



## BRINGING CULTURE THROUGH MUSIC: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ERASMUS+ SMILE PROJECT\*

di

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### 1. *Music as a cross-cultural pedagogical tool: the SMILE project*

Discussing the educational value of music is, contrary to what one might think, not an easy task from a scientific perspective, as there is always the risk of falling into widely accepted clichés. The extensive scientific literature on the subject can sometimes be redundant, repetitive, and already well-known<sup>1</sup>

Music possesses extraordinary power as a tool of expression due to its ability to directly impact emotions and its non-intelligible and ineffable nature. There is something mysterious and enigmatic about music that allows it to convey any type of message, even complex ones related to the emotional and sensory realms<sup>2</sup>. Although it often remains in the background as a 'constant hint,' music elevates itself to a generative category, always pulsating with connections.

One such connection is with life itself: the first musical rhythm, from which everything originates, is the heartbeat<sup>3</sup>. Another connection is with nature. The renowned plant neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso, director of the International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology at the University of Florence, has conducted research on the bioacoustics of plants. Even plants emit sounds and vibrations, communicating with each other in a mysterious and subterranean manner. They are sentient beings, endowed with a semiotic connec-

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<sup>1</sup> Hallam, 2010; Wiggins, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Hodges & Sebald, 2011; Benassi, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Schneck & Berger, 2006.

tion<sup>4</sup>. After all, some of the most famous musical instruments are made from that wonderful material—the wood of trees, not plastic.

Reflecting on music and the human dimension, the connection with education is immediate, especially in the so-called first 1000 days of a child's life. In the early days, children perceive the language of their parents as music, primarily processing the melody and rhythm of speech, without yet understanding the meaning of the words<sup>5</sup>. Even in intrauterine life, neuroscientists affirm that the first sense a fetus develops is touch, closely followed by hearing. The uterine environment is far from silent; it is rich in sounds. The child perceives the sound vibrations of the rhythm of breathing, the heartbeat, but also the voices of the mother, the father, and siblings<sup>6</sup>. Neuroscientific studies have shown that music during the prenatal period has positive effects on the physical, emotional, and intellectual development of newborns and children, strengthening their cognitive and sensory development<sup>7</sup>.

Music is rich in content and moods that are useful for developing emotional intelligence. Educating children in this art form from an early age allows them to increase emotional sensitivity and promotes education in affectivity, which is fundamental for all human relationships and the building of connections<sup>8</sup>. This is the intercultural value of musica universal and transcultural language. Music, as the calligraphy of the soul, accompanies us throughout life and weaves relationships with others from the earliest years and throughout school age<sup>9</sup>.

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), a Swiss thinker and musician little known in Italy for his educational and pedagogical contributions, is the creator of one of the most well-known methods of music education. He is considered a precursor of modern music education for his triad of rhythm, music, and movement<sup>10</sup>. More than a century ago, he was the first to conceive of the connection between music and movement as an experience aimed at understanding the language of music. The body thus becomes the privileged means of approaching and internalizing aspects of music such as sound parameters, rhythmic pulse, pauses, accents, tempo, phrasing, and form<sup>11</sup>. He discovered, almost by accident during solfeggio lessons with his students, that the acqui-

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<sup>4</sup> Mancuso, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Trehub, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Lecanuet, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Fioravanti & Ragazzi, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Hallam, 2010; Campbell, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Baroni & Addressi, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Dalcroze, 1925.

<sup>11</sup> Nivbrant Wedin, 2020.

sition of a sense of rhythm is facilitated when the timing of musical beats is accompanied by body movements. In developing his active method, Dalcroze used the notion of “eurhythmics”<sup>12</sup> a concept from ancient Greece whose origins can be traced to areas beyond music, such as aesthetic philosophy<sup>13</sup>. Eurhythmics encompasses everything that is ordered, harmonious, and therefore beautiful-not an ideal beauty, like that found in symmetry, but a subjective, sensitive beauty, perceived by the individual in a personal way. Thus, the subjective experience is placed at the center of the educational experience. Rhythm becomes the unifying element that harmonizes all components, understood not only in a strictly musical sense but in a general sense, as a regular and orderly pattern, as a perfect connection between music, body, mind, and the emotional, relational, and social spheres.

One could cite a passage from him: «It is not enough to see things; one must know how to look at them. It is not enough to complacently listen to music; one must know how to truly listen to it. Every sensation must be able to generate a thought. It is not enough to teach students how to use their fingers to play musical masterpieces; one must introduce them to the sensations that generated these pieces, the movement that made their emotions so vivid, the rhythm that ordered and stylized them<sup>14</sup>. A complete citizen must, upon leaving school, be capable not only of living normally but also of feeling life with emotion»<sup>15</sup>.

Over the last decade, classrooms around the world, particularly in Europe, have experienced a significant increase in cultural diversity. This diversity, encompassing various national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, has enriched the educational environment but has also introduced new challenges for educators. In our increasingly diverse and multicultural society, it has become more crucial than ever for teachers to adopt inclusive teaching practices. This need is especially acute in early childhood and primary education, where students begin to form their identities as active members of the school community. Consequently, ensuring that teachers are equipped with the necessary intercultural competence and preparedness has become a significant challenge for the institutions responsible for their education<sup>16</sup>.

In light of this introductory framework, the SMILE project – Share the Music for Inclusive Learning in Education (<https://smile-pr.eu/index.php/en/>)

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<sup>12</sup> Dalcroze, 1930.

<sup>13</sup> Nivbrant Wedin, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Sutela, Juntunen, Ojala, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Dalcroze, 1925, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> Leong, 2020.

– had as its main objective the promotion of music as a pedagogical and educational tool for inclusion, with a specific focus on preschool and primary school education. The SMILE project was designed to provide teachers with a practical framework and a collection of best practices to help them navigate the complexities of inclusion and diversity in education. The primary aim of the project was to equip pre-primary and primary school teachers with the knowledge, key competencies, and educational materials required to effectively use music as a didactic and pedagogical tool for inclusive education.

The success of the the Erasmus+ SMILE project was largely attributed to the collaboration among its diverse partners, including the Thrace Regional Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education in Greece, A.Mus.Ed. Amalgamate Music Education Ltd in Cyprus, the Fundacja Rozwoju Aktywności Międzynarodowej i Edukacyjnej in Poland, Viksjöfors Skola in Sweden, and the University of Catania in Italy. Together, these institutions brought a wealth of experience and expertise, enabling the SMILE project to make a meaningful impact on inclusive education across Europe.

The project's main objectives included:

- Supporting teachers in the effective use of music as a didactic tool for inclusive education.
- Developing pedagogical skills through digital resources and online courses (MOOC).
- Raising broader awareness about the importance of music in inclusive education.

The SMILE project demonstrates how music can serve as a powerful educational tool, particularly from an intercultural perspective. In its essence, music not only teaches us the importance of respecting and valuing different cultures and identities but also fosters emotional awareness, nurturing an education in relationships and affectivity.

## *2. Music as an inclusive teaching tool*

In the scientific literature in the pedagogical field, the concept of inclusion has a relatively recent history, but it is certainly very articulate and nuanced<sup>17</sup>. However, in everyday representation the concept of inclusion is often identified solely with special needs<sup>18</sup>. This perspective is very limiting and does not consider the great scope of the many differences that need to be

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<sup>17</sup> Vislie, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009.

recognized and valued as peculiarities of individual learners and the developments that this concept has taken in recent years until it has become almost coincident with the concept of the right to education for all. In the school context, it is necessary for educational activities to take charge of all students' educational needs by putting into practice a design capable of transforming educational actions to make possible classroom work within the reach of all students. In accordance with current social changes, attention must be paid to the effective inclusion of all pupils<sup>19</sup>. One of the pillars on which inclusive education is based consists, precisely, in introducing systemic and profound transformations in education, not only with partial, superficial, or marginal changes, because what is at stake is the possibility of guaranteeing all pupils the right of access to educational and learning processes<sup>20</sup>. It is precisely in this sense that the concept of inclusion has been understood within the SMILE research project, that is, with a focus on the instructional design of activities capable of fostering the recognition of all students' differences especially in an intercultural sense.

In this sense, music is a powerful means of inclusion because it represents a language capable of overcoming cultural barriers and enables deep understanding among those involved<sup>21</sup>. Despite the fact that it is not, as is often stated in many popular articles, "a universal language" in the strict sense<sup>22</sup>, since it possesses characteristics that connote it in a socio-cultural sense, nevertheless music certainly represents a nonverbal communicative modality capable of connecting seemingly distant worlds.

There are many ways in the scientific literature through which the relationship between music and education has been investigated in the context of inclusive processes. The nexus between music, health and well-being sees four different areas intersecting with each other: music education, music therapy, everyday use of music and community music<sup>23</sup>. One of the relevant aspects on the topic that has been widely investigated in the relevant literature is certainly that of the "therapeutic" use of music<sup>24</sup>, but it is not the only possible point of view. On the contrary, in investigating music as an educational tool in the school context, it is necessary to avoid falling into the trap of medicalizing education<sup>25</sup>. Music in school cannot and should not be ex-

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<sup>19</sup> Gentile & Chiappelli, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Escudero, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Burnard, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Raymond & MacDonald, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Hillecke, Nickel & Bolay, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Clarke & Shim, 2009.

hausted in music therapy, that is, in a “treatment” useful to reduce symptoms related to certain disabilities<sup>26</sup>. Likewise, the nexus between music and education need not translate into an instructional logic that identifies music solely with music or instrumental education. Exposing individuals in training to musical experiences does not only mean teaching them notes, scales or different instruments because this is only part of the enormous educational potential of music. It is, in fact, a language and, as such, can take the forms of an inclusive educational approach aimed at valuing the differences and peculiarities of individual students.

The use of music to increase levels of inclusion is supported by international literature<sup>27</sup>, which recognizes its importance for the full implementation of the principles of freedom, equality and equity<sup>28</sup>. Music is a complex and “global” communicative form; it encompasses and conveys an infinity of meanings because it is closely related to imagination, thinking, bodily and motor skills. Therefore, the educational potential of music in the school context is diverse in nature and refers to the experimentation of a multisensory approach that supports the activation of different learning processes, the cognitive, emotional, and motor development of individuals, the exploration and enhancement of emotionality in the direction of the socialization process.

Designing inclusive educational pathways that are able to make full use of musical potential means focusing on the multisensory aspect for the enhancement of the sense-motor stimuli activated by listening and body movement to the use of symbolic and abstract language. In this sense, in fact, what is activated is a crossing of the entire range of cognitive modalities; as Levitin & Tirovolas<sup>29</sup> note, musical listening produces psychomotor reactions as early as fetal age and during the first months of life, with positive repercussions from the cognitive point of view as well. Multisensory stimulation means that the exposure of trainees to musical experience can improve learning abilities and encourage cognitive development. According to some studies, music can have positive effects on some cognitive functions and, in particular, on those known as executive functions such as planning, working memory and flexibility, which play a crucial role in learning processes<sup>30</sup>.

The educational and learning potential of music in an inclusive sense is expressed in the fact that it is able to “speak” to everyone and that all indi-

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<sup>26</sup> Aigen, 2014; Curatola, Lamanna & Zappaterra, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO-Kaces, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011; Booth & Ainscow, 2014; Darrow, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Rawls, 1971.

<sup>29</sup> 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Dumont et al., 2017.

viduals can draw from it the elements they need most related to both childhood cognitive development<sup>31</sup> and motor, language, social, cognitive and academic abilities<sup>32</sup>.

Last but not least, using music in school allows one to explore emotional aspects, discover the inner dimension and thus develop and refine one's affectivity. The activation of these channels allows the harmonious development of socialization processes related to the possibility of carrying out educational activities in cooperative forms thus fulfilling various educational functions ranging from pure entertainment to the transmission of messages, including between different cultures, to become a tool for tolerance and mutual understanding. From the emotional point of view, music can play an important role referring to self-expression, that is, the possibility of finding communicative channels of one's emotions, which are often still difficult to manage especially in some age groups. In this sense, it also takes the form of a means of communication with others<sup>33</sup>.

Music, moreover, has a "popular" aspect in the most pop sense of the term; that is, it speaks to everyone allowing it to convey profound messages; through the apparent simplicity of a simple and direct language, music can express desires for justice and legality, it can shake consciences from indifference, apathy and resignation. In this sense, the inclusive potential of music is also made explicit in multicultural contexts due to the fact that in the last two decades music education is no longer dominated by Western classical music; the music canon has changed a great deal by finally welcoming all less academic repertoires as well. Along with the music canon, the educational approach to music has clearly changed as well, opening up in a multicultural sense to the many forms it takes in and out of school circles by allowing for the study of popular music and engagement in more informal musical activities within an institutional music education framework<sup>34</sup>.

Against the backdrop of this complex and challenging scenario, it is clear how crucial a role teachers can play in enhancing the inclusive potential of music through appropriate instructional design and equally appropriate selection and use of teaching techniques and strategies. For music to elicit its full inclusive potential, however, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of this great possibility that musical language enables and activates in educational

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<sup>31</sup> Tinti, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Ho et al., 2003; Costa-Giomi, 2004; Schellenberg, 2004; Forgeard et al., 2008; Standley, 2008; Jentschke & Koelsch, 2009; Southgate & Roscigno, 2009; Yazejian & Peisner-Feinberg, 2009; Strait et al., 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Suthers & Niland, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Raymond & MacDonald, 2013.

communities. Indeed, as Lubet<sup>35</sup> argues, it is possible to effect inclusion through music, but there are also musics of inclusion and for inclusion.

Attributing meaningfulness to the musical experience, using approaches that go to involve multisensoriality are aspects that can be greatly facilitated by the knowledge and use of musical software. It is therefore necessary, on the part of the teachers, great organizational and operational flexibility, including through the use of the simplest tools, both technological and non-technological, and that these approaches are included in a solid educational project and oriented to objectives belonging to a broader educational plan aimed at the inclusion of each pupil with his or her own peculiarities within the classroom, which represents a large part of the child's social life.

From the point of view of instructional design, the approach to music can be part of the weekly teaching schedule and this is done either through listening, proposed on the basis of curricular activities, through singing, also as invention and improvisation, in association with activities and games, including motor games carried out in the gymnasium, and through activities of musical perception and production using voice, body and objects. The latter aspect can also be carried out with the support of experienced teachers in the field of music. In order to foster the inclusive process and, at the same time, the motivation and self-esteem of students, it is important that the proposed activities involve the class as a whole: each person concurs and participates in the indicated activities in the manner that is most congenial to him or her.

Making inclusion concrete in an intercultural sense is certainly a complex challenge that cannot be left to a few simple interventions that teachers can adopt as protocols of action. Adequate teacher training is needed that uses both formal and institutional channels as well as the less structured and more informal ones that the technology of recent years makes available to increasing numbers of users.

### *3. The impact and outcomes of the SMILE Project*

The SMILE project (Share the Music for Inclusive Education) is a transformative initiative that has significantly advanced the field of inclusive education by integrating music as a powerful pedagogical tool. The project was aimed to equip teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to effectively use music in classrooms with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The project was structured around four primary results (PRs), each addressing different aspects of this goal.

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<sup>35</sup> 2009.



The first project result, (PR1) *Needs Analysis Report*, played a crucial role in establishing the foundation for the SMILE initiative. This report provided an in-depth examination of the current educational practices among teachers working with culturally diverse student populations. The analysis, conducted through a combination of desk research, surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, identified significant gaps in teachers' musical knowledge, their ability to integrate music into inclusive teaching practices, and their digital competencies. The report underscored the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid shift to virtual learning environments. Teachers expressed a clear need for professional development and accessible resources, particularly in the context of using music to foster inclusivity<sup>36</sup>. The insights from PR1 were instrumental in guiding the development of subsequent resources and training programs, ensuring that they were tailored to address the specific needs identified in this comprehensive research.

Building on the findings of PR1, *PR2: Digital Repository of Educational Materials* was developed as a key resource for teachers. This repository offered a wide range of materials designed to help educators integrate music into their teaching practices, including traditional and contemporary songs, descriptions of traditional musical instruments, and online educational musical tools. The repository also included practical examples of best practices, lesson plans, and teaching techniques, all categorized in an intuitive and user-friendly format. The collaborative development of this repository involved experts in social inclusion, music education, and digital technology, ensuring that the materials were not only educationally valuable but also conducive to creating an inclusive classroom environment. Feedback from teachers who tested the repository was overwhelmingly positive, with many noting that the resources significantly enhanced their ability to engage students from diverse backgrounds and foster a more inclusive learning atmosphere.

The third project result, *PR3: Teacher's Guide*, was a comprehensive manual designed to support teachers in integrating music into their educational practices effectively. This guide, informed by the findings of PR1, provided both theoretical insights and practical strategies for using music in the classroom. It included historical examples of music's role in fostering unity and provided step-by-step instructions for utilizing the materials available in the digital repository. The guide was designed to be accessible to all teachers, regardless of their prior experience with music, and emphasized the importance of selecting culturally relevant music to reflect the diverse backgrounds of students. The guide's pilot testing revealed that it significantly increased

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<sup>36</sup> Westerlund et al., 2022.

teachers' confidence in using music as a teaching tool and led to noticeable improvements in student engagement and classroom dynamics<sup>37</sup>.

A pivotal component of the SMILE project was the training activity, which took place in Cyprus from 26<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> June 2023. This training event brought together twenty primary school teachers from the participating partner countries for an intensive, face-to-face training experience. Each partner selected five teachers from its network of primary and pre-primary schools to participate in this event. The training was designed to equip these teachers with the skills and confidence to use music as a tool for inclusive education, with a focus on practical implementation in their daily teaching routines. The participants were trained by experts in music, language education, all specializing in inclusive education. In particular, the training in Cyprus was structured into five stages: 1) presentation of project goals. This stage provided an overview of the SMILE project's aims, setting the stage for the practical and theoretical training that followed; 2) workshop on music's multicultural dimension. Participants were introduced to the basic elements of music and its role in multicultural education. This hands-on workshop was designed to break down barriers and build participants' confidence in expressing themselves through music; 3) introduction to research on music and multiculturalism. This stage highlighted research that underscores the impact of music in developing a multicultural approach and fostering acceptance among students from diverse backgrounds; 4) practical training on inclusive education methods. Teachers engaged in a hands-on workshop where they explored the methods and activities proposed in the SMILE project. This practical session allowed participants to experience firsthand how their classrooms could be transformed using music-based activities; 5) Feedback and discussion. The final stage involved a feedback session where participants shared their experiences and provided valuable insights. This feedback was crucial for refining the project's resources and ensuring their effectiveness in real classroom scenarios.

The Cyprus training activity was not only a learning experience but also served as a pilot phase for evaluating the *Teacher's Guide* (PR3) and the *Digital Repository* (PR2). The teachers who participated in this training became ambassadors for the SMILE project, sharing their newfound knowledge and experiences at subsequent multiplier events and contributing to the dissemination of the project's outcomes.

The fourth project result, *PR4: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)*, represented a key innovation in the dissemination of the SMILE project's

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<sup>37</sup> Crawford, 2020.

findings and resources. These MOOCs were designed to provide widespread access to the project's training materials, allowing teachers across Europe and beyond to benefit from the initiative, regardless of their geographical location<sup>38</sup>. The online courses were structured into multiple modules, each focusing on different aspects of using music for inclusive education. These modules included interactive lessons, video demonstrations, and assessments to reinforce learning. Teachers could complete the courses at their own pace, revisit materials as needed, and earn badges upon the completion of specific modules. The inclusion of discussion forums and collaborative platforms within the MOOCs further enhanced the learning experience by enabling teachers to share experiences, ask questions, and support each other in their journey towards more inclusive teaching practices. The availability of these courses through the School Education Network and the SMILE website ensured that they reached a broad audience, thus amplifying the project's impact.

The impact of the SMILE project has been so far positive, with significant influence at local, regional, national, and international levels. At the local and regional levels, the project has transformed educational practices in multicultural settings, particularly in regions such as East Macedonia-Thrace, where schools serve a highly diverse student population. By providing teachers with innovative tools and methodologies designed to address the challenges of inclusive education, SMILE has significantly improved student engagement, classroom dynamics, and academic outcomes. The training activity in Cyprus was particularly impactful, serving as a model for how music can be effectively integrated into teaching practices to foster inclusivity. At the national level, institutions such as AMusEd in Cyprus and FRAME in Poland have played a crucial role in disseminating the outcomes of the SMILE project through their existing training programs and educational support activities. The training in Cyprus has become a key component of AMusEd's professional development courses, ensuring that the benefits of the SMILE project extend to a broader audience of educators. Similarly, FRAME has incorporated the project's methodologies into its efforts to address the challenges of immigrant integration in Poland, providing teachers with the tools they need to create inclusive classroom environments in increasingly diverse educational settings.

One of the key strategies for amplifying the impact of the SMILE project was the organization of Multiplier events. These events were designed to disseminate and discuss the outcomes of the project's results (PR1-PR4) with a wider audience, including teachers, educational leaders, policymakers, and

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<sup>38</sup> Misra, 2018; Malita, Tiru & Grosseck, 2018.

other stakeholders. The events served as platforms for presenting the project's findings, demonstrating the resources developed, and sharing best practices for integrating music into inclusive education. The multiplier events were held in various participating countries, providing an opportunity for teachers who had participated in the training and pilot phases to share their experiences and successes. These events were instrumental in encouraging other educators to adopt the SMILE resources and methodologies, thereby extending the project's reach and impact.

The SMILE project's impact has also extended to the broader educational policy landscape. At the European and international levels, the SMILE project has fostered greater cooperation and exchange of best practices in inclusive education. The creation of an open e-learning community through the SMILE platform has enabled ongoing collaboration among teachers, allowing them to share ideas, discuss challenges, and develop innovative solutions to common educational issues. This community can become a valuable resource for educators seeking to stay current with best practices in inclusive education and to continue their professional development in this critical area<sup>39</sup>.

#### 4. *The Final Conference in Italy*

The smile project results were presented during a final event held over two days, June 26 and 27.

The event involved numerous participants from various sectors: project partners, academic figures, teachers from nursery, primary, and secondary schools, university students, and international participants.

On the first day, a visit was organized to the "Italo Calvino" Comprehensive Institute in Catania, a representative of the school community and an associate partner of the project. This visit allowed international guests to observe the reality of "school in nature" an innovative pedagogical approach that supports learning processes from nursery school, particularly strengthening the exploration phase. In this phase, children's curiosity is stimulated, encouraging them to investigate, analyze, compare, and learn about plants and animals through conversation and connection with their prior knowledge<sup>40</sup>. The use of flexible spaces promotes education in listening to and appreciating the sounds of nature, fostering an effective learning environment that enhances music in its many nuances. Sound manifests its dual nature-sensitive and material on one hand, and spiritual on the other-relating to the different

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<sup>39</sup> Gous-Kemp, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Guerra, 2023.

dimensions of the individual: physical-corporeal, emotional, cognitive, and symbolic<sup>41</sup>.

The guests were welcomed by an expert music teacher from the institute, who facilitated moments of experimentation with music and emotions. Using simple musical instruments, the first activity guided the participants, who were placed in a circle, through the exploration of sounds using hands and voice, the most powerful expressive instruments available to humans. Subsequently, the participants entered a particularly relaxing environment where the sounds of Tibetan singing bowls, also known as sound bowls, enveloped them. In silence and with eyes closed, they listened to the sweet and delicate sounds. These magical, enveloping, and slightly mysterious sounds made the cells of their bodies vibrate, thanks to their harmonious play, providing moments of well-being.

The visit continued in the welcoming Snoezelen Room, a multisensory room located within the institute, where students lower their defenses and open up to broader and shared experiences. The word “Snoezelen” is a combination of two Dutch verbs: *snuffelen* (to seek out, sniff, or explore) and *doezelen* (to relax)<sup>42</sup>. It is an environment where all sensory channels are positively stimulated through adaptations in lighting, chromatic atmosphere, sounds, and tactile experiences tailored to the specific needs of each individual. Snoezelen is a holistic, ecological approach that considers humans as inseparable psychophysical units, immersed in a space where verbal and non-verbal languages, voice and body, music, and colors intersect, offering a variety of experiences. It is an environment where tension and emotional stress are released, and muscles are relaxed, thanks to a welcoming and attractive space<sup>43</sup>.

The participants were invited by the guides to explore and try every attraction the environment offered: musical instruments, fiber optics, bubble tubes, and water beds, all surrounded by atmospheric music that filled the room. They had the opportunity to experience the space in its entirety, stimulating all five senses<sup>44</sup>.

On the second day, the final international conference of the Erasmus+ project SMILE was held at the Department of Educational Sciences, University of Catania. For the occasion, the venue came to life with engaging sounds, accompanied by dances and rhythmic moments that enveloped the

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<sup>41</sup> Deleo & Colazzo, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> DeJong, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Hodnett et al., 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Bonora et al., 2019.

participants in pleasant moments of sharing. The conference featured speakers from research centers associated with the project partners. During the conference, the results of the transnational research were presented, with particular emphasis on the project outcomes. Additionally, best practices implemented at the two State Comprehensive Institutes, partners of the project “Italo Calvino” (Catania) and “Galileo Galilei” (Acireale) with a musical focus, were shared.

One aspect of the conference focused on methodologies, where speakers presented strategies to be used in multicultural classes to introduce music as a tool that promotes inclusive education. Music transcends time, place, and culture<sup>45</sup>; it is a natural element, like language, universal and transcultural, capable of enhancing individual and collective biographies and stories, welcoming diversity, and creating a sense of common belonging. Listening to a piece of music can stimulate an emotional channel connected to a memory that resurfaces through the act of listening. Music belongs to the symbolic realm of pleasure, immediate gratification, and sublimates the emotional needs of individuals.

The second part of the conference involved the two schools, “Italo Calvino” and “Galileo Galilei”, which were involved in the three-year project. Their interventions focused on disseminating best practices for promoting inclusive and intercultural education through music. A particular case study was presented: the pilot project on music with the help of Alternative Augmented Communication, carried out by the “Galileo Galilei” Institute in Acireale. This highly innovative and inclusive experiment demonstrated how music can be a powerful pedagogical and inclusive tool that teaches the importance of respecting differences, fosters emotional awareness, and promotes education in relationships and affectivity.

The conference was attended by numerous teachers from pre-primary and primary schools, as well as university students and future educators, who had the opportunity to learn new tools and methodologies while sharing educational practices tested in various international contexts. The final phase of the conference involved the active participation of the audience, who were invited to join in dances and songs led by the teachers from the Calvino Institute involved in the project. These teachers proposed engaging musical games using hands, cymbals, and voices, to the notes of pieces from the classical tradition, providing moments of shared joy that enriched this exciting and sonorous experience. The traces of this experience will be preserved online, thanks to a dedicated web page: SMILE Project.

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<sup>45</sup> Peretz, 2006.

## 5. Conclusion

The SMILE project represents a significant advancement in the integration of music, education, and inclusion, underscored by the fruitful and synergistic collaboration among all involved partners. This collaboration not only fostered the sharing of best practices but also cultivated a new cultural awareness around the triad of education, music, and inclusion. The project's educational impact was enriched by the narratives and emotional insights contributed by the European partners, which added new dimensions to the understanding of these connections. This initiative has laid the groundwork for the creation of an educational community that considers the unique and specific circumstances of each individual. It has enabled the development of educational scenarios where everyone is empowered to cultivate musical knowledge and skills, thus promoting holistic personal growth. By expanding knowledge of inclusive and multicultural musical practices, the SMILE project has contributed to the establishment of a structured network. This network serves as a pioneering and leading force in promoting a new paradigm of inclusion, one that can be replicated and adapted across various educational contexts. The goal is to discover and appreciate the shared human essence in others, fostering a new sonic harmony that captivates and connects souls across cultural divides. This project not only enhances the educational landscape but also sets the stage for a broader dissemination of these inclusive practices, aiming to influence and inspire educational communities worldwide.

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the outcomes and impact of the Erasmus+ SMILE project (Share the Music for Inclusive Education), an initiative aimed at integrating music as a cross-cultural pedagogical tool to enhance inclusive education in preschool and primary school settings. The project focused on equipping teachers and educators with the necessary knowledge, competencies, and resources to effectively use music as a didactic tool in multicultural classrooms. By exploring music's unique ability to transcend cultural barriers, the SMILE project sought to create educational environments where all students, regardless of background, could experience holistic personal growth, both emotionally and cognitively. The paper highlights the collaborative efforts of European partners, which facilitated the development of key resources such as a digital repository, a teacher's guide, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These tools provided educators with practical strategies to integrate music into their teaching, leading to improved student engagement and more inclusive classroom dynamics. The SMILE project significantly advances the field of inclusive education by promoting a new, adaptable paradigm of inclusion across various educational contexts, while also establishing a collaborative network to inspire and connect educational communities globally.

L'articolo presenta gli esiti del progetto europeo Erasmus+ SMILE (Share the Music for Inclusive Education), un'iniziativa volta a promuovere l'educazione inclusiva e interculturale nei contesti della scuola dell'infanzia e primaria. Il progetto ha valorizzato la musica come linguaggio universale per favorire la diffusione di pratiche di accoglienza e di integrazione culturale. In questo contesto, il progetto ha contribuito a sviluppare, negli insegnanti e negli educatori coinvolti, competenze e conoscenze necessarie per impiegare la musica in modo efficace come strumento educativo e didattico in contesti eterogenei e multiculturali. L'articolo mette in evidenza un quadro di buone pratiche e di strumenti educativo-didattici, valorizzando gli sforzi collaborativi dei partner europei coinvolti, la cui sinergia ha consentito, in ottica comparativa, lo sviluppo di risorse fondamentali quali un *repository* digitale, una guida per insegnanti e un MOOC per valorizzare la musica come strumento educativo inclusivo in prospettiva interculturale.