point to a desire for more or different preparation.

In Belgium, almost a third of participants felt partly or barely equipped for their practice (30%). This suggests that whilst many undertook some kind of preparation or training, participatory practitioner preparation is still an area in need of support. In the UK, fewer practitioners felt partly or barely equipped (13%). This could be due to more education pathways (as noted above, 21% of UK practitioners had a participatory music practice degree,

compared with 4% in BE). It could also be that other activities deemed important pathways to preparation, including peer learning and learning by doing, are more readily available in the UK.

Discussion and conclusion

Participatory music practices are situated and context dependent (Camlin, 2015; Higgins, 2024) and therefore differ depending on where they happen, who takes part, and associated aims, motivations and beliefs. Yet amongst this diversity, practitioners in Belgium and the UK identified similar skills and experience necessary for effective participatory practice, which we have distinguished as three domains: musical, pedagogical and social. As Camlin & Zeserson (2018) argue, "despite the situatedly diverse nature of community music practice, […] there is sufficient alignment of practice amongst community music's many ways to be able to infer a number of generalizable characteristics" (p.713). Thus, comparisons may be made internationally (Schippers & Bartleet, 2013). Furthermore, we suggest such comparisons might be increasingly expected as the field continues to mature through global growth and professionalisation (Higgins & Bartleet, 2018; Sloboda et al., 2020).

The three domains are both complex and interrelated. Practitioner articulations of skills and experience involve a complex interplay between attitudes, competences, knowledges and skills. "Professional attributes" and "psychological attributes" as discussed by Camlin (2022) are often entwined since domains intersect and overlap in many instances. For example, *supporting creativity and agency* was often discussed as being intimately linked with musical skills and experience, such as the ability to take an *experimental and creative approach* through *being a versatile musician.* Practitioners in both locations explained that experimentation, creativity and versatility supported "playful environments", where "mistakes are ok", which can lead to participants "becoming more playful" alongside creating environments where they can "initiate music making and approaches". The relationship between musical and social skills

and experience offers another example. For instance, the social skill *relate to and communicate with participants,* which requires the ability to "listen", "read the room", and make "decisions on the basis of participant input", was said to be enacted through the musical skill *communicate with music* and *musical flexibility.* At the same time, these areas of musical skills and experience were considered as being dependent on the ability to *relate to and communicate with participants*. Such entanglement is unsurprising given that many participatory music practitioners understand the essence of music as lying in social action (Small, 1998) and employ constructivist models to learning "as participants invest their musical development as co-creators and co-constructors of meaning" (Anderson & Willingham, 2020, p.177).

Within and across the three domains, flexibility was emphasised. As discussed in the introduction, the ability to adapt has been considered as a "professional attribute" (Camlin, 2022) essential for creating music activities that resonate with participants (Yi & Kim, 2023). In this study flexibility was considered in connection to improvisation; both musically and the ability to work off-plan, (Moser & McKay, 2005; Gibson, 2020), and openness; both to others and to learning (Anderson & Willingham, 2020). Yerichuk and Tai, in their research exploring community-engaged practitioners, suggest practitioner competency of this type is "more than improvisation, flexibility or adaptability; it's a radical responsiveness to what participants are bringing into the workshop [in order] to engage on their own terms" (2023, 6:32). This speaks to facilitation as the modus operandi of participatory practice. We suggest that emphasis on flexibility by practitioners in this study is situated within understandings of participatory practice as relational; enacted between practitioner(s) and participant(s). Thus, co-creation is foregrounded. However, co-creation is not a straightforward equal meeting between practitioner and participant as co-creators; it requires careful facilitation on the part of practitioners to address inherent power relations and different music experiences (Gibson, 2020). Flexibility is part of such careful facilitation. Finally, as the practice unfolds through

music encounters, flexibility is required in the moment. Practitioners need to be "on [their] toes, on the ground, in the room" (UK.09.I). This kind of flexibility requires empathy and deep understanding of the contexts in which one is working (Yerichuk & Tai, 2023).

On the whole, there was agreement between practitioners in both locations around what skills and experience is required for effective participatory practice. One area that did differ was reflective practice. Reflective practice was prominent in the UK data, but less so in the Belgian. This may be in part because practice in Belgium – at least framed by intervention and impact, and matured through professionalisation and scholarship – is relatively newer than in the UK.

In terms of how practitioners prepared for their practice, they listed many different types, reflecting the many ways of participatory music practices (Veblen, 2007), alongside practitioners' diverse backgrounds and experiences. Many listed several forms, indicating that preparation involves a combination of activities. Furthermore, preparations were often bespoke to practices and contexts. These findings resonate with Camlin and Zeserson's assertion that whilst participatory practices have a number of generalizable characteristics,

> there is not—and cannot be—a universal description of how individuals become community music practitioners, or a course of training that might be universally applied; all situations of community music are different, and therefore require specifically situated forms of training. (2018, p.713)

Their recommendation of specifically situated forms of training speaks to the need for practitioners to hone their practice in relation to the unique needs and characteristics of the communities they serve. This doesn't mean that HME courses based on generalizable characteristics are lacking relevance -our findings affirm the value of generalizable skills and experience- but meaningful HME training must also engage with community contexts, as participatory practice is rooted in music making with communities. Accordingly, sustained

and embedded relationships with communities are essential for preparations to be attuned to people and place.

Peer and experiential learning were frequently stated forms of preparation. For several practitioners, experiential learning was considered as the *real* learning: the idea being that musical, pedagogical and social expertise are developed in connection to people and place by *doing* the work. For many practitioners, experiential learning was scaffolded by peer learning, for example guidance from experienced practitioners, practicing alongside them, volunteering, or undertaking apprenticeships. Preparation in this way relates to Lave and Wenger's *situated learning* model (1991). Meaning that "learners in any given situation will learn the practices of that situation" (Camlin & Zeserson, 2018, p.214). Thus, we understand the relationship between early career and experienced practitioner to be highly important. This can support participant care as experienced practitioner(s) guide new practitioners via their existing participant and organisational relationships. We suggest this is especially important in the context of work with people with experiences of marginalization and trauma. Additionally, preparation guided through experienced practitioners' *existing relationships* may avoid the pitfalls of parachuting in (Hope, 2011). Therefore preparation via long-term projects with communities and experienced practitioners can be advantageous. However, such peer learning should be accompanied by critical reflection to avoid mere replication and to enable new practitioners to practice as their authentic selves. We suggest that collective iterative critical reflection, embedded within peer-guided experiential learning, may contribute to mutually beneficial insights for both the practitioner and situated practices.

Self-directed study was another significant form of preparation. Here, too, reflective practice is important. A self-directed approach requires consideration of questions such as: What kind of practitioner do I want to be? What do I want my practice to do and why? What do I need to learn or equip myself with to achieve this? We suggest that reflective practice and

processes of self-actualisation should be fostered through participatory practice learning programmes and activity to support such decision-making. Furthermore, we propose this as an ongoing and iterative process.

Finally, we turn to ethical considerations arising from our findings. Practitioners widely agreed upon experiential learning as a means of honing their skills. However, whilst this summary appears straightforward, in practice it is complicated. In both locations, practitioners described experiential learning with community groups as an intense experience; using words such as "wham!" (BE.15.I), "a baptism of fire" (UK.09.I) and "a steep learning curve" (UK.03.I). In doing so they raise ethical questions about experiential learning: what kinds of preparation are supportive and possible in advance of the music making encounter? And how can the care and safeguarding of all involved (including practitioners) be ensured? As Musgrave (2023) explains, musicians may become unwell themselves as they provide wellbeing services to others.

With the field's growth, we suggest that scaffolding experiential learning is an ethical imperative to limit the risks of well-intentioned practice inadvertently manifesting as irresponsible experiment with negative consequences for participants, practitioners or associated organizations. As Helguera explains,

> As artists, we may walk blindly into a situation and instigate an action or experience. But unless we don't really care about the outcome, it is important to be aware of why we are acting and to learn how to act in an effective way. (2011, p.xv)

Throughout this article, we have presented skills and experience that practitioners consider necessary to be effective in the field, alongside the learning pathways they experienced. In doing so, we contribute to the domain of participatory music practitioner education through better understanding of practitioner preparation on the terms of those that *do* the work. Our research has shown that peer-guided experiential learning, accompanied by

self-directed study and critical reflection, offers an important pathway for practitioners to hone musical, pedagogical and social skills necessary for effective practice. Furthermore, we suggest that such guided experiential pathways may benefit most from deep, long-term relationships with practices and communities.

While we consider this practitioner-centered perspective an essential contribution, it also marks a boundary of the study: the findings reflect practitioners' subjective experiences and do not incorporate parallel data from HME programs or other training courses for this field. Combining these perspectives -of both practitioners' experiences and institutionalized training programs- presents a promising avenue for further research.

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