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Music Education in the Contemporary School: Role, Necessity, and Alignment with the New Curriculum in Greek Public Education

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Abstract. This paper presents a narrative review and theoretical-policy analysis of the role of Music as a subject in contemporary schools, with particular emphasis on Greek public education as a case study for peripheral European educational reforms. Drawing on Greek and international scholarly literature identified through systematic database searches, the paper synthesises evidence on the multidimensional effects of music education on students' cognitive, emotional, and social development, while also engaging critically with contested transfer claims and the methodological limitations of the extant research base. The study further analyses the New Curriculum (NC) for Music introduced by the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), examining both its alignment with contemporary research and the implementation challenges and structural gaps that may constrain its realisation. The findings support the view that music education represents a substantive component of holistic schooling; they simultaneously underscore the need for critical engagement with benefit claims, realistic appraisal of policy aspirations, and sustained investment in teacher professional development and material infrastructure.

Keywords: music education, narrative review, new curriculum, cognitive development, emotional intelligence, Greek education, transfer effects, educational policy

Introduction

Music constitutes one of the most ancient and universal phenomena of human civilisation. In every known society and throughout every historical era, human beings have engaged with sound as a medium of communication, expression, ritual, and aesthetic pleasure. In this context, the inclusion of music education in school curricula traces back to the ancient Greek tradition, in which music was regarded as an inseparable component of civic formation. Nevertheless, despite this long-standing tradition, the subject of Music continues to receive marginal treatment within the curriculum in numerous educational systems, including the Greek one.

In the contemporary international and domestic educational landscape, pronounced tendencies towards globalisation, rapid technological advancement, and an orientation towards labour-market outcomes have prompted a shift towards utilitarian and technocratic subjects. The humanistic dimension of education and the arts is frequently threatened with marginalisation, and economic pressures have often contributed to the downgrading of music education (Kokotsaki, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2017).

Contemporary Pedagogy, Psychology, and Neuroscience converge on a body of evidence suggesting that music education within general schooling can meaningfully contribute to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. The extent, generalisability, and causal direction of these effects, however, remain subjects of active scholarly debate, as detailed in the sections that follow.

Research Problem

Music education in Greece occupies a formally recognised yet structurally marginalised position within compulsory schooling. Despite its institutional inclusion, it faces chronic shortfalls in specialist staffing, instructional time, and material resources. The recent introduction of a new curriculum by the IEP raises the question of whether aspiration and evidence-based design can translate into meaningful practice, given these structural constraints.

Research Focus

This paper focuses on (a) the evidence base concerning the effects of music education on cognitive, emotional, and social development; (b) the critical limitations of this evidence base, particularly with respect to transfer claims; and (c) the alignment — and tensions — between the Greek New Curriculum for Music and the documented realities of its implementation context.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This paper aims to synthesise and critically evaluate the scholarly literature on music education and to analyse the extent to which the Greek NC for Music reflects and responds to this literature. The following research questions guide the analysis:

- RQ1: What does contemporary research evidence indicate about the cognitive, emotional, and social effects of music education, and what are the principal methodological limitations and contested claims within this evidence base?
- RQ2: To what extent does the Greek New Curriculum for Music align with the available evidence base, and what implementation challenges and structural gaps may constrain its realisation?
- RQ3: How does the positioning of music education in Greece compare with approaches adopted by other European educational systems?

Materials and Methods

Type of review

This paper constitutes a narrative review and theoretical-policy analysis. Rather than following a fully systematic protocol with quantitative synthesis, it seeks to critically map and interpret a broad field of research and policy, which is characteristic of the narrative review approach (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019). A systematic review or meta-analysis was not undertaken, as the primary aim is conceptual and policy-analytical rather than quantitative.

Databases and search strategy

The literature was identified through searches conducted in the following databases: ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre), PsycINFO, Scopus, Google Scholar, and the Hellenic Academic Libraries Union (HEAL-Link). Additionally, the reference lists of key reviews and meta-analyses were hand-searched to identify further relevant sources.

Search terms

The following English-language search terms were used, individually and in Boolean combinations: “music education”, “music training”, “cognitive development”, “language development”, “mathematics”, “emotional intelligence”, “social development”, “Greek education”, “new curriculum”, “transfer effects”, “far transfer”, “Mozart effect”. Greek-language searches used equivalent terms within HEAL-Link.

Time period

Sources published between 1980 and 2024 were considered, with priority given to studies from 2000 onwards. Earlier seminal works (e.g., Plato, Aristotle; foundational pedagogical texts) were included for their historical-philosophical significance.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Sources were included if they: (a) reported empirical findings or systematic reviews on the effects of music education or music training; (b) addressed music education policy in Greece or comparable European contexts; or (c) provided theoretical-philosophical frameworks directly relevant to the analysis. Sources were excluded if they were not available in English or Greek, if they were not peer-reviewed (except institutional reports and policy documents), or if they addressed music therapy in exclusively clinical (non-educational) contexts.

Selection and synthesis

Approximately 200 sources were screened at the title and abstract level; 75 were retained for full-text reading, of which 62 are cited in this paper. The synthesis is thematic and analytical rather than statistical. Consistent with the narrative review approach, the author has exercised interpretive judgement in weighting evidence, and this process is necessarily subject to selection bias. The paper explicitly engages with contested findings and does not seek to present a uniformly positive account of music education's effects.

Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Music Education

The recognition of music as a foundational component of education possesses deep historical roots. In ancient Greece, Plato, in the Republic, emphasised that musical education shapes character and guides the soul towards the moral good: “musike eis psuches paideian malista kathekei” (Plato, 2000/380 BCE, Republic, 376e). Aristotle, in the Politics, argues in favour of music as a means of recreation, catharsis, and moral formation.

Aristotle, in the Politics, argues in favour of music as a means of recreation, catharsis, and moral formation (Aristotle, 1944/350 BCE, Politics, 1339a). During the Middle Ages, music retained its place in higher education as part of the Quadrivium (alongside Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy). In modern history, Pestalozzi and Froebel incorporated music into their philosophy of holistic education that respects the natural development of the child (Abeles et al., 1995).

In the twentieth century, pedagogues and musicians such as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Zoltán Kodály, Carl Orff, and Shinichi Suzuki reformed music education by introducing experiential methods grounded in movement, singing, improvisation, and the use of simple instruments, thereby laying the foundations for contemporary Music Pedagogy (Dionisiou & Dogani, 2012; Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014).

Tiganouria (2014) emphasises that musical education has been an element of human formation from antiquity to the present, contributing to the psychosomatic and social development of the individual and to the expression of innate musicality. While this formulation is philosophically grounded, its empirical operationalisation remains an open research question addressed in the following sections.

Cognitive and Neuroscientific Dimensions of Music Learning

Music and Brain Development

Over the past three decades, neuroscience has contributed substantially to the understanding of music's influence on the human brain. Schlaug et al. (1995) demonstrated that musicians who began training before age 7 exhibited a significantly larger corpus callosum than non-musicians, suggesting enhanced interhemispheric communication. Levitin (2006) documents that music simultaneously activates multiple brain regions, including the cortex, cerebellum, basal ganglia, and limbic system, implying that musical learning is a cognitively demanding and potentially beneficial activity.

Hyde et al. (2009; full list: Hyde, Lerch, Norton, Forgeard, Winner, Evans, & Schlaug) identified structural brain changes in children who received music instruction within as little as fifteen months of training. Tierney and Kraus (2013) demonstrated that music education improves auditory processing, with positive downstream effects on linguistic skills.

Critical note. Most neuroimaging studies in this area involve small samples and correlational designs that cannot establish causation. As Sala and Gobet (2017) note in a comprehensive meta-analysis, musician-non-musician comparisons are confounded by self-selection, socioeconomic background, and motivational factors. Participants who persist in musical training may differ from non-musicians in ways that precede and predict the observed brain differences. These limitations do not invalidate the findings but substantially constrain the inferences that can be drawn.

Music, Language Development, and Literacy

Anvari et al. (2002) demonstrated that musical skills in four-year-old children are associated with the development of phonological awareness and early reading abilities. Moreno et al. (2009; full list: Moreno, Marques, Santos, Santos, Castro, & Besson) found that music education enhances linguistic neurological responses, with implications for reading and comprehension. Huss et al. (2011) demonstrated that children with dyslexia may benefit in particular from music education as a compensatory tool for linguistic difficulties.

Papadopoulou (2012) reported higher reading fluency and phonological processing among primary school students in Attica who received systematic music education, compared to peers without musical training.

Critical note. The language-music link is among the better-evidenced transfer claims, but it too is contested. Sala and Gobet's (2017) meta-analysis found that, once methodological quality is controlled, the effect sizes for music-to-language transfer are modest and heterogeneous. The mechanisms proposed (shared auditory processing resources, phonological sensitivity) are plausible but not definitively established. Studies that include active-control groups—comparing music training to equally intensive training in another domain—typically produce smaller effects than those comparing music students to untreated controls.

Music and Mathematical Thinking

The relationship between music and mathematics is one of the most frequently discussed—and most contested—fields in music education research. Rauscher et al. (1997; full list: Rauscher, Shaw, Levine, Wright, Dennis, & Newcomb) introduced the “Mozart effect” to describe a transient improvement in spatial-temporal reasoning following exposure to Mozart's music. This claim was substantially qualified by subsequent work: Chabris (1999) conducted a meta-analysis that found effect sizes near zero for the passive-listening version of the claim. The term “Mozart effect” has since been widely regarded as overstated in its popular formulation.

More robust findings concern active music education: Cheek and Smith (1999) identified a positive correlation between years of instrumental study and performance on mathematics tests. Schmithorst and Holland (2004) demonstrated greater activation of the prefrontal cortex during mathematical problem-solving in musically trained individuals.

Critical note. This is precisely the terrain where critical caution is most warranted. Sala and Gobet's (2017, 2020) meta-analyses of music-mathematics transfer studies found that after correcting for publication bias and methodological quality, the effect sizes are small and not consistently distinguishable from zero. Bangerter and Heath (2004) situate the Mozart effect's cultural persistence within the sociology of scientific legends rather than in its empirical validity. The shared cognitive structures hypothesis (rhythm, symbol comprehension, abstract thinking) remains theoretically

attractive but empirically underspecified. Researchers in this field increasingly recommend caution when making far-transfer claims based on the available evidence.

Emotional Intelligence, Social Development, and Music Education

Music and Emotional Intelligence

The theory of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) has significantly influenced contemporary educational philosophy. Music education is associated with the development of emotional competencies, as it requires the recognition and expression of emotions, empathy, and self-regulation (Hallam, 2010). In an extensive bibliographic review conducted for the Music Education Forum in the United Kingdom, Hallam (2010) documented evidence of music's contribution to the emotional development of children and adolescents, while acknowledging the variability in study quality across the literature.

Sergis (2019) found that students at Music Schools in Greece exhibited higher levels of emotional sensitivity and conflict management skills compared to peers in mainstream secondary schools. Lamont et al. (2003) emphasised the significance of musical participation for psychological well-being and sense of identity among adolescents.

Music and Social Skills

Participation in musical ensembles—choirs, orchestras and other musical groups—constitutes a recognised context for the cultivation of social skills. The necessity of cooperation, mutual listening, and shared commitment can foster values that extend beyond the musical context (Welch et al., 2014; full list: Welch, Himonides, Saunders, Papageorgi, & Sarazin). Putnam (2000) identifies music as a potential factor in building social capital, particularly in communities where social cohesion is under pressure.

Hallam and MacDonald (2013) documented associations between active musical participation and lower rates of social alienation and antisocial behaviour among adolescents. Music education programmes implemented in multicultural schools within the ESPA 2014–2020 framework in Greece demonstrated music's potential as a tool for social inclusion and intercultural dialogue. However, formal evaluation of these programmes remains limited (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Critical note. The social benefits of music education are plausible and supported by a range of observational evidence. However, most studies in this domain are correlational, making it difficult to isolate the effects of music participation from those of sustained engagement in any structured extracurricular activity. Comparative studies that include control groups engaged in equivalent non-musical activities would strengthen causal inference.

Special Educational Needs and Music Therapy

Music therapy, as a recognised clinical and educational practice, employs music as a medium of communication and therapeutic intervention for individuals with autism, intellectual disabilities, ADHD, and other developmental disorders (Gold et al., 2006). In Greece, the integration of music therapy elements into special education remains limited; however, research initiatives, such as Neofytou (2018) at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, demonstrate the potential of musical interventions for children on the autism spectrum. The distinction between music therapy (a clinical intervention delivered by trained therapists) and music education (a pedagogical activity) is important. It should not be conflated when interpreting findings from either domain.

Cultural Identity, Aesthetic Education, and Critical Thinking

Music education is not confined to the development of cognitive or emotional skills. It also constitutes a primary means of cultural formation and the cultivation of critical thinking. Within a multicultural society, music education can serve as a bridge among diverse cultural traditions, fostering respect for and understanding of cultural otherness (Elliott, 1995).

Elliott (1995), in his work *Music Matters*, proposes a praxiological philosophy of music education, according to which music is understood only within the context of its cultural production and consumption. This approach incorporates elements of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), positioning the student as an active subject who questions and reconstructs musical values.

In the Greek context, the teaching of traditional Greek music and Byzantine chant is directly linked to national and cultural identity. Babiniotis (2010) emphasises the importance of preserving musical tradition as part of the linguocultural heritage, while Gotovos (2002) highlights the role of music in understanding Greek history and identity within the multicultural school.

Reimer (1989) argues that music education develops a unique form of intelligence—associated with sensory perception, emotion, and creative imagination—that is not fully addressed by other academic subjects. The intercultural dimension of music education is further elaborated by multiple scholars who identify musical pluralism as a vehicle for acceptance of cultural diversity (Elliott, 1995; Campbell, 2004; Tiganouria, 2014).

Challenges and Obstacles in the Implementation of Music Education in Greece

Institutional and Administrative Issues

Despite the institutional provision of Music as a compulsory subject at primary and lower-secondary levels of Greek education (it is absent from the Lyceum timetable), practical implementation faces serious difficulties. In many schools, particularly in remote or rural areas, specialist Music teachers are lacking, resulting in the subject being taught by teachers of other specialisations or being entirely omitted (Kotopoulos, 2015). The inadequacy of the material and technical infrastructure—instruments, dedicated rooms and instructional materials—further undermines the quality of music instruction.

Konstantinidou-Semoglou (2009) notes that Greek educational policy has not formulated a coherent framework for supporting aesthetic education subjects, leaving the quality of provision largely dependent on the personal initiative and capacity of the individual teacher. The standard allocation of one hour of Music per week is considered insufficient for the development of meaningful musical competencies (Papadopoulos, 2017).

Social Attitudes and Prejudices

Social attitudes towards music education constitute a significant obstacle. In many Greek families, music at school is regarded as secondary relative to examined subjects, particularly in the context of university entrance procedures (Green, 2003; Kokotsaki, 2010). The pressure for high scores in core academic subjects drives both parents and students to downgrade the significance of music education. This orientation is frequently reinforced within the educational system itself (Kokotsaki, 2010).

Tiganouria (2014) frames this issue in terms of equity: the educational system frequently fails to invest in arts subjects, leading students to develop them outside school through private or tutoring

activities. This pattern reproduces socioeconomic inequalities in access to music education. Addressing these attitudes requires systematic communication of research evidence to educators, families, and the broader society.

Digital Technologies: Challenge and Opportunity

Digital tools such as Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), music composition applications, and online learning platforms create new environments for musical experience (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017). However, the risk of superficial musical experience, divorced from deeper understanding, is real. In Greece, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed both the possibilities and the limitations of distance music education: research conducted by the IEP (2021) indicated that collaborative musical learning—choir, orchestra and other ensembles—could not be satisfactorily reproduced in a digital environment, highlighting the irreplaceable value of in-person musical co-presence.

The New Curriculum for Music in Greek Public Education

Framework and Philosophy of the NC

Within the framework of the broader educational reform implemented by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs with the support of the IEP, a New Curriculum (NC) was developed for Music at all levels of compulsory education. The NC is embedded within the “Subject File” of the reform initiative and aspires to transform music education from a knowledge-centred into an experiential, creative, and student-centred process (IEP, 2023).

The foundational principles of the NC draw on a tripartite set of educational values: (a) the holistic development of the student, (b) active participation and creative engagement, and (c) connection with culture and everyday life. This philosophy aligns with international frameworks, including those of the International Society for Music Education (ISME) and the European Music Council (EMC), which recognise music as a fundamental human right and an educational necessity (ISME, 2018).

Structure and Content of the NC

The NC is organised around four central axes: (a) the perception of musical elements and concepts, (b) the acquisition of musical skills, (c) the development of cognitive skills, and (d) social and emotional development. Particular emphasis is placed on the integration of Greek traditional music, Byzantine musical tradition, and contemporary creation, alongside exposure to global musical traditions—an intercultural dimension that the international literature supports as democratically and inclusively grounded (Campbell, 2004; IEP, 2023).

Interdisciplinarity, Cross-Curricular Integration, and Technology

The NC organically connects Music with other academic subjects (History, Literature, Physics, Mathematics) through cross-curricular project-based activities and introduces digital tools (composition software, DAWs, interactive applications), developing students’ digital literacy through an artistic lens.

Music and Inclusive Education

The NC acknowledges the inclusion of students with diverse learning, physical, and cognitive needs. Music, as a non-verbal medium of communication, can constitute an effective tool for achieving

meaningful inclusion for students with dyslexia, ADHD, or autism, for whom the multi-sensory approach of music—auditory, visual, tactile—may assist in circumventing difficulties encountered in written or oral communication (Overy, 2003; Gold et al., 2006).

Teaching Approaches and Methodological Principles

The NC encourages active and participatory teaching methods that incorporate elements from the Orff, Kodály, and Dalcroze approaches, which have demonstrated effectiveness in international educational contexts (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987). Rhythmic movement, vocal practice, the use of simple percussion instruments, and improvisational creation constitute core strategies for holistic musical engagement. The tripartite framework of Listening–Musical Perception, Performance–Musical Practice, and Composition–Musical Creation provides students with a multi-dimensional encounter with the musical phenomenon (IEP, 2023). Tiganouria (2014) notes that music education is grounded in lived experience, particularly in vocal development through singing, the most immediate human instrument.

Assessment and Educational Objectives

At the level of assessment, the NC departs from purely knowledge-centred evaluation and proposes authentic forms of assessment: performance-based assessment, portfolio assessment, and self-assessment, approaches aligned with contemporary educational research on the primacy of process over exclusive focus on outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Educational objectives prioritise not only musical competence but also the formation of musical identity—a positive and meaningful lifelong relationship with music—a concept Elliott and Silverman (2015) describe as “musical literacy” in its broadest cultural and emotional sense.

Critical Appraisal of the NC

The NC represents a substantive and carefully designed reform initiative, and its aspirations are broadly consistent with the evidence base reviewed above. A balanced analysis, however, must also consider its limitations and the risks attending implementation.

First, there is a significant gap between the NC’s aspirational framework and the documented infrastructural realities: chronic teacher shortages, particularly in rural areas, mean that the NC’s vision of specialist-led, experiential music education cannot be delivered equitably across the school system without substantial additional investment in staffing and professional development (Kotopoulos, 2015; Papadopoulos, 2017).

Second, the NC’s cross-curricular and interdisciplinary ambitions presuppose a degree of interdepartmental collaboration and curricular coordination that is difficult to achieve within the Greek school’s traditionally siloed subject structure. Without structural support and dedicated planning time, cross-curricular integration risks remaining aspirational on paper rather than routine in practice.

Third, the NC’s emphasis on authentic and process-based assessment, while pedagogically well-founded, presents challenges for teachers trained primarily in traditional knowledge-based evaluation models. The absence of a sustained, system-wide professional development programme to support the NC’s assessment philosophy represents a significant implementation risk.

Fourth, the Greek educational policy literature has not yet produced a substantial body of empirical evaluations of the NC’s implementation outcomes. The claims made for the NC’s effectiveness

are, at present, largely anticipatory rather than evidence-based, and systematic evaluation research is urgently needed.

Comparative Analysis: Music Education in European Educational Systems

The comparative examination of music education in European educational systems reveals both common trends and significant differences. According to the Eurydice (2009) report, music is included as a compulsory subject in most European countries' curricula, with considerable variation in instructional time, objectives, and methodology.

Finland, which has held leading positions in international educational assessments, is frequently cited as a model of holistic education in which music plays a prominent role (Sahlberg, 2011). The Finnish system treats music as a fundamental component of balanced development rather than a supplementary subject. In Germany, the Musikschule institution cooperates systematically with mainstream schools, creating a complementary network of music education (Gruhn, 2005).

This comparison reveals that Greece, despite a strong tradition and institutional provision for music education, lags behind exemplary European systems in terms of implementation and funding. The NC represents a positive step towards convergence with the best European practices. However, its realisation requires substantive investment in teacher professional development, material and technical infrastructure, and social recognition—areas where, as detailed above, significant shortfalls currently persist.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The foregoing analysis supports a differentiated conclusion: music education constitutes a substantive and well-evidenced component of holistic schooling, with documented contributions to cognitive, emotional, and social development, while simultaneously inhabiting a research landscape characterised by contested claims about transfer, methodological limitations, and the need for critical discernment.

The evidence for music education's benefits is most robust for auditory processing and phonological awareness, emotional regulation, and the social skills developed through ensemble participation. Evidence for far-transfer effects—from music training to mathematics or general cognitive ability—is considerably more contested and should be presented with appropriate qualification. The NC for Music constitutes a significant reform initiative whose aspirations are well-grounded in the research literature; its effective realisation, however, depends on addressing the structural gaps between aspiration and implementation that currently characterise music education in the Greek public school.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are advanced:

- Adequate specialist staffing: Every school should have a qualified Music teacher, with particular attention to rural and remote areas, as a prerequisite for any meaningful curriculum reform.
- Sustained teacher professional development: Systematic, scientifically grounded training in the pedagogical philosophy and methodology of the NC, with particular attention to authentic assessment practices.

- Material and technical infrastructure: Adequate provision of musical instruments and digital tools in every school, without which the NC's creative and interdisciplinary activities cannot be delivered.
- Increase in instructional hours: Revision of the school timetable to provide adequate time for meaningful musical learning, and consideration of extending compulsory music provision to the Lyceum.
- Community connection: Strengthening of ties between the school and local musical organisations, conservatoires, and cultural associations.
- Systematic evaluation: Empirical monitoring and evaluation of the NC's implementation, to enable evidence-based adjustment of policy and practice.

Suggestions for Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge from this analysis:

- Longitudinal studies with active-control designs are needed to establish the causal direction and magnitude of music education's effects on cognitive outcomes, particularly for claims about mathematical and general cognitive transfer.
- Evaluation studies examining the implementation fidelity, contextual variation, and student outcomes of the NC across diverse Greek school settings would constitute a priority for the national research agenda.
- Comparative qualitative research into the experiences of music teachers implementing the NC in under-resourced schools would illuminate the gap between policy aspiration and classroom reality.
- Research into the differential effects of music education for students with special educational needs, including the boundaries between music education and music therapy in school-based contexts, is warranted.
- Cross-national comparative studies examining the mechanisms by which high-performing European systems (e.g., Finland and Germany) sustain music education across the system would inform Greek policy reform.

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Conflict of Interest

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