

INCLUSION AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH MUSIC: A LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE STUDY IN RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE

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ABSTRACT

The role of structured musical participation in fostering inclusion and social engagement among children living in residential childcare is examined. The research was conducted in cooperation with a Czech children's home and the Harmony Foundation, which operates an orchestra inspired by El Sistema model. A participatory qualitative design was employed, combining sustained observation, semi-structured interviews with children and educators and reflective team discussions. Data were analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis and systematic coding. The findings indicate that regular collective music-making enhanced emotional regulation, self-confidence and perseverance. Children showed a greater willingness to collaborate and form positive peer relationships, while educators observed more cohesive group dynamics and increased motivation. Public performances strengthened the sense of belonging and personal accomplishment, particularly among children with prior experiences of instability and social exclusion. The results provide empirical evidence that music-based programmes can effectively promote inclusion and social participation in residential childcare and should be regarded as an integral component of holistic educational support within this context.

Keywords: : inclusive education, residential childcare, music education, social participation, El Sistema, qualitative research, participatory action research, child development, social inclusion.

JEL Classification: A29

INTRODUCTION

Music has long been recognized as a powerful medium for human connection and expression. Within educational and social contexts, it offers opportunities to bridge personal and structural barriers, enabling children and young people to experience belonging and participation in ways that traditional forms of education often fail to achieve. The study of music as a social practice therefore extends beyond pedagogy. It touches on psychology, social work, cultural studies and ethics, linking aesthetic experience to human rights and social justice. In recent years, the concept of inclusion has moved to the centre of educational discourse. Inclusion today is not limited to the integration of children with disabilities or special educational needs but is increasingly understood as a principle that ensures equal access to learning, participation and recognition for all. In this broader sense, inclusion addresses cultural, economic and emotional dimensions of human experience. It is within this intersection that music education holds exceptional potential. Through collective artistic creation, learners develop self-awareness, empathy and cooperation, all of which are essential for social participation and civic competence.

Despite the growing recognition of music's transformative capacity, children in residential childcare often have limited access to structured musical activities. Their learning environments tend to prioritize immediate behavioural management and basic education over creative development. Yet these children are among those who could benefit most from sustained musical participation. For example, engagement in ensemble music-making can foster emotional regulation, strengthen resilience and contribute to the formation of social identity. Musical activity thus becomes not only a form of expression but also a context for rebuilding trust and social competence. The present study was conceived at the intersection of these perspectives. It builds on long-term practical experience in Czech residential childcare institution, carried out in cooperation with the Harmony Foundation, which operates an orchestra inspired by the El Sistema model. This partnership provided a rare opportunity to explore how collective music-making can function as a catalyst for inclusion and social participation among children with diverse life experiences. By examining their musical and

interpersonal development over time, the research seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how music can enhance educational and social outcomes in complex institutional environments. The findings are situated within broader interdisciplinary discussions on inclusion, well-being and social development. Empirical evidence connecting artistic experience with psychosocial growth is provided, and the dialogue between education, the social sciences and the humanities is further developed. Through this interdisciplinary lens, the article situates musical participation not as an isolated cultural activity, but as an integral part of inclusive and holistic education.

1 MUSIC EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Music education provides a flexible and richly textured learning environment that accommodates diverse developmental trajectories and communication styles, positioning artistic engagement (or just an engagement into art) as a legitimate and equitable pedagogical pathway rather than a compensatory intervention. Structured participation in musical activities activates attentional systems, supports working memory processes, refines motor planning and coordination and facilitates emotional signalling and affective attunement, thereby expanding opportunities for meaningful interaction and skilled participation among learners who may not thrive in language-dominant or behaviourally rigid classrooms (Juntunen & Sutela, 2023; Hedayati et al., 2016; Holochwost et al., 2017). The multimodal sensory dimensions of rhythm, movement and sound allow students to explore self-expression, refine self-regulation and develop persistence in an environment that values exploration, embodied engagement and responsiveness to others. Shared rehearsal and performance contexts also strengthen confidence, social reciprocity and mutual recognition, reinforcing a sense of competence and belonging while also cultivating adaptive emotional and cognitive strategies (Blasco-Magraner et al., 2021). Crucially, inclusive music-education approaches deliberately resist deficit interpretations and the lowered expectations that often accompany special-education categorisation, which can restrict curricular access, curtail aspiration and undermine long-term developmental prospects (Adamek & Darrow, 2005; Hibell et al., 2010). By sustaining ambitious goals, affirming stu-

dents' agency and integrating supportive scaffolding with creative freedom, music education functions as a substantive educational arena that stimulates cognitive growth, nurtures identity, expands communicative repertoires and strengthens social participation for children with varied learning profiles (Bovsunivska, 2022; Daněk, 2024; Daněk, 2025).

2 PROGRAMME EL SISTEMA

El Sistema is a globally recognized music-social programme founded in Venezuela in 1975 by the musician and economist José Antonio Abreu (Hernandez-Estrada, 2012; Tunstall, 2013). Established amid deep socio-economic instability marked by poverty, unemployment and rising crime, the initiative sought to counteract the social exclusion of vulnerable children by providing free access to high-quality orchestral education (Tunstall, 2020). José Antonio Abreu conceptualized music as a catalyst for social transformation, emphasizing its preventive and developmental functions, particularly for children exposed to structural disadvantage (Tunstall, 2013). With state support, he created the “Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela”, known by the acronym FESNOJIV, later renamed the Simón Bolívar Music Foundation, though the programme is internationally known as El Sistema.

From its inception, the programme has been characterized by an explicit social mission. Music is understood not solely as an artistic pursuit, but as a medium for reducing social risks and fostering civic engagement. Scholarship identifies five foundational principles underpinning El Sistema: social transformation, orchestral participation, intensive instruction, accessibility and cooperation (Booth & Tunstall, 2014; Govias, 2011; Tunstall & Booth, 2016).

- Social transformation. The core objective is to foster positive social change through active participation in musical ensembles. Social and artistic goals are interdependent; musical excellence is pursued in parallel with the cultivation of pro-social dispositions and community responsibility.
- Orchestral participation. Learning takes place primarily in ensemble settings. Collective instruction and rehearsal are treated as efficient and equitable pedagogical strategies, enabling students to develop musical and socio-emotional competencies through shared practice and mutual support.

- Intensive instruction. Ensembles rehearse several times per week, and frequent public performances are considered integral to progression. Regular stage experience reinforces discipline, motivation and self-efficacy, while also strengthening community engagement and visibility.
- Accessibility. Participation is free, open to all children and explicitly directed toward socially vulnerable groups. No entrance auditions or talent screening are used; instruments and technical support are provided. This principle reflects the programme's egalitarian ethos and commitment to cultural democratization.
- Cooperation. Ensembles collaborate with families, schools, local institutions and musical organizations. This relational model extends beyond Sistema-inspired networks and seeks to establish broad-based alliances within educational, cultural and community systems (Govias, 2011).

In the Czech Republic, several initiatives draw on El Sistema's philosophy, the most prominent being the Harmony Foundation Orchestra, which applies these principles within the national musical tradition shaped by composers such as Antonín Dvořák and Leoš Janáček.

2.1 PROGRAMME EL SISTEMA AND LONG-TERM COLLABORATION WITH THE HARMONY FOUNDATION IN RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE

The Czech adaptation of the El Sistema philosophy has been implemented by the Harmony Foundation, which acts as the programme provider and pedagogical guarantor. The residential childcare institution cooperates with the Foundation by facilitating children's participation in orchestral rehearsals and performances organized at a local primary school. This arrangement enables children in residential childcare to access structured orchestral education without financial or organizational barriers, while maintaining professional artistic and pedagogical standards. Within this partnership, children regularly attend ensemble rehearsals, instrumental lessons and public performances led by experienced music educators trained in inclusive pedagogy. The programme functions as a complementary educational space, parallel to both formal schooling and the residential institution's internal activities. It introduces a context defined by collaboration,

artistic ambition and cultural participation, allowing children to experience identity through creative achievement rather than through welfare-based roles typically associated with residential childcare. The research team conducted sustained observations of musical sessions at the primary school and systematically monitored children's emotional and social responses upon their return to the residential home. These observations revealed that regular engagement in collective music-making supported the development of self-regulation, confidence and perseverance. Children gradually displayed stronger peer relationships, increased motivation and a greater capacity for empathy and teamwork.

Over several years, this collaboration has evolved into a stable and respected component of the educational ecosystem. The orchestral programme is recognized not merely as an extracurricular activity but as a pedagogical and socially integrative intervention that enhances inclusion and belonging. Teachers, social educators and musicians cooperate closely, ensuring consistent participation, communication and mutual support across institutional boundaries. Public performances have strengthened the children's sense of pride and competence, while ongoing collaboration between the school, the orchestra and the children's home has contributed to relational stability and community cohesion. The sustained partnership between the residential childcare institution and the Harmony Foundation, which has been the subject of systematic research and observation since 2015, exemplifies how culturally grounded initiatives can bridge institutional, educational and social domains. It demonstrates the potential of music-based interventions to promote inclusion, personal growth, and social participation among children in alternative care settings.

2.2 GENERALIZED DEVELOPMENTAL PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS IN RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE ENGAGED IN EL SISTEMA-INSPIRED EDUCATION

Across years of engagement, a generalized portrait can be articulated of children participating in the programme within residential childcare. Many enter the initiative with fragmented educational histories, fluctuating self-esteem and limited prior experience with structured extracurricular activities. Emotional regulation skills are frequently developing, social interactions may reflect mistrust or defen-

siveness shaped by earlier adversity and academic motivation can be inconsistent. Despite these vulnerabilities, children often display pronounced creative potential, sensitivity to recognition and strong latent motivation when supported by clear expectations, stability and opportunities to achieve tangible success. Participation in ensemble-based music practice acts as a mediating context in which these characteristics evolve. Early challenges with sustained attention, frustration tolerance and cooperative behaviour gradually diminish as children internalize rehearsal routines and experience shared artistic purpose. Progressive improvements are observable in discipline, self-regulation and collaborative functioning. Children begin to perceive their individual contribution as meaningful within a collective framework and, over time, some assume informal leadership or mentoring roles. These trajectories indicate that structured musical participation strengthens resilience, promotes identity formation and supports socio-emotional maturation. Although developmental progress remains non-linear, the programme provides an enduring anchor that facilitates repeated experiences of competence, belonging and agency – capacities transferable to academic and social contexts beyond the musical setting

3 METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on continuous empirical work conducted since 2015, enabling longitudinal insights into the developmental and social outcomes of sustained music-based participation in residential childcare. Across this period, successive cohorts of children living in residential childcare were involved. The initial phase included a group of 15 children, followed by a smaller cohort of 3 children after their transition out of the programme. In 2025, a cohort of 10 children participated in research examining interaction with a digital music education application, and the study currently continues with a cohort of 3 children. A qualitative design grounded in an interpretive paradigm was adopted, recognizing that processes of musical participation and social inclusion are embedded in subjective meaning and relational experience. The methodological approach is informed by Participatory Action Research, which positions participants as co-constructors of knowledge and conceptualizes research as a collaborative endeavour oriented toward improvement in educational and social practice

(Baum, 2006; McIntyre, 2008). This orientation reflects the ethical and pedagogical assumption that children in residential childcare and inclusion-focused music programmes possess lived expertise that must inform the analytic process (Cornish et al., 2023; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

3.1 DATA COLLECTION

Multiple complementary strategies supported the thick description of lived experience in this setting. Prolonged observation documented rehearsals, ensemble practices and public performances, enabling the portrayal of interactional dynamics, emotional expression, engagement patterns and peer cooperation in authentic musical environments (Boyko, 2013). Semi structured interviews were conducted with children and educators to explore perceptions of belonging, motivation, development and the social meaning of musical participation. The interview format ensured structure while allowing space for participants to articulate individual perspectives and agency (Espedal, 2022; Dunwoodie et al., 2023). Group dialogues with selected participants further elaborated emergent themes and enabled collective reflection in line with participatory principles.

3.2 ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Data were analyzed through an integrative framework combining Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and elements of Grounded Theory. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis supported a detailed examination of subjective experience and identity related processes associated with musical participation (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). In parallel, analytic procedures associated with Grounded Theory facilitated systematic coding, category development and the progressive generation of conceptual patterns grounded in the data (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Makri & Neely, 2021). Coding and analytic memos were revisited iteratively to preserve sensitivity to participants' perspectives while ensuring conceptual precision. Peer consultation and practitioner reflection enhanced interpretive rigour and strengthened confirmability of findings.

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical procedures followed international standards for research involving children in socially sensitive contexts. Informed consent and assent were secured,

participation was voluntary and withdrawal could occur at any time without consequences. All data were anonymized and securely stored. Emotional safety and respect for the autonomy of children were prioritized throughout the process (Kiernan & McMahon, 2024). In addition, a value sensitive stance guided the integration of digital tools during fieldwork to ensure cultural sensitivity, protection of personal information and accuracy of mediated content (Jacobs & Hultgren, 2021). The complete research protocol, including instruments and consent procedures, was submitted for review and approved by the institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection (Ambis University, 2025).

4 RESULTS

The analysis reveals a coherent pattern of developmental, relational and identity-forming processes emerging through sustained participation in an El Sistema-inspired orchestral environment. The findings do not describe uniform pathways, but instead illustrate gradual advancement shaped by individual histories, group dynamics and pedagogical structure. Evidence from observations, interviews and collaborative reflections indicates that collective music-making operates as a socially generative practice in which children construct belonging, acquire socio-emotional competencies and negotiate emerging identities within a supportive yet demanding cultural setting. The following thematic areas summarize these core outcomes.

4.1 SOCIAL INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION TRAJECTORIES

The findings demonstrate that structured collective music-making within an El Sistema-inspired environment fosters meaningful forms of participation among children with diverse educational needs. Participants consistently described the ensemble setting as a context in which they experienced acceptance, legitimacy and shared purpose. Observation data indicated progressive movement from tentative participation toward confident engagement, characterized by increased willingness to take responsibility within rehearsals and collective performance settings. Educators confirmed that children who initially demonstrated avoidant behaviour or limited peer interaction gradually adopted collaborative roles, evidencing strengthened social presence and group identification.

4.2 DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

Interview and observation evidence revealed improvements in self-regulation, emotional expression and persistence during demanding tasks. Children articulated the orchestra as a “place to calm down” and “try again”, indicating the emergence of internalized coping strategies and tolerance for frustration. Educators reported enhanced task focus and delayed gratification, particularly visible during extended rehearsals and performance preparation. These behavioural indicators corresponded with qualitative accounts of reduced impulsivity, greater emotional vocabulary and increased confidence in communication with peers and adults.

4.3 IDENTITY FORMATION AND AGENCY

Participation supported positive identity positioning. Children recurrently described themselves as “musicians” and “members of the orchestra”, suggesting a shift from deficit-framed self-perceptions frequently associated with special-education experiences toward aspirational identities aligned with competence and belonging. Observational field notes documented moments in which children initiated musical solutions, volunteered leadership during section practice and proposed performance ideas. These instances signal the development of agency and active contribution rather than passive receipt of support.

4.4 CULTURAL BELONGING AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION

The programme served as a bridge between residential childcare and community life. Public performances and interactions with partner cultural institutions created opportunities for social recognition and visibility. Participants described these events as occasions where “people see us differently”, suggesting a redefinition of social status and challenge to stigma associated with residential childcare. Residential childcare professionals highlighted the programme’s role in reducing isolation and building relational capital, noting strengthened ties between children, staff, families and local cultural actors.

4.5 PEDAGOGICAL DYNAMICS AND SUPPORTIVE CONDITIONS

Analytical comparison across sessions underscored the importance of sustained

intensity, collective practice and consistent pedagogical expectations. Children responded positively to high musical standards, which they associated with fairness and respect. Structured routines combined with emotionally attuned support emerged as enabling conditions. Educators emphasized that musical rigor did not conflict with inclusion but served as a motivating structure, reinforcing the principle that excellence and accessibility can operate simultaneously within inclusive cultural education.

4.6 CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite demonstrated benefits, several constraints emerged. Fluctuating emotional states, histories of adversity and variability in attention capacity occasionally interrupted participation. Breaks, individual coaching and predictable routines mitigated these challenges. Logistical barriers such as transport, instrument maintenance and coordination with residential schedules influenced continuity of engagement. These factors highlight the need for institutional coordination and resource stability when implementing inclusion-focused music programmes in childcare settings.

The results indicate that intense, socially embedded orchestral participation contributes to social inclusion, identity development and emotional growth among children in residential childcare. Music functioned not as an auxiliary enrichment activity, but as a structured socio-educational system facilitating belonging, competence, aspiration and relational integration. The data suggest that El Sistema-based practice can operate as a socially transformative educational environment when embedded in long-term relational pedagogies and supported by institutional cooperation.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings contribute to a growing body of evidence demonstrating that intensive collective music-making can operate as an inclusive socio-educational environment for children in residential childcare. Participation in ensemble-based music education supported not only musical progression but also social affiliation, emotional regulation and identity formation. In this context, the orchestra functioned as a structured social system in which children negotiated roles, recei-

ved recognition and developed competencies associated with long-term developmental benefit. These outcomes resonate with insights from research on El Sistema implementations in different contexts, which emphasize belonging, collective responsibility and exposure to high artistic expectations as meaningful drivers of psychosocial growth.

The results also refine assumptions often associated with socially oriented music programmes. Inclusion was not grounded in reduced expectations or protective support, but in sustained challenge moderated by relational trust. Intensity, continuity and public performance acted as catalysts for agency and perseverance. This dynamic aligns with perspectives suggesting that children in residential childcare benefit from environments that affirm capability, offer visibility and support ambition rather than focusing solely on remediation. The programme, therefore, represents more than a cultural intervention. It functions as a mechanism for constructing social capital, expanding participation in public life and contesting deficit-based narratives commonly associated with residential childcare.

At the same time, constraints with implications for policy and practice are highlighted. Participation was shaped by institutional coordination, stability of staffing, emotional fluctuation and resource availability. These complexities confirm that cultural inclusion cannot be viewed as an isolated pedagogical practice but must be embedded within organizational, financial and social infrastructures capable of sustaining long-term engagement. Supporting arts-based inclusion in institutional environments requires investment in qualified educators, inter-sectoral cooperation and continuity of provision. The evidence also suggests that ethical attention to voice and agency is essential. When children are recognized as active contributors rather than objects of intervention, motivation and developmental gains strengthen, and the cultural practice becomes aligned with wider principles of child rights and participation.

Inclusive orchestral practice is positioned as a form of socially engaged education that intersects with social welfare, cultural policy and the right to meaningful participation. Music, in this setting, did not merely supplement daily routines. It created a developmental landscape in which children could rehearse confidence, solidarity and public recognition, extending the scope of what residential childcare can offer.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence indicates that inclusive orchestral programmes can enhance social integration, emotional development and cultural participation for children in residential settings. To translate these findings into durable practice, several strategic directions emerge.

- Educational and social institutions should incorporate structured arts-based learning into residential childcare environments as a recognised pedagogical pathway. Music education in this form is most effective when it is sustained, collective and tied to real performance contexts. Programmes should therefore prioritize regular rehearsal schedules, competent artistic leadership and publicly visible outcomes that reinforce dignity and accomplishment.
- Systems of support must be designed to sustain participation over time. Coordination among residential facilities, schools and cultural organizations is essential to ensure logistical continuity. Stable funding for instruments, instruction and transportation should be regarded as a necessary investment rather than supplementary expenditure. Partnerships with community arts institutions and conservatories may further strengthen quality and continuity.
- Training for music educators and residential childcare professionals should include competencies related to trauma-informed practice, inclusive pedagogy and collaborative reflection. Children in residential childcare require learning environments that balance high expectations with emotional sensitivity. Professional preparation that bridges artistic excellence with social pedagogy is critical for maintaining this balance.
- Participatory structures should be strengthened. Children benefit when they are invited to co-design aspects of the programme, provide feedback and hold visible roles in artistic decisions. Maintaining channels for voice supports self-efficacy and aligns practice with international commitments to child participation in decisions that shape their lives.
- Policymakers should recognize arts-based inclusion as part of broader social integration frameworks. Cultural programmes within childcare systems contribute to social cohesion, reduction of stigma and development of human

capital. Embedding them into national strategies on inclusive education, child welfare and cultural participation can enhance their sustainability and impact.

CONCLUSION

Collective music education inspired by El Sistema is shown to function as a socially generative space for children in residential childcare, in which participation acquires developmental, relational and civic meaning. Through sustained ensemble practice, public performance and pedagogical expectations that affirm capability, children cultivated competencies associated with belonging, self-regulation, confidence and agency. The orchestral setting enabled them to enter a symbolic and social world not typically accessible in residential childcare, one in which they were recognized as contributors, artists and community members rather than recipients of support. These findings indicate that music, when embedded in long-term pedagogical relationships and aligned with principles of inclusion, can provide a platform for social mobility, identity reconstruction and the cultivation of dignity.

The evidence also underscores that such outcomes are neither automatic nor superficial. They depend on continuity of provision, relational stability, professional expertise and an institutional culture that treats cultural participation as a right rather than an enrichment privilege. When these conditions are present, music becomes a medium through which children rehearse forms of citizenship, experience public acknowledgment and encounter expectations that transcend the boundaries of residential childcare. When absent, the potential of music risks reduction to episodic activity without structural impact. Beyond documenting positive change, a repositioning of arts-based practice within the discourse on social inclusion and child welfare is proposed. The cultural sphere should not be interpreted as peripheral to education or social support but as a domain in which identity formation, collective agency and participation in shared symbolic life are enacted. The results invite educational and social institutions to regard musical participation as part of a broader architecture of rights, opportunities and social justice for young people in residential childcare. In doing so, they signal a future in which access to aesthetic experience and collective creation becomes a structural expectation within inclusive policy rather than an exceptional initiative.

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