

Analyzing Effects of Musical Activities on Children's Social-Emotional Well-Being and Resilience

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Abstract

The primary aim of early childhood education and care (ECEC) curricula is to foster and enhance children's social-emotional well-being. Previous research indicates that musical activities in ECEC settings can support various aspects of children's well-being, particularly social-emotional competencies. This study examined whether integrated musical activities influence the social-emotional well-being and resilience of preschool children in ECEC environments. A quasi-experimental within-subjects design without a control group was employed. Two early childhood educators from rural and urban areas in the counties of Zagreb and Međimurje assessed the social-emotional well-being and resilience of 45 children before and after a six-week program of daily musical activities centered on three animal-related themes. The sample comprised 21 boys and 24 girls aged 4.5 to 7 years. Changes in social-emotional well-being were measured using the Croatian version of the PERIK instrument. The intensive six-week music program increased children's interest in musical activities and contributed to the development of their musical competence. Paired *t*-test analyses revealed significant improvements across all six dimensions of social-emotional well-being and resilience: social skills, self-control, assertiveness, emotional stability, activity orientation, and pleasure in exploration. While these findings support the positive role of integrated musical activities in preschool settings, the absence of a control group limits the generalizability of the results. Future research should include a control group and a larger, randomized sample to determine the impact of musical interventions on children's social-emotional well-being and resilience more accurately.

Keywords: early childhood, integrated musical activities, preschool children, social-emotional well-being, resilience

Introduction

Events such as lockdowns, earthquakes, wars, economic crises, globalization, and migration

profoundly impact children's social and emotional well-being and resilience. These global changes require careful attention and further research to understand their effects on young children and support their development in an increasingly complex world. The effects of the pandemic, coupled with broader political and economic issues, have impacted the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 (United Nations [UN], 2015), particularly those related to education, health, and well-being. Simultaneously, access to artistic and cultural experiences for children has been limited (Bačlija Sušić & Sambol, 2022; European Commission [EC], 2021; UN, 2015).

Given the complexity of education and the importance of local context, meaningful change in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings requires both internal and external leadership (Eisner, 2017). The concept of educational connoisseurship illustrates how artistic principles can enrich educational practices by encouraging nuanced observation and interpretation of learning and teaching processes (Efland, 2004). Ecological developmental theories, such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and its later "process-person-context-time" (PPCT) model, further support the relevance of contextual influences. These theories provide comprehensive frameworks for understanding child development through interactions within their environment (Eriksson et al., 2018). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory highlights the influence of contextual systems on children's development, while Brendtro et al. (2005) emphasize that every child benefits from having at least one adult who offers them unwavering care and affection. ECEC systems are increasingly focused on fostering children's social-emotional development, resilience, and overall well-being. This approach aligns with international agendas and national curricular priorities. Education systems recognize social-emotional well-being and resilience as essential components

of holistic development. They play a pivotal role in creating emotionally supportive environments that nurture social connectedness, emotional regulation, and adaptive functioning.

Social-emotional well-being in early childhood

The concept of children's social-emotional well-being is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional, developmental construct within positive psychology. Various theoretical perspectives offer a thorough basis for examining and comprehending this concept (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021, 2024). One of the most prominent theoretical models of children's well-being is the multifaceted framework developed by Ben-Arieh et al. (2014), which offers an interdisciplinary approach that comprehensively captures the complexity of well-being across multiple dimensions. Besides other contemporary aspects this model encompasses, it also perceives children's overall well-being as aligned with the developmental domains of cognitive, psychomotor, and social-emotional well-being. Even though this model provides such a significant contribution to the field of children's well-being, it still lacks some related indicators and measures. Therefore, other, more context-specific and operational models have been developed to help practitioners assess and promote well-being in educational settings.

Mayr and Ulich's (2009) model offers a framework for understanding and promoting social-emotional well-being in early childhood. The model identifies six observable dimensions that serve as practical indicators for assessment and pedagogical planning: social skills, self-control, pleasure in exploration, self-assertiveness, emotional stability, and activity orientation. These domains emphasize that children's well-being should take precedence over pedagogical trends, offering educators objective tools to guide developmentally appropriate strategies grounded in children's emotional needs and interests. As Mayr and Ulich (2009, p. 45) assert, "the well-being of children under a practitioner's care is of paramount importance, beyond all pedagogical methods and trends."

National and European educational policies increasingly prioritize child well-being as the foundation of lifelong learning and development (Ho & Funk, 2018). For example, the Croatian National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care [NKRPOO] (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta Republike Hrvatske

[MZOS], 2015) recognizes well-being as a core value and integrates it into cognitive, psychomotor, and social-emotional developmental domains (Tatalović Vorkapić & LoCasale-Crouch, 2021). However, Ho and Funk (2018) emphasize that aligning policy goals with everyday practice requires reliable methods for assessing and supporting children's well-being in specific settings. Therefore, it is crucial to implement objective observation and documentation techniques to monitor children's development. These techniques form the basis for designing educational activities that respond to children's needs and interests.

Social-emotional well-being and music education in ECEC

The first five years of life are critical for establishing a foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (Neuman & Powers, 2021). ECEC settings play a vital role in supporting children's well-being (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013). Rather than relying on implicit or secondary goals, integrating music education as an explicit teaching objective can enhance the focus on children's social-emotional development. When well-being is a clear goal of music education, educators can implement strategies that promote children's overall development (Schmid, 2024). This approach aligns with the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015), which emphasizes children's well-being across personal, emotional, physical, educational, and social domains. High-quality ECEC environments support children's healthy development and successful integration into positive social relationships (MZOS, 2015).

Research from the Study of Early Education & Development [SEED] Project Consortium (2018) studied the social-emotional well-being of five-year-old children in ECEC settings across five European countries, including Croatia. The study revealed notable variability both within and between countries. In Croatia, the relatively low percentage of children identified as a cause for concern may be linked to specific contextual factors. For example, many five-year-olds do not regularly attend ECEC programs, and mixed-age group settings are common, resulting in fewer children being assessed. These findings highlight the diversity of ECEC contexts and the need for targeted pedagogical approaches, such as music education, to support social-emotional well-being. Furthermore, the SEED Project emphasizes the importance of considering cultural context and ECEC traditions

when assessing children's psychosocial well-being, as developmental competencies are understood differently across countries (Franck et al., 2024). Therefore, universal assessment tools should be used cautiously, particularly in culturally diverse settings.

Studies based on experiential learning models (Laevers, 1997) show that children's well-being and engagement are key indicators of the quality of education during musical activities. Using tools such as the Leuven Scales for Well-Being and Involvement, researchers have found that children exhibit above-average levels of well-being and engagement during music sessions. These results are supported by responsive teaching practices that enrich musical skills and overall experiences (Bačlija Sušić et al., 2022).

Fostering social and emotional learning by providing musical activities in early childhood and care education

Building on the foundational understanding of children's social-emotional well-being, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Social and Emotional Competencies (SEC) are essential components of curricular activities in ECEC. These elements support children's mental health and overall well-being (Ho & Funk, 2018; Yorke et al., 2021). Higher SEL levels are consistently linked to enhanced well-being, emotional intelligence, resilience, and positive academic and social outcomes (Arslan & Akin, 2013; Bačlija Sušić et al., 2022; Rakap et al., 2018; Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021, 2022).

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020), SEL encompasses processes through which children develop skills to recognize and manage emotions, build positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, and make responsible decisions. CASEL (2013) outlines five interrelated competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are central to children's effective social engagement (Vranjican et al., 2019).

Music education is a powerful tool for fostering SEL. Activities such as improvisation, playing instruments, group singing, and identifying emotions through music provide authentic opportunities to develop collaboration, empathy, emotional regulation, and social cohesion (Bačlija Sušić & Buerger Petrović, 2023; Varner, 2020). Music stimulates emotions, fosters creativity and

imagination, and promotes group interaction and self-expression (Kūpana, 2015). Additionally, it offers relaxation and inspires imaginative thinking. Research indicates that music classrooms create safe, predictable learning environments characterised by emotional connection and empowerment, which are vital for SEL (Newhouse, 2020). Long-term engagement in collaborative music-making improves mood, strengthens peer relationships, and enhances self-awareness (Carter, 2011; Stewart et al., 2019). Moreover, brain research suggests that early and sustained interaction with music supports both cognitive and emotional development and can be enriched through technology (Upitis, 2001).

Empirical findings from the SEED Project Consortium (2018) and studies using tools such as the Leuven Scales for Well-Being and Involvement (Laevers, 1997) reinforce the positive impact of music on children's social-emotional well-being in diverse ECEC contexts, including Croatia (Bačlija Sušić et al., 2022). These insights underscore the importance of integrating music into SEL-focused curricula as a means of nurturing inclusive, culturally responsive, and emotionally supportive learning environments.

The aim of this research is to analyse the effects of integrated musical activities implemented in two early childhood settings of preschool children on their social-emotional well-being and resilience. It was expected that significant differences in children's socio-emotional well-being and resilience after the implementation of integrated musical activities would be found.

Method

Participants

The study included a non-random sample of 45 participants, 21 boys and 24 girls, with a mean age of 5.65 years ($SD = 5.59$), ranging from 4.5 to 7 years. The children were enrolled in preschool programs at two kindergartens: one in an urban area of Zagreb County and the other in a rural area of Međimurje County.

Measures and procedure

This study uses a quasi-experimental, within-subjects design to test the possible effect of integrated musical activities, without a control group, and a non-random sample with only one group of subjects. In other words, only one experimental group was used, with musical activities implemented with two-time measurement

points. The time between the first and the second measurement was six weeks. Children's social-emotional well-being and resilience were measured using the PERIK (Positive development and resilience in kindergarten; Mayr & Ulich, 2009), i.e. its adapted and validated version in Croatian language (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2014). The instrument contains 45 items distributed equally across six subscales: social skills, self-control, pleasure in exploration, self-assertiveness, emotional stability, and activity orientation. First subscale measures children's competencies in making social contact and socialization, the second one the ability of regulating one's own behaviour, the third one the enjoyment in exploring the environment; the fourth one evaluates fulfilling one's own needs in alignment with the environment, the fifth one the ability to cope with stressful situations, and the sixth one activity engagement. Early childhood educators rated the items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). All subscales showed satisfactory levels of reliability (social skills $\alpha = .958$; self-control $\alpha = .968$; pleasure in exploration $\alpha = .946$; self-assertiveness $\alpha = .956$; emotional stability $\alpha = .896$; and activity orientation $\alpha = .818$), confirming the reliability levels reported in the national validity study.

After obtaining the necessary permission based on the informed consent, which consisted of the basic information about the study, the early childhood educators who agreed to participate were provided with the instructions for rating children's behavior and using the scales. The kindergarten management teams, early childhood educators, and parents were thoroughly informed about the aims and methods of the research. Ratings were collected before and six weeks after the musical activities were implemented.

The ratings were carried out by the early childhood educators who worked with the children in the kindergarten groups that implemented the activities. The confidentiality of the data collected on children's behavior was maintained to the greatest extent possible. However, due to the within-subjects design and the need to compare data from two measurement points, complete anonymity was not possible. Only educators who performed the assessments knew the children's identities, while the researchers had no access to any personally identifiable information. This distinction between confidentiality and anonymity is particularly important in within-subject designs, where individual data must be tracked over time.

Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS 22, i.e. descriptive analysis and testing for mean differences (*t*-test for dependent sample) between two measurement points. Musical activities based on three themes related to children's interest in animals were integrated with other areas within two-week themes, such as rabbit, spider, and bee, as part of the full-day program for children in ECEC settings. Encouraged by various prompts, the children were engaged in adopting and performing new songs (*Bunny Woes*, *Here Is the Beehive*, and *One Little Spider*), counting rhymes (*The Rabbit Is Sleeping*, *Bumblebees and Bees*, and *Spider*), and listening to classical music (Camille Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals* ("Kangaroos"); Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee* and Vic Mizzy's *The Addams Family* theme) within the musical play. All stimuli used were selected based on the children's interests and developmental stages. Throughout the research, the educators and the music expert planned each phase collaboratively, based on joint reflections (Bačlija Sušić et al., 2024).

Results and discussion

The descriptive statistics and *t*-tests for dependent samples are presented in Table 1. It can be observed that the mean values in the first measurement are rather similar to those reported in previous studies (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2022; Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2014). As previously established, early childhood educators rated the emotional stability of children as the lowest, and the self-control as the highest, all within moderate to slightly elevated value levels. The mean values obtained in the second measurement were higher than those in the initial measurement. Statistically significant differences were observed across all PERIK dimensions between the first and second time-point measurements. In other words, the rated social-emotional well-being and resilience were significantly higher after the implementation of musical activities. This finding is expected and in accordance with previous findings.

Research findings from the SEED Project, which examined the social and emotional well-being of young children in ECEC settings, suggest that the lower percentage of assessments of social and emotional well-being among 5-year-olds in Croatia compared to other countries may be due to lower attendance at ECEC programmes and the presence of mixed-age groups in some Croatian settings (SEED Project Consortium, 2018).

Furthermore, previous research in the context of music education confirms that music can serve as a powerful tool for supporting children’s SEL and well-being, in line with a holistic approach to learning in early childhood education (ECE) (Bačlija Sušić et al., 2022; Bačlija Sušić & Buerger Petrović, 2023). The results of an earlier study on musical activities with preschool children, viewed through the lens of children’s well-being and involvement as key indicators of educational quality (Laevers, 1997), show above-average levels of well-being and involvement, while highlighting the important role of early childhood educators in this process.

Music and SEL share complementary goals of supporting children’s self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills (Varner, 2020). Music serves as an emotional stimulus, a creative outlet, a means of relaxation, and a tool for self-expression and group interaction (Küpana, 2015), while activities such as improvisation, ensemble playing, group singing, and identifying emotions in music naturally connect general music learning to SEL (Varner, 2020).

Table 1. Descriptives at each measurement point and *t*-values with significance levels on each social-emotional dimension

PERIK dimension	MP*	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Social skills	1	3.48	1.06	-5.86	44	< .001
	2	4.32	0.75			
Self-control	1	3.53	1.08	-6.05	44	< .001
	2	4.27	0.59			
Pleasure in exploration	1	3.70	0.90	-5.78	44	< .001
	2	4.47	0.59			
Assertiveness	1	3.42	1.10	-6.75	44	< .001
	2	4.22	0.72			
Emotional stability	1	2.93	0.78	-6.41	44	< .001
	2	3.63	0.64			
Activity orientation	1	3.29	0.80	-6.92	44	< .001
	2	4.11	0.65			

Note. *MP=measurement points (1=first measurement; 2=second measurement)

It is important to note the significance of an integrated approach to ECE’s music education in the curriculum (MZOS, 2015). As a component of an integrated approach to ECE, in which all segments within the educational process are connected and integrated (MZOS, 2015), music activities are part of children’s holistic way of artistic and creative expression of ideas, experiences and emotions through different media.

Instead of viewing the benefits of music for children’s well-being as an implied outcome, music education can be presented as a specific goal aimed at promoting social-emotional development and enhancing well-being. When well-being is defined as a teaching objective, educators can design music activities that intentionally foster children’s emotional and social development (Schmid, 2024).

However, it should be noted that only one group of children received musical activities; there was no control group in this study. This absence is a major methodological limitation because it makes it difficult to determine whether the observed changes can be attributed solely to the musical activities or to other external factors, such as maturation, group dynamics, or environmental influences. Without a comparison group, it is impossible to completely rule out alternative explanations for the results. In addition, the sample was very small and non-random, which should be addressed in future studies. Moreover, the assessments were carried out by early childhood educators who implemented the musical activities, which may have influenced their assessments at the second measurement point. Furthermore, as teachers’ ratings reflect the context and traditions of ECEC, universal assessment systems may be inappropriate due to cultural differences in assessing children’s psychosocial well-being (Franck et al., 2024). Thus, ensuring a larger, random sample, a control group and more objective rates - while recognizing that universal assessment systems may be inappropriate due to cultural differences in assessing children’s psychosocial well-being - will improve the objectivity, reliability, validity and generalizability of future studies on the impact of musical activities on children’s social-emotional well-being and resilience.

In terms of possible implications for practice, it can be concluded that ECEC music programs should be designed to support children’s holistic development. Based on the belief that children have the right to receive the highest quality education from skilled, professional educators (Day & Gu, 2015), the well-being of children under

the practitioner's care takes precedence over any teaching methods or trends (Mayr & Ulich, 2009). Music can serve as a powerful tool in this context, playing a crucial role in fostering children's holistic development.

Conclusion

This study provides preliminary evidence that integrated musical activities in kindergarten may positively influence preschoolers' social skills, self-control, assertiveness, emotional stability, stress management, activity orientation, and enjoyment of exploration. While these results are encouraging, they are not conclusive. Conclusions should be drawn with caution, as the lack of a control group limits the generalizability of the findings. To better assess the impact of integrated musical activities on children's social-emotional well-being and resilience, future research should include a control group, a larger, randomly selected sample, and a more rigorous design to confirm these effects.

Acknowledgements. This study was a part of a scientific university project *The impact of integrated music activities on the development of musical abilities and well-being of preschool children during the pandemic* funded by the University of Zagreb.

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