

INCLUSIVE MUSIC EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract: This research explores the impact of musical activities on at-risk children with special educational needs. The study uses qualitative research methods. The findings point to the inclusive potential of music education, especially for children with special educational needs, and highlight the benefits of music education. The research addresses communication barriers in music education and the need for specialized training of teachers. By presenting the positive results of including children with special educational needs in music education, the paper advocates for an inclusive educational model that values creativity and encourages equal access to the arts, emphasizing the essential role of music in education and its universal accessibility.

Keywords: Music Education, Resocialization, Children's Home, Social Exclusion, Special Educational Needs, Inclusive Approach, Social Justice.

1 Introduction

Often perceived as an exceptional phenomenon, music tends to be associated with grand concert halls, prestigious exhibition spaces, renowned artists, and a discerning audience from the upper echelons of society. This conventional narrative suggests that music is exclusive to the educated elite. However, our society is a diverse tapestry, not solely comprised of the educated and affluent. This research diverges from the norm by focusing on the most vulnerable community members—children residing in residential childcare institutions. Here, amid seemingly austere surroundings, the Muses can make their presence felt.

This paper's main aim is to reveal the research results that closely follow the impact of musical activities on children in residential care settings. It challenges the conventional narrative of music's exclusivity by demonstrating that music is not restricted to certain social groups. The paper unfolds in two distinct sections. Initially, we delve into our theoretical underpinnings and research's methodological design. Our qualitative design is explained in detail and contextualized within the rich tapestry of resources that explore music activities in the realm of education for children with special educational needs. This groundwork provides the framework we researched, allowing for a nuanced understanding of its significance.

After establishing our theoretical foundation, we presented significant research findings. These findings shed light on the transformative impact of artistic activities on children in residential childcare homes, particularly in music education. The paper not only unveils these impactful results but also advocates for modifications in the approach to music education, drawing from the insights garnered during the research process.

In this paper, we explore the inclusive potential of music education. The recommendations from this study extend beyond the immediate context of the children's home under scrutiny. They hold promise for broader application in various institutional settings and would benefit a larger group of individuals at risk of social exclusion.

In essence, this research serves as a testament to the transformative power of music, breaking down conventional barriers and showcasing its capacity to reach even the most marginalized segments of our society. The implications of our findings extend far beyond the walls of residential childcare institutions, resonating with the broader discourse on inclusivity and social impact. Through this exploration, we seek to broaden the horizons of music, making it a force for positive change and enrichment for all, regardless of socio-economic standing or circumstance.

2 Theoretical Background

There is currently a growing interest in music education for children with special educational needs, as evidenced by the work of Merck and Johnson (2017), Bovsunivska (2022), and Xin et al. (2023). The issue of music activities, music education, and music itself in the context of special educational needs can only be seen as downright interdisciplinary. Thus, our research is anchored not only in the field of music education but also in the field of special education. We might miss critical contexts if focusing only on one disciplinary direction. At the same time, we are aware of the differences and specificities between the different grasps of the researched issue in the international context. Among the most frequently cited works are, in particular, the works of Adamek and Darrow (2018) and Merck and Johnson (2017); we must include Sobol (2008). However, significant differences in the grasp of the issue are found, for example, in the works of South American authors (Nazario, 2021). Among Slavic experts, let us mention Daněk (2023a), Kmentová (2019) or Kružiková (2020). It is essential to highlight that music activities are often understood as a music therapy field, which is the field of special pedagogy (Kantor et al. 2009; Pavlicevic 2014). The special pedagogical area of our interdisciplinary research is anchored by the works of Stárek (2023) and Lechta (2016). During our study, we have tried to grasp the multidisciplinary grasp of the issue, taking into account the specifics of all disciplines that touch upon the issue of music education for children with special educational needs.

3 Research Methods

In pursuing our research objectives, we adhere to a qualitative design that undergoes a continuous and critical review process, aiming to strike the optimal balance among various research tools and methods. Our existing research design unfolds in a two-stage approach, commencing with a foundational information-gathering phase. This initial stage incorporates diverse methods, including interviews, observations, and an in-depth analysis of case studies. The wealth of information garnered through these methodologies is then subjected to the analytical lenses of grounded theory methods and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Case studies play an essential role in our research. Case studies are necessary for qualitative research (Hyett et al. 2014; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). For this paper, we obtained a unique case report of a child involved in researched music activities. The information for this case report is very detailed and provides a deep insight into the complex situation of the child.

Grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis stand out as fitting research methods, as they eschew the confirmation of hypotheses to uncover new facts (Charmas 2006; Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The qualitative nature of our research empowers us to approach our chosen topic creatively, facilitating the capture of subjective views from the subjects under investigation. The transformative journey from subjective experiences, perspectives, and opinions to scientifically grounded knowledge is a hallmark of qualitative design (Given 2008; Leavy 2014). However, we acknowledge the importance of adhering to clear methodological rules in conducting qualitative research, employing triangulation methods and various methodological tools to enrich the processing of the research problem (Flick 2009).

While recognizing the inherent limitation of not generalizing the results, we emphasize that our qualitative research design holds the potential to significantly contribute to the current inclusive paradigm (Willig 2017). Our commitment extends beyond the confines of traditional disciplinary boundaries, reflected in our interdisciplinary research that spans music education and special education.

Striving for a comprehensive theoretical foundation, we remain aware of the limitations inherent in our knowledge scope. Despite these constraints, our commitment lies in meticulously applying rigorous methodologies, ensuring the reliability and validity of our research findings. In the ever-evolving landscape of music education and special education, we advocate for a dynamic and adaptive approach, continuously refining our qualitative design to meet the challenges presented by emerging trends and evolving needs. Through our interdisciplinary efforts, we aim to advance knowledge within the specific music and special education domains and contribute meaningfully to the broader discourse on inclusive paradigms and innovative research methodologies. By doing so, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of the transformative potential inherent in the intersection of arts, education, and inclusivity.

4 Researched Environment

Our exploration takes us into the intricate environment of a residential childcare setting, specifically a children's home in Prague, Czech Republic. The poignant circumstances leading to a child's placement in such a home often arise from the family's inability to provide a safe and stimulating environment, compelling the intervention of the court. For the children and young adults placed in these homes, the experience is synonymous with separation from their loved ones. This profound loss not only triggers a sense of resignation but can also result in a notable loss of motivation (Kaasinen et al. 2022; Daněk 2023b).

Moreover, the unstimulating and pathological conditions prevalent in their original families contribute to challenges in the realm of social competence. The impact of institutional care is far-reaching, influencing individuals for the remainder of their lives (Gabriel et al. 2021). As society undergoes transformative changes, so do the children within these homes (Daněk et al. 2023). The evolving landscape prompts us to closely monitor the shifting needs of these children, who increasingly grapple with psychiatric problems and profound psychological deprivation. Addressing these challenges necessitates an inclusive and multicultural educational approach (Deppler et al. 2015; Acuff 2018; Daněk and Klugerova 2023).

Our research zeroes in on this dynamic environment, seeking to understand musical activities' influence on children's educational and social competencies. Initially, our focus centres on a string orchestra, methodologically grounded in the globally acclaimed social music program, El Sistema. Renowned for its transformative impact, El Sistema is perceived by many experts as a catalyst for social change through musical experience (Puomies and Juvonen 2020). Despite the Czech Republic's solid cultural traditionalism, particularly in music, our study demonstrates that the El Sistema program holds the potential to thrive in the artistic milieu that produced musical luminaries like Antonin Dvorak and Leos Janacek.

Subsequently, our investigation delves into a music ensemble curated by the children's home itself, providing an intimate look into localized musical initiatives tailored to the unique needs and context of the residents. By exploring the impact of globally recognized programs and locally crafted musical activity, our research aims to unearth insights into how musical activities can catalyze positive change in the educational and social spheres of children facing the challenges of residential care. In doing so, we aspire to contribute to the academic discourse and the practical implementation of inclusive and culturally relevant educational strategies for vulnerable children in residential settings.

A total of 23 children from the children's home participated in our research. The vast majority of them had been diagnosed with special educational needs. Dyslexia and dysgraphia predominated, and in three cases, we had confirmed ADHD. This group of children was very exceptional as it included one girl with ADHD, although ADHD is not often found in girls. In two cases, we worked with severe behavioural disorders. All participants were psychologically deprived. We noted instances

of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and neglect in the educational records. Not surprisingly, many of the children in the target group were under the care of a psychiatrist or psychologist. The children in our research did not have good school results, had low aspirational levels, and had minimal social skills. This unusual group of children was involved in our music projects. In the case of the orchestra project based on the El Sistema program, the children played string instruments; in the case of the musical ensemble organized by the children's home, the main musical activities were singing and playing keyboard and flute. The children had no previous musical experience. How did their contact with music affect them? As an example, we present the following case study.

5 Case study

The boy comes to the children's home from a broken, incomplete family at age 14. His mother was his foremost caregiver. The mother was unable to provide the boy with the necessary educational boundaries. The boy began to have difficulty attending school and gradually began to exhibit negative patterns of risky behaviour. Truancy appeared, and grades deteriorated rapidly. The court ordered residential care. The boy came to the children's home with a terrible reputation. The available documentation portrayed the boy as an aggressive, antisocial who refused to tolerate social norms. The boy was assigned to a family group with predominantly male caregivers. This decision proved to be a very fortunate one. Colleagues were able to offer the boy dominant male role models. Although we expected significant disciplinary difficulties given his diagnosis, the boy behaved well in his family group in the children's home. However, problems arose in primary school. The boy was a student in his last year of primary school. From the first days of schooling, he had issues with the teachers. He refused to accept female authority. He presented himself as a dominant personality who would not submit to a person of the opposite sex. The boy had inferior grades and very problematic behaviour. Colleagues tried to motivate the boy to change his behaviour. The problem was that girls of the boy's age found his dismissive behaviour towards women beautiful. The young man put himself as a rebel for whom no rules applied. Although we were warned, we offered the boy the opportunity to join the orchestra.

The boy chose the violin as his instrument. He had never played the violin. However, during our conversations, he mentioned his grandfather, who dealt with musical instruments several times. Indeed, the boy was well-versed in the terminology of the instrument. Compared to others, he knew what the terms fingerboard, string, and tuners meant. He needed to gain experience with art music. However, music has been the boy's main hobby since he arrived at the children's home. He devoted himself to modern dance music. At first, only in a passive form, he listened to contemporary popular artists and collected a discography. Subsequently, he began to work as a DJ at various events at the children's home. Although the boy had no musical background, he could compose short pieces in various modern dance music styles. He invested all his financial resources in computer equipment, speakers, and mixing consoles. In his own words, the time spent composing helped him calm down. He was a concertmaster in the orchestra. Mastering the required level of violin playing was smooth for the boy. His teachers often pointed out his natural violin posture. He had the proper grip with his left hand. Surprisingly, even the bowing was correct. He mastered the required pieces very quickly. The instructors said the young man was a talent. In addition to his musical talent, the young man was physically available. His palms were quite square. The fingers were not long; they were considerably rich in muscle mass. The fingers were capped with flared tips, and the nails sunk well below the edge of the finger. The little fingers were very developed, ending at the level of the middle of the last link of the ring finger. The teachers judged the boy's hand ideal for playing the violin. During orchestra rehearsals, he gave a satisfied impression. He responded very calmly to the authority of the teachers. The boy quickly established solid and friendly relationships with the orchestra teachers. His good behaviour in the orchestra amazed all the primary school teachers who knew

about the boy's educational problems. The boy even physically threatened the teacher several times during lessons. Similar incidents never occurred in the orchestra.

Although in the case of the boy diagnosed with behavioural disorders, we did not expect a successful involvement in the project, the results were surprisingly positive. The boy was actively integrated into the orchestra. He very quickly mastered the required level of playing the instrument. He particularly benefited from public performances. He has calmed down a lot; he has modified his behaviour. In his own words, the most significant benefit of the orchestra was the environment where he could present himself in a positive light. However, he saw the problem as the need to rehearse regularly. He left at his request, but he always remembers his orchestra membership. He continues to play music. In interviews, he stated that his orchestra membership motivated him to further his musical development. He was very popular among the lecturers. He also exercised his natural authority as concertmaster. He looked forward to rehearsals. His participation in the orchestra raised a wave of interest in the program among the teaching staff at the elementary school. The teachers knew the boy as a troubled student. During interviews, teachers often pointed out that they failed to understand that he was a calm and composed student in an orchestra setting. After leaving the orchestra, the boy maintained contact with teachers and members. Currently, the young man is in a difficult life situation. According to our information, there is a possibility of incarceration for drug offences.

6 Course of Research and Important Finding

Our primary research thrust revolves around several pivotal questions, each aimed at unravelling the intricate relationship between children in residential care and their engagement with musical activities. First and foremost, we inquire into the ability of children residing in children's homes to actively and meaningfully participate in musical pursuits. This research question involves probing how these children, often grappling with challenging circumstances, can effectively navigate and immerse themselves in the world of music. Understanding their capacity for participation serves as a foundational step in tailoring musical interventions to their unique needs and circumstances.

A subsequent focal point of our inquiry revolves around the comparative impact of musical activities on children from residential care settings versus their counterparts in the general population. This line of questioning seeks to discern whether musical interventions, when presented in a standard manner, yield similar outcomes for children in the specific context of a children's home as they do for those in more conventional family settings. Unravelling these nuances is crucial for comprehending standardized musical programs' effectiveness and identifying the need for tailored approaches, considering the distinct challenges and dynamics prevalent in residential care.

An integral facet of our investigation pivots around formulating optimal methodologies for presenting musical activities to children with special educational needs. Recognizing the diverse and often complex needs of children in residential care, especially those with special educational requirements, we aim to pinpoint the most effective and inclusive ways to introduce and engage them in musical endeavours. This question involves a nuanced exploration of pedagogical strategies, adaptive approaches, and the incorporation of inclusive elements that resonate with the unique profiles of these children.

In essence, our research sheds light on the potential barriers and facilitators influencing the musical engagement of children in residential care. By addressing these key research areas, we aim to contribute valuable insights that enrich our understanding of the intersection between music and the well-being of children in such settings and inform the development of tailored interventions that can positively impact their educational and social experiences. Through this holistic approach, we aspire to

pave the way for more inclusive and effective musical programming for children in residential care, fostering a sense of empowerment and joy in their lives.

Our research attempts have yielded many intriguing findings, shedding light on the remarkable artistic potential residing within children and young adults in the unique context of a children's home. Their demonstrated capability for high-quality artistic performances is a testament to their creative expression's richness and the untapped reservoir of talent within them. However, a poignant revelation emerged, signalling the imperative to tailor music education for children with special needs. The rationale behind this adaptation stems from a commitment to ensuring that no child, regardless of their educational challenges, is denied access to the invaluable benefits of music education (Wright 2019).

Music, as a powerful medium, provides a means for adequate compensation in areas impacted by special educational needs. Moreover, the transformative potential of modern technology in music education cannot be overstated. Tablets now grace the shelves of musicians, replacing traditional stacks of music sheets. The availability of sheet music and musical records has become seamless, ushering in new possibilities and democratizing access to musical resources (Vancova and Osvaldova 2020).

Our research underscores that most children with special educational needs can be included in musical activities. This revelation challenges preconceived notions, prompting reflection on the potential of music education as a bridge for children facing challenges such as ADHD or dyslexia. While acknowledging that inclusion demands significant efforts, we must pose the crucial question: what needs to be done to facilitate this inclusive musical journey?

Enriching music education with innovative elements stands out as a paramount solution (Powel et al. 2020). Music educators who guide these children through their educational challenges must have the necessary skills and knowledge. This entails comprehensive preparation to work effectively with children who find solace and support through music education.

The role of music educators extends beyond individual preparation; it calls for an emphasis on special education needs and the cultivation of functional interdisciplinary collaboration (Adamek and Darrow 2018). This collaborative approach not only enhances the quality of education but also fosters a supportive environment where the unique needs of each child are met. Moreover, the responsibility for promoting inclusivity in music education extends beyond the educators to encompass society. A broader societal shift towards embracing diversity is crucial, challenging the prevailing norms that might not currently favour differences.

Our firm conviction is that music education is irreplaceable in every child's educational journey. In the fast-paced landscape of contemporary times, music education emerges as a beacon guiding us toward the much-desired ideal of inclusive education. It is a conduit through which diverse learners can find common ground, fostering an inclusive educational environment that nurtures and celebrates differences.

Like all art forms, music transcends the realm of mere artistic performance; it is, above all, a social phenomenon (Small 1998). Art and music are intricately linked to social status (Murray 2012). The families of the children under study often come from backgrounds characterized by a lower cultural status. The recurring theme of communication barriers underscores the challenges these children face in expressing themselves within the confines of a restricted code prevalent in their home environments (Bernstein 2003; Jones 2013). Artistic communication in a perfect linguistic code adds another layer of complexity to successful communication.

Furthermore, children from indigenous families may not bring with them the intrinsic motivation crucial for success in the arts (Stanko-Kacmarek 2012). This fact presents an additional challenge for music educators, necessitating the cultivation of solid skills to activate motivation in children facing significant hurdles.

Our research paints a vivid picture of the transformative potential of music education for children with special educational needs in residential care. It calls for a comprehensive approach encompassing adaptation, innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and societal change. As we envision a future where inclusive education is the norm, music education emerges as a powerful catalyst, breaking down barriers and fostering an environment where every child can thrive, regardless of their unique challenges and backgrounds.

A profound inquiry surfaces as we delve into the heart of our research findings: why does music education sometimes find itself excluded from the comprehensive embrace of an inclusive approach? Is it deemed less significant than other subjects, perhaps relegated to secondary status compared to mathematics or sciences? These questions have gained prominence, particularly in the context of our music projects, where the public often raises eyebrows at the sight of children from residential care homes holding violins. Music educators have occasionally posed a challenge, asserting that children with special educational needs are ill-equipped to participate fully in standard lessons.

However, our research vehemently challenges these assumptions. We have consistently demonstrated that the capacity to engage in musical activities is an intrinsic capability shared by most individuals. We firmly assert that not every participant in the educational process needs to possess absolute hearing or sing with a crystal-clear soprano. The diversity of talents and abilities should not be stifled by limitations imposed by those who might be less musically gifted. Special educational needs should never be an excuse to replace genuine practice, and affirmative action, in particular music education, is an impractical notion. The essence of inclusion lies in celebrating differences and resisting the temptation to flatten the rich tapestry of educational realities into a homogenous shade of mediocrity.

Throughout our research journey, we have grappled with the ambiguity surrounding the inclusive understanding of music education and related activities. Conversations with music educators surfaced a prevailing disillusionment with the current state of inclusive education. A significant factor contributing to this disillusionment is the vague perception of inclusion as a phenomenon that demands excessive attention to children with special educational needs, potentially hindering the learning pace for typically developing students and inadvertently neglecting the needs of exceptionally gifted children. The lack of familiarity with the intricacies of inclusion within a segment of the educational community further exacerbates these challenges.

The crux of our argument underscores the absolute necessity for teacher preparedness in working with children with special educational needs (Lee et al. 2015). This preparedness extends beyond the mainstream classroom to encompass a broader understanding of the very concept of inclusion. The Salamanca Conference of 1994 served as a pivotal moment for inclusive education, marking the declaration that every child has a fundamental right to education and must have the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of education (UNESCO 1994). However, achieving proper inclusive education remains daunting despite this significant milestone.

Inclusive education, we posit, is not merely an educational goal but a societal aspiration—an ideal reflecting a tolerant society where everyone collaborates in an environment saturated with respect and humanity. The collaborative partnership between schools and families is a linchpin for the success of inclusive education. It is misguided to assume that even the most

exemplary inclusive school can navigate the challenges posed by the inclusive paradigm without the support of families. This collaborative spirit must extend beyond families to include school founders and legislators, forming a united front with the necessary tools and weapons for the arduous campaign for inclusion. Despite progress since the Salamanca conference, a lingering reluctance to fully embrace inclusive ideas in society persists (Pivik et al. 2002). This reluctance underscores the formidable obstacles in the path of promoting inclusive education. As we navigate this challenging terrain, our research stands as a clarion call for a renewed commitment to inclusive education, recognizing its potential to create a harmonious and respectful society where every child's right to education is acknowledged and upheld.

7 Conclusion

Research findings have unequivocally revealed a widespread musical aptitude among most children from the children's home. This musical potential holds significant promise for the studied group, particularly for individuals with special educational needs who often harbour substantial creative capabilities (Kapoula 2016). The inherent creativity and artistic abilities within this demographic can serve as compensatory and growth-promoting factors, as underscored by the work of Healey and Rucklidge (2008). Activating the creative competencies of our target group emerges as a pedagogical imperative with the potential to significantly facilitate their inclusion into mainstream society.

Communication and creative skills are highly esteemed and intricately linked to artistic activities in the contemporary landscape. By recognizing this, our pedagogical duty becomes clear—cultivating educational environments that eliminate potential discriminatory factors (Mernick 2021). As educators, we must foster an inclusive reality where every individual, regardless of background or abilities, can access the transformative power of artistic expression.

A growing realization permeates our understanding—an inclusive approach to education not only upholds quality but actively dismantles barriers that may hinder the participation of diverse learners. While acknowledging that identical outcomes might not be universally attainable, we steadfastly advocate for the insistence on equal opportunities for all. The right to access education is a fundamental entitlement, yet it must not be wielded to restrict or hinder other participants in the educational process. Thus, our commitment extends beyond merely securing access to education; it embraces the broader goal of democratizing the arts.

In our conviction, music possesses an extraordinary ability to positively influence all facets of our lives. This belief underscores our firm conviction that music activities hold an irreplaceable place in modern education—they must be accessible but also open, welcoming, and developmental. The democratization of music education is pivotal; it is not confined to the realm of elites but must transcend social strata. As a phenomenon, music should belong to the masses, not the exclusive domain of a privileged few.

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